

Ep 334: Being More Than a Mom (with Ericka Souter)



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Jen Riday

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You're listening to the *Vibrant Happy Women* podcast. I'm Dr. Jen Riday. And on this episode we're talking about how to be a mom and have a life, you don't have to give it up. Stay tuned.

Hi, I'm Jen Riday. This podcast is for women who want to feel more vibrant, happy, aligned, and alive. You'll gain the emotional, physical, and spiritual tools you need to get your sparkle back and ensure that depression, anxiety, and struggle don't rule your life. Welcome to the Vibrant Happy Women Podcast.

I am so excited about this topic, you may have heard me talk about my adventure workshop in episodes past. You know I'm on the topic of being a more adventurous woman. Well, what better topic to have on this episode today than how to be a mom and have a life. It's so fascinating how culturally we all buy into the idea that when you have kids they are the center of your focus. Now, I don't want to belittle anyone who has done this, or who is doing this, or who buys into this because I bought into this forever until I hit this point where I had made my kids central to everything.

I didn't work outside of the home, I baked homemade bread, I threw parties that were amazing. And I sewed on their scout patches and my whole life revolved around my kids and I couldn't have been less happy. And I felt ashamed for that because everyone else around me looked happy but I was probably comparing my insides to their outsides. Having met a lot more women now I recognize that a ton of women become very unhappy when their whole life revolves around just one aspect.

Back in the 50s and 60s we idealized parenting back then but the fact is the stories I've heard, moms sent their kids out to play and expected not to see them until the end of the day, until dinner. Those moms had other skills and things, and talents and they were sewing, and talking. And they had friends, and they would travel, and they would see the national parks. I'm

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so grateful to be in a time when the pendulum is swinging back and to be a contributor to helping all of us see that there is so much more to us than just being a mom, or a wife, or an employee.

We can and should have passions and things that light us up. For me now I firmly believe that the best version of a mom is doing only those things that completely light me up so that when I'm around my kids I am oozing with joy. I can break out into song and start a funny dance thing, and tell a joke, and be wild, and excited, and happy. I want my kids to remember that. And in the process I no longer bake cookies. I don't often cook because my husband's got that and that's fine.

I don't sew a thing, I tell them to ask dad to sew on their buttons or whatever's going on. Now, not to say that I'm dumping everything on my husband. I don't. I've hired a housekeeper. I have this podcast. I have these friends that provide the support and the friendship I need. I'm trying to fill in all these other areas of life because my priority is to show up in the most joyous, aligned, high vibe state I can for my kids. If I model that and help them raise their emotional baseline then I have succeeded, nothing else matters, truly nothing else matters to me.

So, what matters to you? What would it mean for you to live a life where you're a mom and you're living? You're a mom and you have passions, and creativity, and out lit with your friends? What have you always dreamed of doing? I want you to explore that topic as I talk with my guest today, Ericka Souter. Ericka explored this topic through a book and you're going to hear about that in this interview. Just food for thought, plant the seed, how can you be a mom and live rather than just exist? This is the theme for the past several episodes but it's so, so important.

Now, if you're not a mom, you can examine cultural expectations. How can you not just exist at your job, or with your family of origin, or whatever

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you're doing in your life, how can you not just exist but truly live and thrive, whatever you do with your time, whatever roles you have? All of those roles that we can have are important, not just one. Alright, well, let's dive into this interview, I think you're going to love it. And here we go.

Jen: Hey vibrant happy women, I'm here with Ericka Souter today and she's going to be talking about the shift into not only becoming a mom but that moment as a mom when you recognize, hey, wait, what about all this other stuff in my life, I can't just be a mom. So, Ericka, is the author of *How to Have a Kid and a Life: A Survival Guide*. She explores the 21st century parenting dilemma. When did being a good mom become synonymous with giving up everything that makes you, you? Question of the year.

A journalist with over 20 years of experience, Ericka's work has appeared in magazines, newspapers and she is a regular contributor on Good Morning America. Ericka, I'm so grateful you're here. I'm excited about this topic. Welcome to the show.

