

Who mothers mommy?

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A mother is the tireless supporter of her family, very often setting aside her own needs to tend to her children's, a task that knows no schedules or time limits.

But where does mom draw her strength during her decades long involvement with her [children](#)? What factors bear the biggest impact on keeping a mother psychologically healthy enough to tend to her children? Two Arizona State University researchers say unconditional acceptance by friends and authenticity in relationships play essential roles in keeping mom happy herself, and thus grounded in her tasks with child rearing and development.

In what is described as the first known study to delve into the phenomenological experience of motherhood, Suniya Luthar, a Foundation professor of psychology at ASU, and post-doctoral research associate Lucia Ciciolla asked more than 2,000 well-educated, upper middle-class mothers what factors helped them cope with motherhood. This group, the researchers said, is increasingly described as being at "high risk" for parenting stress, because over time, they have come to spend vastly greater number of hours per week on children's activities and commitments, as compared to well-educated fathers and less-educated mothers.

In "Who mothers mommy? Factors that contribute to mothers' well-being," published in the early on line issue of *Developmental Psychology*, Luthar and Ciciolla, said that four factors (out of seven total) stood out as main contributors to helping mom's equanimity of spirit and keeping

distress at bay. They are unconditional acceptance, feeling comforted when needed, authenticity in relationships and friendship satisfaction.

The authors reported that being married, per se, was not related to mothers' psychological well-being; more significant was the quality of the marriage. And even when women were satisfied with their partners, there were powerful effects for the quality of women's relationships.

"Relationships with spouses are important but clearly not determinative to a mother's well being," Luthar said. "Our findings show the strong potential protective power of other close relationships - satisfaction with the frequency of visiting with friends had significant unique associations with all seven adjustment outcomes."

Luthar's work on this study is a by-product of her more than 25 years of work on resilience among children facing adversities. Recurrently, resilience researchers have found that the single most powerful "protective factor" for kids is having a strong, supportive bond with the primary parent. As mothers are typically primary parents - across socioeconomic strata - she is now deliberately focused on trying to unravel what best helps mothers themselves to function well.

"Developmental science is replete with studies on what moms do and do not do, what they should do and should not do," she says, "but there is almost no attention to what might mothers need to negotiate the inevitable challenges in sustaining 'good enough parenting' across decades."

One goal of the study, Luthar said, was to test the stereotype that mothers today are excessively invested in their children, as embodied in the phrase "helicopter parents." There was no support for this stereotype in the study findings.

"Our results yield little support for views that as a group, upper-middle class mothers' well-being is primarily tied to their investment in their children and their roles as parents, and instead, suggest far stronger ramifications for feelings of being personally supported," Luthar said. "Women's adjustment status did co-vary with how they felt in their roles as mothers but also showed equivalent if not vastly stronger variation with the emotional support in their everyday lives."

What exactly does the notion of support mean in this study, and how is it different from what has been conventionally studied in psychology? Luthar explained that this is best captured by two simple phrases that one might instinctively see as relevant for children but not for highly accomplished, well-educated women: "I feel seen and loved for the person I am at my core," and "When I am deeply distressed, I feel comforted in the way I need it."

Highlighting parallels between the needs of children and their mothers who tend to them, Luthar said, "just as unconditional acceptance is critical for children, so it is critical for mothers who must provide it. Mothers, like children, benefit greatly when they know they have reliable sources of comfort when in distress."

Findings of this study also have direct implications for interventions.

"These findings are extremely encouraging in showing the strong protective potential of close, authentic relationships in buffering women through the myriad challenges of motherhood," Luthar said. These findings have been harnessed at the core of a supportive intervention she is testing with physician mothers in a collaboration with the Mayo Clinic in Arizona.

Why physician mothers in particular? Because they are at risk for high levels of stress.

"We know well that motherhood is a difficult task for women in general," Luthar said. "For these physician moms who are generally caregivers at home and at work (with the stakes often very high at work), there is no question that stress levels can get high. Hence the impetus to implement a three-month program of support groups, called "Authentic Connections."

Recognizing the need for and potential value of such support groups, the Mayo Clinic has granted all physician mothers one hour of freed time to attend the groups. Two groups were successfully conducted in the spring of 2015 and three more are currently underway.

As the empirical findings from the "Who Mothers Mommy" paper lends strong support to the central conceptualization of the Authentic Connections groups, Luthar hopes to expand her program for [mothers](#) across different community and professional settings. "Over time," she concludes, "it is my earnest wish that women can commonly come to prioritize, and to regularly receive themselves, the steadfast love and care that is uniquely associated with the term mothering."

More information: *Developmental Psychology*,
psycnet.apa.org/psycarticles/2015-48447-001

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