

There's no such thing as a perfect mother

Anne Robinson says that, in the end, a mother's love will trump guilt, embarrassment and wonky name tapes



Special bond: the close relationship between Anne and her daughter Emma Wilson survived the early years when Anne's life was 'all but destroyed' Photo: Sarah Lee/eyevine

When I was sent off to boarding school aged 10, I created a fantasy of the sort of mother I wanted to turn up and claim me on Open Day. She was a cross between Lady Isobel Barnett and Dame Jennifer Jenkins.

It matters not a jot if you have no knowledge of either of these two. Nor had I, beyond knowing they looked the part. They had sensible hairdos, wore nice silk blouses, restrained cardies and tweed skirts and carried themselves with an air of quiet dignity. In my dreams they did embroidery, knitted and made puddings that turned out the right shape. They went shopping with a wicker basket, which contained a neat shopping list. Most importantly when my headmistress, the terrifying Mother Alexander, spotted them, I knew she would head gently but purposefully in their direction.

Mother Alexander was six feet tall and, though young, had a debilitating limp, which meant one foot brushed slowly and awkwardly against the other as she moved. Except, that is, when she spotted my mother. Then, I was convinced she doubled her speed and headed in the opposite direction. Mother Alexander had once tried to interest my mother in my lack of respect for rules, only to find herself being questioned on the soundness of her judgment.

Naturally, my mother did not own cardies, tweed skirts or cookery books. She didn't sew, or even own a sewing basket. The stitching on of name tapes along with ironing, cleaning, baking, gardening, flower arranging and letter writing were part of a long list of activities that came under the general heading of "a job for someone else".

Another lengthy canon was made up of things she mistrusted or avoided, which – unfortunately for Mother Alexander – included teachers (particularly nuns), slow-witted men, paying income tax, budget clothing and anyone who did not share her touching and wholly unrealistic faith in the genius of her children.

She was fourth-generation Irish and had inherited her mother's market stall, which she turned into a lucrative wholesale business. She was Auntie Mame crossed with Howard Hughes. Or if you prefer, Mother Teresa styled by Vogue, but schooled by Stalin. She was quick-witted and defiant. She emptied clothes shops with the zeal of an oligarch's mistress while trading in business with the steeliness of a Goldman Sachs veteran.

When I became a newspaper reporter she bought me a mink coat to keep me warm. Her advice at my wedding was to get plenty of help in the house.

To begin with, we have few yardsticks with which to judge our mothers. But it hardly took long for me to recognise that mine was uncomfortably different from everyone else's. She didn't fit in at the fish and meat markets of Liverpool. But nor did she resemble the wives of the professional men who surrounded us in middle-class Blundellsands, along the coast from the city.

We are meant to love our mothers. Whatever they do, however embarrassingly they behave. But we don't get to choose them. And who is there to tell us how to cope when they turn out to be unlovable, devious, cruel, bullying, exhaustingly anxious, or just not very bright? How many of us grow up silently promising never to repeat our mother's worst shortcomings?

And there's the rub: we rarely appreciate the bits of our mothers – good or bad – that will turn out to be of lasting value. Or realise we might well take on our mother's most ruinous traits.

Barely a day went by, for example, when my mother didn't tell me I was second to none. I took her praise for granted. As I did growing up in a home with a dynamic, fearless, female breadwinner (my father was a genial schoolmaster), a woman who had no truck with difficult men and refused to be embarrassed by money or confrontation. In this respect my mother was gloriously emancipated before her time. But it wasn't the whole story. She was also an alcoholic. Never knowing when she'd embark on another of her benders dominated my childhood. Naturally, I swore I wouldn't ever drink to excess and cause my children the same awful grief. Yet by my late twenties I too was all but destroyed by alcohol. For the first eight years of my daughter Emma's life I was a hopelessly unfit mother, every bit

as much as my own mother had been.

The shame and the guilt linger, despite another of my mother's well known dictums: there are no victims, only volunteers. She had a point. Few of us escape some inherited disadvantage. One girlfriend of mine says the cruel, unhappy atmosphere that existed in her home made her dream only of living contentedly and alone inside the G Plan furniture shop on Wembley high street. Another believes that being routinely slapped as a child wasn't nearly as bad as having a mother who owned a hostess trolley.

Nowadays, mothers wrestle with the guilt of working, yet just as many daughters from my generation complain that having a clever, frustrated mother who was stuck at home meant also having a jealous, competitive mother who resented her children.

And here's what I now know. There is no such thing as a perfect mother. When times are tough and seem hopeless it's because you can only see a little of the jigsaw. Spirit and love can triumph over unpromising beginnings and the faulty dips. A mother's place is in the wrong. Guilt is inescapable and being a working mother, a stay-at-home mother or one who can't cook or sew or do the maths homework isn't the deal breaker. What children want most is a happy mother.

I slowly recovered to become, as the textbooks advise, "a good enough parent". I tried so hard to repeat the things my mother did right and tried even harder to avoid doing the things she misjudged. But along the way I've ended up making plenty of new mistakes.

Emma is generous enough to delight in her unconventional upbringing, her oddball mother. Do I embarrass her? Do her eyes roll upwards, her jaw drop open in disbelief on a regular basis when we are out together? You bet!

She's inherited my red hair and my stubbornness, but not my impatience. It takes her three years to choose a sofa, weeks to pick a lettuce. I adore her company. No one makes me laugh like she does. She tolerates my profligacy, my loud, irritating voice, my inability to listen to instructions and my tendency to want to solve any emotional upset by a trip to Harvey Nichols. I am mostly good-natured about her penny pinching, her obsession with saving the planet, and her need to go through my dustbins in case I've thrown out a half decent cardboard cup.

It's a rite of passage for a daughter to give her mother a wide berth for a while once she's flown the nest. Emma chose to go to university in New York and the city claimed her for several years. Nevertheless, the air miles we clocked up so we could see each other as if she lived along the road ran into millions. Thank goodness, she fell in love, married, came home and although she took her time, produced the grandchildren I longed for.

And here's the best news: when a daughter becomes a mother the relationship with her own mother shifts. She needs her Mum. And by golly was I breathless and waiting to step up to the plate. Grandmothering, I've discovered, is a balancing act; you try and keep your mouth zipped but your arms wide open to catch whatever is thrown your way in a crisis.

My boys, Parker and Hudson (I know they are hers but I think of them as mine) are four and five. They

call me Nonni – not the Italian Nonna – but it works. When Hudson, the firstborn, was six months old, his parents left him with me for a whole fortnight and went off to the Caribbean for a second honeymoon. The pride at being given this most precious of tasks still causes my eyes to water.

The boys come to me on Mondays. I collect them from school and they stay the night. We like their mother out of the way. Because like most clever career girls, their mother's approach to child rearing takes in several of the disciplines of a Harvard Business School chief executive. She disapproves of television, of chocolate, of sweets, of electronic toys, of unregulated bedtimes. I'm convinced both children are ready for Sandhurst. When Hudson and Parker are at Nonni's, however, we relax a little. The three of us call it: "Do What You Like" time. We have the odd biscuit, an episode or two of Shaun the Sheep, an experiment or three on the computer.

Does Emma know? We hope not. But then as I mentioned – a mother's place is in the wrong.

Anne Robinson / The Telegraph