Ericka: Thank you. Thank you for having me. It's my favorite topic, love to talk about women and motherhood.

Jen: Okay. So, give us a little background. When did you become a mom? And how did this whole book writing process unfold? Because I think it's a book we all need so much. I love that you did this.

Ericka: I really wrote the book that I needed when I became a mom. I became a mom in 2008, I had my first child and I was still working full-time and I kind of thought that I knew it would be hard to balance it all but I thought that I could figure out how to have this thriving career, have this wonderful personal life with my friends and also be a great mother. Well,

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then reality hits. And then you're like, "Oh my God, I am drowning. Why didn't anyone tell me this stuff?" And it's not just the juggle.

There are all these things about our lives, we had romantic relationships, close friendships, career goals, hobbies, activities, that made up who we were before we had kids. And then once we had kids they just kind of disappear or that focus kind of disappears. And in that process I found that women like myself and other women that I interviewed were suffering and often suffering in silence. And we were often feeling overwhelmed. And I wanted to dig into why is this?

What are we missing? What is it that we need to do to kind of get back on track to feel more whole? So, I started interviewing moms across the country about their lives. And it really wasn't about cradle cap, diaper blowouts or temper tantrums. This was like what is going on with you? What are you missing? What would make you happy? What would you change about motherhood if you could? What would you keep the same? And then of course I interviewed tons of experts, did tons of research.

So, a lot of the stuff that I talk about is backed up not only by lived experience but also by long term research studies. So that's really how it began. And I have to tell you, it was such a fun and amazing process to just sit down and talk to people about just their lives.

Jen: Well, I'm curious what would they change if they could change anything as a whole? I know what I would say.

Ericka: So, based on my interviews I came up with five questions and it's like a temperature check that I think every woman, actually I think every person should do this every year, whether it's the New Year, or whether it's springtime. And these kind of all hit what a lot of people said they were missing. So, the first question is, am I nurturing my marriage or

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partnership? The next is, is my career headed in a good direction if you have a career outside the home?

Number three, do I have supportive friends to turn to? Number four, do I feel good about myself? Number five, do I nurture any of the passions I had before kids? And number six, have I created a social life that has nothing to do with my children? Do I have friends outside of the playmates for my children?

Jen: Oh, my goodness.

Ericka: And I felt like we start to address those. So, I suggest if you have said, no, actually to any of those questions, we need to kind of prioritize. And it doesn't ignore your children or moving to Hawaii to open up a surf shop and neglecting your family. It means putting yourself back on top of your to-do list. It's okay to make yourself a priority sometimes and so many of us don't do that. Because there's some kind of honor in being the all-sacrificing mom who doesn't worry about herself, who only worries about other people.

But what I also found, when we do that and we don't often realize it, our kids are suffering and research backs that up. So, it's really important to focus on yourself. Actually, there was this really, I mean great study and it showed that a kid's social emotional development, the most important thing to contribute to a kid's social emotional development isn't how much time you spend with them, whether you work outside the home, or you're a stay at home mom, or how much money you make. It's whether or not you are happy. We don't know it, they don't know it but it really does have an effect.

Jen: I believe it. I'll just share my own experience. I used to be a stay at home mom even though I have a PhD in human development and family studies. I could have worked outside of the home. I at that time believed

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being at home was great and it was great in so many ways. But I am noticing a big difference in how my kids are turning out based on which version of me they have gotten. I was really unhappy as a stay at home mom. I was burned out and exhausted, and I was there. I was making the homemade bread but I was not happy.

And now I might not be there as often but when I am there I show up with vibrance, and excitement, and vitality. And I'm telling you, the outcomes in my kids, even though it's a case study is drastically different. So, sounds right to me.

Ericka: I mean right there you're a perfect example that it really does matter how we feel about ourselves and what we have going on in our lives outside of being a good mom. So, I wanted people to read this to find out, every chapter's different. Every chapter touches on a different topic that affects women who have children or women who are caregivers. But there's just prescriptive advice about okay, here's how you start turning this around.

