

7 Steps to Becoming Your Own Parent

by Susette Horspool

If your parents were not the best in the world—and most are not—you don't have to let those memories affect you still. Even if you catch yourself grouching about what they did or didn't do, or if you're unhappy with the way you turned out and lean toward blaming them, you can change that without having to change them or your past. Yes, you might have promised yourself to be a better parent to your kids than yours were to you, and that would somehow set it to right, but then what if you end up not having kids?

There is something you can do for yourself right now, without waiting, and that is to become your own parent—to fill in those gaps yourself—to give yourself what they didn't give you. In my late twenties I read an article about this possibility, and the action I took afterward changed my life.

While reading the article, I remembered an incident that had happened when I was four years old. I was driving with my father from Los Angeles to New Mexico to take my babysitter home. She was a pretty Mexican high-school girl named Helen.

It was a long journey, and I was tired when we got there, but also interested and

observant. I saw cookie-cutter houses—small and square, with faded white paint and tin roofs—standing in a line down both sides of a narrow street. Kids played barefoot in the gravel in front of us, hardly distinguishable from their small dirt yards.

Helen showed us where her house was, and when we stopped she jumped out of the back seat and ran to her door. Her mother threw the door open and gathered her into her arms. Little brothers peeked out from the dark behind her mother's long skirts, calling her name. My four-year-old heart swelled with longing.

As this memory flashed through my adult mind, I stopped to put that longing feeling into words. It was love I wanted—to be greeted with whole-hearted affection, as though I were essential to the well-being of

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my parents, instead of subtly feeling like a burden to my mother or an empty brain to be filled by my educator father. I'd always felt like I had to prove myself when, really, I just wanted to be loved.

The article suggested listing things you wish your parents had provided or traits you wish they'd had, so that's what I did. I listed

all their “faults” and turned them into wishes: “I wish my mother had been a stronger role model.” “I wish my father had taught me how to repair things.” “I wish they'd hugged me more.”

These wishes represent gaps that need to be filled—gaps you can fill for yourself as your own parent. Then you can let your parents off the hook. After all, they were once young like you, and were doing the best they knew how. Now you've grown, and it's your turn to support yourself.

Here is the self-parenting process I used:

1. Fold an empty sheet of paper in half. On one side of the fold, write “Wishes for Mom” and on the other write “Wishes for Dad” (or something similar).
2. Think of all the complaints you've had about your mother and change them into wishes. “I wish my mother had been more interested in me.” “I wish she'd played more with me.”
3. Do the same for your father. “I wish my dad had hugged me more.” “I wish he'd praised me for more than just my appearance.” Keep going until you run out.
4. Go through both lists and star those that still hurt.
5. Now look around for your personal resources. You have yourself, of course, and your partner (if you have one). You have relatives, coworkers, friends, maybe the parents of friends.
6. Now look for local, impersonal resources—non-profit groups or the community college. Perhaps an ongoing yoga or meditation class that offers to help you appreciate yourself.
7. Choose the resources that best fit your starred items, then approach them to ask for help or engagement.

At the time I was doing this work, it happened that a group of women from my town had decided to start a chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW). They asked me to help set it up. I agreed, seeing it as my chance to find stronger female role models and to develop a sense of belonging.

In time, I became one of the first women that chapter sent to the State Board of NOW, where I served for four years. I attended national conferences and met leading feminists like Betty Friedan. I was interviewed in newspapers and TV. As an unintended result, I became a role model myself!

During that period, also, I had a humiliating experience with “guy work.” Because I'd grown up with six younger brothers, I'd always been told to let the boys do the outside work, while I did inside work like cooking. When I wanted to help fix the car, my father had said, “No, that's man's work. You hold the flashlight and hand me tools.” I could watch, but I couldn't do. That turned out to be a huge lack.

During the beginning days of our NOW chapter, my neighbors had started complaining about my grass growing too high. I didn't know how (or hadn't been “allowed”) to do anything about it. Then my kitchen faucet sprung a leak. I knew it was something easy, but I didn't know what. I expected to have to call a plumber and pay an arm and a leg to fix something I should have been able to do myself. Then I thought of all

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the other things that could break that I wouldn't be able to fix, and I burst into tears.

I didn't want to marry just so I'd have someone to fix stuff, so what could I do? I cried in my rocker until the pain had abated, then got up and called the

plumber. When he came, I told him my dilemma—both the leaking faucet and my personal angst. He nodded understandingly and went into the kitchen.

“You're right,” he said. “It just needs the washer changed.” He showed me how to do it and charged me nothing.

The next day the fire department showed up, along with the neighbors. By then my grass was waist high and dry. The firemen looked at the grass, looked at me and said, “Why didn't you cut it?”

“I don't know how,” I whispered, ashamed. I told him my brothers were allowed to, but I wasn't.

They asked, “Do you have a job?”

“Yes.”

“Why don't you hire a neighbor boy to cut it?” *Duh!* My brothers used to cut other people's lawns all the time.

I said, with a teeny bit of hope, “I don't have a lawnmower.”

The fireman said, “Then hire someone whose parents have one.” Again I felt stupid.

Then the neighbors said they had one and would help me find a boy, and just like that, it was solved. The firemen cut the grass lower with a scythe and left the rest to be mowed.

Done with feeling stupid about guy stuff, the next week I went to the local community college and signed up for a car mechanics class.

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That whole period was a life changing experience for me—a self-parenting gift. I found mentors, teachers, and male/female fill-ins

for my parents. Although I'm not gay, I became an extension of a gay community where some women were building their own houses—everyone pushing the edges of propriety and experimenting with who we wanted to become.

By self-parenting, you can fill in your empty spaces and become a fuller, more satisfied person too. There's no need to depend on having kids to learn how to be the parent your parents were not. You can become your own parent anytime you want to by filling in those parental gaps yourself.

When you become new, your life becomes new. When you become strong, your life becomes strong. You'll also like your parents better, without them having to be any different. There are only seven steps to getting there, and the last is the most fun.



After pursuing interests in psychology, good health, and breaking through barriers, Susette Horspool acquired a master's degree in sustainable development. Gaining valuable knowledge and experience while exploring the right career fit, she realized her greatest overall fit lay in writing.

One of her articles, “Why Nature is Important to Human Physical and Economic Wellbeing,” includes nature and health, and how humans copy nature in developing new products: <https://owlcation.com/social-sciences/Man-and-Nature-Why-We-Need-the-Natural-World>

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