

An excerpt from *Dragon Mom* by Janet Gonzalez Mena

CHAPTER ONE

ABOUT BEING REAL

This book is about being who you really are. Many parenting books take into account your not-nice aspects, but subtly give the message that you should be nice - if not nice, at least reasonable and calm. My experience is that the effect of that message is guilt. This book is different. I urge you to be yourself when you parent, and to like it. I know that's easier said than done.

The parent me has several aspects. I've already shown you Dragon Mom in the introduction. As you get to know her you'll see that she plays a variety of roles, She blows up. She also protects those around her, structuring situations to keep her young offspring from harm. She's not always obvious about this task of hers.

Even when she's not blowing up, she's oversized, which results in clumsiness. Her brain is minute, which results in more automatic behavior and less thoughtful behavior. It's hard to believe, but basically she is a lovable character, innocent and good at heart, in spite of her nasty temper and her potential for destruction.

I have another parenting character. I call her Mrs. Bodunky. She's almost the opposite of Dragon Mom. A sweet, kindly, plump, nurturing person, she likes to make delicious meals and gets great satisfaction out of watching people eat them. When she cuddles her offspring, she's warm, soft, and smells of lavender soap. She sings lullabies and cheery wake-up songs, instead of screaming, "Go to bed!" or "Get up!" as Dragon Mom has been known to do.

Like Dragon Mom, Mrs. Bodunky has her bad side. The dragon's potential for destruction is evident. Her size alone means that she could crush a child with a single footstep. Her claws are capable of bloody gashes, which heal into scars. She has a strict hands-off rule when she's angry, but all of us are aware of the lethal potential. Mrs. Bodunky's potential for destruction is less obvious.

Mrs. Bodunky puffs up as the dragon does, but instead of turning into a monster, she turns into a marshmallowy ooze. Though she still looks like a kindly, plump woman, when she embraces a child, there is danger of suffocation. I don't know if you have ever been embraced by marshmallow ooze, but it can be pretty awful. Some kids like it because it's soft and sweet. The suffocation effect is so subtle that sometimes children don't even know it's happening.

Here is an example of puffed-up Bodunky:

"Mommy. I hurt my knee." Child, who has been waiting all day for

attention from busy mother working on a magazine article, presents a dirty knee with an infinitesimal red mark.

"Oh, poor baby!" Scoops up child in arms, carrying off to bathroom. Washes knee while gushing sympathy. Gives child several band-aids. Takes back to kitchen. Feeds. Gives present she was saving for upcoming birthday. Leaves child to play with present and returns to computer.

Like Dragon Mom, Bodunky's brain is on the small side and she operates on automatic pilot a good deal of the time. But at her core, she is as good and innocent as her monster counterpart.

Here is the dragon in the same situation:

"What do you mean you're hurt? That's just a tiny scratch. Did you clean up your room yet?"

"But the hurt is inside. I think my leg is broken!"

"Don't be silly. Your leg isn't broken. You're standing on it. It's fine shape to take out the trash, which I see is overflowing."

Child picks up leg, trying to balance on one foot. 'I need a band-aid."

"Don't be ridiculous. That little scratch doesn't need anything.

What you need is to do what I told you and quit bugging me about little things." Voice raises.

'This isn't a little thing,"

"Of course it is. Quit fussing and do your chores.' Voice is now screaming.

I'll spare you the rest of the scene. Eventually the child either gives up or Dragon Mom starts feeling guilty about her anger. That guilty feeling may lead to an apology to the child. After the apology, she turns the child in question over to Bodunky smother with marshmallow cream.

As you see, the two often work in concert. The dragon appears - arguing, screaming, threatening, and criticizing. When she is finished, she invites Mrs. Bodunky to take over. That dear woman then mops up by doing for the children whatever Dragon Mom had wanted them to do. The attic scene in the introduction is an example of this situation.

Both of these characters have good qualities. They just don't behave very well. Dragon Mom combines strength, power, and determination. Bodunky, in her warm, accepting way, can be appropriately nurturing if she doesn't blow up into a marshmallow.

I want you to know that, in addition to these two characters, I have a mature, intelligent, thoughtful, competent parent in me. She has a normal-sized brain and doesn't operate on automatic pilot. She listens to the voice of reason regularly, although she still has feelings and expresses them.

I like to think of this person as the real me, but of course she's not. She's just one of us. I like so much to think of her as me that I call her Parent. Unfortunately, J.C.P isn't around most of the time when I'm parenting. These other two bunglers keep appearing. I do want to show how Janet C. Parent would have handled the bumped knee situation, so I'm giving her a little space.

"Mommy, I hurt my knee."

Mommy looks up from the computer and says, 'Well, I see you have a little red mark there. Puts arm around child and gets down at eye level so they are talking face to face.

I hurt myself."

"I know you've been playing by yourself for a long time now, while I've been working on the computer."

"Yeah, and then I fell down."

"I bet you'd like me to spend some time with you for a while. Why don't you wash off your knee and then we'll decide what to do together. Waits to see if child moves toward bathroom. Child remains still. "Do you want me to help you wash your knee?"

The above behavior is what I've learned to do. I can be calm and realistic. I can be understanding and appropriately nurturing. I can be adult and mature without being empty or unreal. I don't do those things naturally. I've learned to do them. I've learned from books, form classes, and from watching other competent parents.