Here's how you address this because you're not alone. There are thousands of women who are dealing with this. And this is how they have found help and hope.

Jen: So, tell us your version of this turnaround. You had your kids, you wrote the book and learned a lot. But how have you turned it around so that you feel that balance between all of these areas, marriage, career, friends, feeling good about yourself, passions and a social life that doesn't involve your kids?

Ericka: Yeah. So, I did a lot of the things wrong in the beginning. I kind of just focused full on, on just taking care. I had one child in 2008 and then eight and a half years later I had my second. Do not recommend that time,

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that spread, without one in the middle but that's how I did it. And it was with the first one that I just completely lost so much of myself. My career kind of just went sideways, I wasn't as focused. I always felt overwhelmed. I let a lot of friendships take the backburner and not realizing that you really do need that emotional support.

You need people around you that kind of get you and love you, and lift you up, even if they don't have solutions, they're just there. And so, when I started focusing on writing about, when I became a parent, I used to work in entertainment news. I worked for People Magazine and Us Weekly. And it just wasn't the kind of space that I felt that was conducive or respectful of motherhood because you got pulled in two different directions. And I just felt that I wanted a more forgiving environment. Where if my kid was sick it wasn't such a big deal if I had to run out or had an asthma attack or something like that.

So, I switched gears to start writing about motherhood for a place called CaféMom which is a great parenting website on all news parenting. And that's when I was an editor there and I started just to kind of dive in. I started going to every conference, the Mom 2.0, Blogger, anything where women were congregating to talk about their lives. But I did it more as so I could understand my job more fully, so I could just kind of immerse myself. And I went from Kim Kardashian to this world of moms, totally big change.

And what I'm incredibly grateful for because I found a lot of meaning and purpose. I felt really good about what I was working on and the kinds of information we're bringing to moms. And then the conversations that we were having, real meaningful conversations. And so, I didn't start off thinking, I'm going to write a book about motherhood because it was so hard for me. I kind of thought I was just doing my job. But then I really immersed and when I talked to people I could relate to so many of the struggles that moms were having.

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And that's when I started thinking, okay, how do we change this? How do I feel like I'm not drowning? How do I not feel like I'm letting everyone down? And then that's kind of where the seeds for the book came from. And that's when I decided to write a book. I didn't do a ton of writing because I was mostly editing at CafeMom. But I did write a post on this discovery of a mom gene. Rockefeller University, these scientists had discovered this gene in mice and they dubbed it the mom gene.

So basically, kind of when it's activated or turned on in your body they hypothesized that it's responsible for your need to nurture and your need to be a mom. And I thought, this is really interesting because I was never the type of mom who ever craved having kids. My husband's biological clock was ticking. He would send me text messages, my biological clock is ticking away, we have to have a baby. And I'm thinking, oh gosh. And so, I never had that desperate need to be a mom.

But obviously when I did become a mom I enjoyed being around my kid, I love my kid and I feel like that's something we always have to say, qualify when we say anything remotely negative about motherhood. We have to say, "Well, no, no, no, I'm super grateful and I love my kid." But I read the research and I wrote this article and it was entitled is discovery of a mom gene the reason some of us don't crave having kids? And just wrote about my own experience, how I was never the type of young little girl who played house.

I did have Barbies but they were solving mysteries in the Amazon, they weren't marrying Ken, they weren't having little babies. And I never understood when I went to college and I met young women who were like, "All I want to do is get married and have kids." I'm thinking, oh my gosh, I can't wait to start a career. I can't wait to be this and that and do all these things. And so, I wrote this article. And the response was so overwhelming

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where lots of women who were moms were writing in saying, “Oh my God, I don’t think I have the mom gene either.”

“Oh my God, finally I feel like this really resonated with me.” And I thought, well, what else are we not talking about that’s affecting other moms out there? When you feel like you don’t have the mom gene there is also a lot of insecurity. You’re like, look, I’m, not a natural mother. I had trouble breastfeeding and it made me feel so guilty and bad. When everything is breast is best but then what if you can’t do it?

Jen: Now you’re supposed to breastfeed two years, how would that have felt? Oh my gosh.

Ericka: I mean I can’t even imagine. And how your career suffers because moms are viewed differently in the professional setting. And there are all these things that we just weren’t talking about and I addressed them all in the book. These are things, no one at your shower is going to tell you, “Your sex life is going to suffer.” Or you may [crosstalk] or you hate your husband. No one’s going to say that. So, they can just buy my book and it’ll say it for them.

Jen: Oh yeah, well said. I’ve read stories of kids who grew up in the 50s and 60s, the moms really didn’t pay a lot of attention to their kids. We have this idea that they were home like June Cleaver with the pearls and the dress. But the kids were sent outside and weren’t expected to come in the house again till dinner. That level of freedom allowed women to do their thing, whatever that was. Obviously there’s a certain amount of privilege if the women were sitting around playing card games or whatever.

But I often question how we got to where we are where the entire world revolves around your child. And I think the pendulum kind of hit its edge and now the women are saying, “Hold up, not okay.” Where is it going to

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swing back to? But in addition to that there are so many different way to be a mom. Where do we get this idea that there's one way? All the what to expect when you're expecting books have to have contributed. The idea that there's a right way, what if we just have shades of grey in between all the ways are great, who cares?

Certain kids from this mom will have this advantage and certain kids from this mom will learn more independence and it's beautiful. So, I don't know, it's something I've been thinking about.

Ericka: No, I mean it's a really relevant point because I think that we get these images from obviously the media, and books, and entertainment, but we also get this idea from our own moms. So, I asked a lot of women, "What was your mom like?" And they're like, "She cooked every meal. She was great. She did everything for us. She never did anything for herself." And I was like, okay. But they're remembering this fondly but then at the same time they're drowning trying to do the same thing.

And then I would ask, "But what was your mom like outside of having kids, did she have any hobbies, did she work?" And then it was like, "Oh yeah, she worked two jobs and she never did anything for herself." Or, "She wanted to go back to school but my sister and I were really upset about it so she didn't do that." Or, "She was always so tired when she came home and cooked." And so, when you really kind of sit down and you break it down.

And then I was like, "Would you want your daughter to feel that way, overwhelmed, and tired, and never do something for herself? So then why are you letting yourself do that?" So sometimes we have to kind of sit back and take a look at how we're living and how we're neglecting certain things and make a change. And so that's why I do think that celebrity images of

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motherhood looking so perfect and blissful. I remember when I interviewed, I used to interview celebrities for a living.

And I remember one and she's like, "I love being pregnant." And I thought, really? Or, "It's so blissful." Or, "I love it when my kids' upset and I soothe them and I just hold them." Those images are what are reported. We don't see the hard parts. We think we're failures when we're having trouble. And then we just work harder to give more, and more, and more of ourselves because we're just waiting for it to look so perfect, and blissful, and easier and it's not going to.

So, I'm hoping now we're at least in a time where people are having kind of honest conversations about how hard it is. But I didn't want this to just be like it's so hard. I also wanted to have, okay, here's how I'm going to make it better because we're now in the time when we can complain about it but I want more solutions.

Jen: Yes. Well, speaking of solutions, let's say someone out there is listening, they're like, "Yes, yes, yes, I am not fully living. I feel kind of dead inside." What advice would you have for them? Well, what advice do you have for stepping onto this path without letting the guilt hold them back, how do you go into that starting to live phase?

Ericka: Well, first of all you have to just acknowledge that you deserve to have a little fun and a little something for yourself. I have a five year old, I have a 13 year old and a five year old. And I have to remind myself that he is not going to suffer if for one evening I don't play Matchbox cars with him. Or you know what I mean? If I have something that I want to do, whatever my personal goal is, for me I have set my priorities. I make sure my kids have what they need.

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I try to nurture my relationship with my husband but I have three coffees a week with my girlfriends. That is a priority and that is something that I do every week. I have made that a priority. Luckily my career is something I really enjoy so I also have that, now what I do for a living, writing. But you have to decide what it is that you're missing. So, lots of women are struggling with this. So, I have a chapter called Motherhood May Not Be Enough. And I want people to understand, that doesn't make you a bad person if you want something more.