I find it easy to like myself when I'm Janet Competent Parent. But I know that I'm more likely to be the dragon or Bodunky in a given situation. These people in me all have personalities. Each has a certain consistency, which means that she things, feels, and acts in fairly predictable ways. Each speaks in a different voice.

All of these characters are part of the real me. When I am one of them, I may not be nice, but I am being real. I can also make up characters and be a fake. I'm at my fakest when someone who expects me to be an expert is present when I'm with my children. I am aware that this happens, but awareness doesn't seem to help. I wasn't always aware of my now fakeness. One of my children taught me about it.

I was finishing up my first day as a preschool teacher when my three-year-old son arrived from the class next door. He kept tugging on my apron as he waited for me to say good-bye to my remaining students. I could see that he was impatient to ask me something. Finally, I turned and asked, "What is it, Adam?"

"Mommy...?" He looked puzzled.

"Yes?" His next words stunned me. I've never forgotten them.

"Why are you talking so funny to those kids?"

I realized at that moment that I had been trying hard to be true to my concept of a real teacher. I was being more of smiley face than a real person. I can certainly forgive myself for that phone behavior. I was new at this job. I didn't know how to be "me" and "teacher" both. I was playing a superficial role - and not very well, either.

I got better as I got more experience. I developed a "teacher" set of characteristics that were closer to who I really am than the smiley-faced exterior I used as a beginner.

My teacher me is different from my parent me. But she has the full range of characteristics: I can be nurturing, protecting, critical, marshmallowy, or as calm, mature, and reasonable a teacher as I am a parent. Nevertheless, I feel and act differently when the children I am in charge of are not my own.

Unfortunately, I seldom get such clear and immediate feedback when I'm being fake as I got from Adam that day long ago. I have had to work on distinguishing "realness" for myself. I've found that my "fake detector" works better detecting fakeness in others than it does picking out my own.

But periodically, I can call forth that three-year-old voice asking his very serious question. I'm also getting better at listening to my voice of reason when it says, "You're being fake, Janet." The trick is to take a split second from what might be an emotional moment and really listen.

Children need to be raised by real people, not fakes playing superficial roles. They need full-bodied people, not inflatable life-sized dolls like "Mama Smiley Face," who is nothing but a shell.

My Bodunky with her marshmallow insides is better than a parent with nothing inside. Fakes are empty shells. Poke them hard enough and they collapse. Shells are empty because their real feelings are hidden away. Children need parents who show the many aspects of themselves.

Parents who are home all day, every day, with their children have little chance to play superficial roles, to be fakes, to operate as shells. The time factor works against that. Constant togetherness forces people to be real. But most of today's parents have limited time with their children, and so may strive harder to maintain a smiley-faced parent shell because they think they should. The pressure of making time together into "quality time" leads to fake roles.

Usually, parents can't achieve the smiley-faced shell for very long. They feel guilty when the shell collapses and real feelings appear - feelings that aren't always "nice." They don't appreciate the fact that it's better for their kids to see them acting means, tired, grouchy, and impatient than it is for them to feel that way and act some other way.

A test of realness is asking, "What's happening inside me right now?" When you ask that question, you get in touch with your physical and emotional feelings, and become aware that you have some choices. One choice is to be honest about your reactions.

The voice asking the question, "What's happening inside me?" and making the choice is called "the self". The voice of reason is part of that self. But the self isn't just a voice or a person; it's more of a control center. If you dislike the dehumanized electronic image, you can personify it by thinking of it as the director of all your parts.

The director is nothing along. It must always be clothed in personality. It cannot act without a role. Just as you can't act without a body, neither can you act without a personality - a set of roles. The word "personality" comes from the word "persona," which means "mask." That's not to say that we all walk around hidden behind masks; the message is just the opposite. The mask doesn't hide you; it allows you to be in the world, to act, to express yourself, to feel. It gives shape to the shapeless, animates, gives voice. Without a mask, there is no real you. The self behind these masks or roles doesn't act; it only directs. It chooses which aspect of your personality will come forth at any given moment.

Being real doesn't mean acting straight out of the self. It means being aware of the self at the center, and the self being aware of the full range of "you's." This has to do with knowing that there is a controlling factor beyond the actor of the moment. This control center has the well-being of the individual at heart and aims at meeting that individual's needs. The director, or self, operates the safety witch that keeps the dragon from abusing here children.

Each of us has the lifelong task of expressing all these parts of ourselves. Most of us don't like all our parts, which is understandable, because not all of them are nice. I truly hate the dragon most of the time. Some parts of all of us have inevitably been warped and twisted as we were growing up. One of the tasks of the adult is to come to know and accept all these parts.

I'm working hard with Dragon Mom. Writing this book is one of the ways I'm getting in touch with her. I'm hoping that all the attention will help her express her good qualities more and her warped, destructive qualities less. I firmly believe that all my parts are basically good. Each holds valuable energy. I can't use this energy as long as I deny, neglect, or try to kill off the parts of me that I don't like.

As parents, we need to be fully who we are so that our children can learn how to feel feelings, express them, make choices, and recognize needs. They will more easily learn to be real if their parents are real. They will learn to deny parts of themselves if they see that behavior in their parents' example. They will play superficial, stereotypical roles if the people around them play those kinds of roles. Being real is accepting and sometimes expressing all the parts of you. Being real is being grouchy and impatient sometimes, warm and accepting sometimes, angry and intense sometimes, needy sometimes, giving sometimes. Children need parents who are all of these - and more.