Everyone always tells you, if you have kids and you have your home, and you should be happy, why are you unhappy? It makes you sound ungrateful. And that's not fair because there's so much a part of you. Some of the quotes that women told me, "I feel like I have lost a part of myself." "I feel like I should be doing more. Is this all I'm meant to be? And I have more to give than just being a mom." And it's okay to say that. So, you can be a mom and you can be something else.

And so, I wanted people to start asking themselves questions, to kind of sit down. And at the end of actually most of the chapters I have a worksheet that you do, just asking yourself questions. And some of the ones for people for when they're trying to figure out what to do next. So, sit down with a notepad, and answer each of these questions and then lay the groundwork for figuring out what you need to do to pursue your dreams.

And dreams could mean a job or it could mean a hobby, it could mean learning a new skill. So, it's going to be different for everyone. For example, number one, when you were a little girl what did you want to be when you grew up? What is your dream job? Other than your children, what fulfills you? Because you're allowed to have other things that fulfill you. What do you think you need to be happy? If you never tried to reach your goal how would you feel?

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And then there's many more questions on that list but just to start thinking, you have to start doing some inner work to just start thinking about what you want. And then you can make plans to get there. You can't do it in one day, you can't do it one week. For some people it's wanting to go back to school. Sometimes you have to save money or figure out babysitting, or figure out a work schedule, or get a job that has a work schedule that's more conducive to going to school.

Or finding a program that has nights and weekends but I want people to start moving toward whatever it is that's going to make them feel more purposeful.

Jen: I love that, move towards what makes you feel more purposeful, having a life, a kid and a life. I love this. So, Ericka, where can people connect with you to really get more inspired on this topic? Obviously they're going to get your book, "How to Have a Kid and a Life, I love that but where should they connect with you?

Ericka: I'm constantly posting on Instagram where I post not just information from my book but I also post articles I write on motherhood. I'm constantly writing for parents, The Bump, or mom.com CafeMom. So, I would check out my Instagram, it's @erickasouter and I always update with my speaking engagements or wonderful podcasts like yours. And then of course you can go to my website which is erickasouter.com which has an archive of a lot of my work on motherhood and parenting.

So yeah, I just keep the conversation going and people can DM me and talk about this. It's really important, I love engaging with people on the topic.

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Jen: Fantastic important work, thank you for answering this question through this book. I love it. I appreciate you being on the show today. Take care, Ericka.

Ericka: Take care. Bye bye.

Okay, I hope you're inspired to begin to live in a way that feels juicy. In autumn, leaves on the trees become brittle, and dry, and they fall down and life is over. Don't let that be you. How can you feel juicy, and vibrant, and alive like there's a song in your heart that needs to be sung, that you're just excited to wake up and be alive? It is your job to set up your life for that to happen. You are meant to be a being of happiness, a woman of purpose, and joy, and fulfillment.

That energy, P.S., speaks the truth and you can adapt, and change, and pivot, and shift to make this happen. Now, I've been doing this in my life, you may have heard me tell about my new adventurous woman self that is developing and coming into being. How I am filling a backpack with my essentials so I can go anywhere at any time. I am not neglecting or abandoning my kids, don't worry. But once they all move out of the house this is going to be a more adventurous self.

But for now, I'm going to just start adding that adventure with and without my kids, with and without my husband. I get to explore what feels like my next best step. If you'd like to be along for that journey I have a workshop where I talk about everything I did to start setting up this new lifestyle. It's at jenriday.com/adventure. Go listen to it, get inspired, also follow me on social media where I'll be sharing more of my adventures.

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I am on Instagram and Facebook at @jenriday. My friends, I love you, I want you to be vibrant like a violin string that is plucked, it just sings, and vibrates, and resonates, and shines into the world. We can live that way. It's up to us to make it happen. Thank you so much for being here, I will see you again next time, until then make it a vibrant and happy week. Take care.

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