“I would rather be the child of a mother who has all the inner conflicts of the human being than be mothered by someone for whom all is easy and smooth, who knows all the answers, and is a stranger to doubt.”
Donald W. Winnicott, 1955.

In the early 1950s Donald Winnicott, a British psychoanalyst, developed the theory of the ‘good enough’ mother. He was responding to the popular idea of the ‘perfect mother’, an ideal that he saw causing guilt and anxiety in otherwise competent mothers who worried that they were somehow failing to measure up to what was, in fact, an unrealistic and unachievable standard.

Winnicott argued that children were resilient – the human race would not have survived if they weren’t – and that provided mothers (or, as we would say today, parents) were ‘good enough’, most of the time, then occasional ‘failures’ were unlikely to be harmful. In fact, he argued, such failures were actually important for children’s development. Without them children would never learn to live in the real world, as opposed to a world of constant adult attention and cosseting.

Like the famous opening lines of Dr Benjamin Spock’s Baby and Child Care (1972), “Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do,” Winnicott’s message was one of reassurance. The ‘good enough’ mother no longer had to measure up to perfection – she simply had to be good enough. It wasn’t an excuse for laziness or poor parenting. ‘Good enough’ was still a high standard, but by allowing some leeway, it took away the pressure and anxiety of feeling the need to always get it right. It took away the pressure to be perfect.

These days no one seems to remember Winnicott. I recall being taught about him at university but the decision to include him amongst the more well known theorists – such as Piaget and Vygotsky – must have been a personal one on the part of our psychology lecturer, because no one else I know has ever heard of him. His idea of the ‘good enough’ mother though, has always stuck with me, perhaps because in the midst of so much theory, it seemed so commonsense and down to earth.

Today perfection remains an alluring and enticing goal. Indeed, who wouldn’t want to be perfect? And yet perfection, despite its seeming attractions, is in fact a poor motivator. While high expectations are, as the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) reminds us, important, such expectations need to be realistic if they are to be achievable. When we use perfection as the benchmark against which to measure ourselves, we almost always fall short – and usually respond by feeling either resentful, or guilty, or both.

I am reminded of the dangers of perfectionism, and of Winnicott’s response to it, when I talk to educators about the EYLF and the National Quality Framework (NQF) and how educators perceive their own role within both of the frameworks. The introduction of the EYLF and NQF represent two of the most important and positive developments for the Australian early childhood field for a generation. And yet, for some educators, their introduction has produced an unintended sense of disempowerment and anxiety. In some cases, this is simply a natural reaction to change. In others however, there is a feeling that the role of educators is now so complex, and the expectations so high, that it is all increasingly unachievable.

Of course, for some educators – those whose practice is outdated, tired or simply poor – the EYLF and NQF should be challenging and demanding, even confronting. However, when experienced and capable educators are just as anxious, then it seems that something may be going awry. I don’t think the problem lies with the frameworks. The EYLF and NQF were designed to challenge and provoke our thinking, but the intention was not to overwhelm and demoralise. It seems to be more about our response to the very idea of standards and expectations, and the misconception that they demand perfection from us.

In working with the new frameworks we need to be careful that in applying high expectations to ourselves, we do not inadvertently head down the road to perfectionism. It doesn’t have to be that way. Read carefully, the EYLF and the National Quality Standard (NQS), provide ample evidence that perfectionism is not the answer. Such a path however is difficult to avoid, if only because perfectionism is such a pervasive idea. We live in a society that idealises the perfect life, the perfect job, the perfect body, the perfect family. We are bombarded with the message that perfection is both possible and desirable. In the face of this, it is hard not to be sucked in, despite the fact that
measuring ourselves against the unattainable only leads to dissatisfaction.

This is where Winnicott’s idea of being ‘good enough’ offers an alternative way to think about what we do. The truth is that no one is perfect. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t set high standards, or aim to improve. This is not an argument for slap-dash or half-baked practice. Nor is it an excuse or apology for laziness. Instead it is an attempt to think about what really matters in quality early childhood education, and our role in it, without idealising the impossible.

As educators we are called upon to make hundreds of decisions every day. Some are small, while others are large, some will be inconsequential, while others will have lasting impacts. Understandably, we want to make good decisions as often as possible. But if we imagine that we can always make the right decision, and always do the right thing, then we are setting ourselves up for failure.

In this regard the principles of reflective practice and ongoing improvement, are vital parts of both the EYLF and NQF. Importantly both recognise that we are not perfect. In a perfect world there would be no need for reflection or improvement. However, the message that there is always room for improvement, can itself be taken in two ways. Either it becomes a comfort (that none of us is perfect) or it can become a thorn in our side, reminding us of exactly the same thing, but with an added twist – we are not perfect but we should be. If we allow ideas about improvement and reflection to become coupled with an expectation of perfection, then they become just another way to beat ourselves up about what we have done ‘wrong’. When we look at what we do from the vantage point of perfection, we will always fall short. While it is important to identify areas where we can improve, it is also important to recognise that there are things we do well. Everyone makes mistakes, and there will always be things that, given a second chance, we might do differently. But the value of reflective practice is in seeing such failures in the context of everything we do. There is something in human nature that seems to lead us to focus on the negatives, even when they are outweighed by positives. But we don’t have to let our mistakes define us. The key is to see them as learning opportunities, rather than as black marks against our name. ‘Good enough’ gives us permission to do this.

Good enough allows us to put our mistakes into perspective and, as the EYLF and NQF argue, to use them as the basis for genuine and meaningful reflection and improvement. Of course there are mistakes we don’t want to make. The wrong dose of medicine, the gate left open, the child left unattended on the change bench – all are inexcusable and we rightly develop policies and procedures to ensure that they don’t happen. But, if we aren’t willing to make more minor mistakes, then we are unlikely to learn or to improve. The good enough teacher gets it right often enough that children feel secure and supported, but is also prepared to get it wrong often enough, that there is a chance that something new or interesting will occur. Getting it ‘wrong’ occasionally is an important learning experience both for ourselves and for the children we work with. As Winnicott argued, the perfect parent actually does little to help a child adjust to life in what is clearly an imperfect world. When we allow ourselves to be human and to make the occasional mistake, we demonstrate a valuable lesson about what it means to be a well-rounded person, warts and all.

Resilience and persistence are key qualities that we aim to encourage in children. We would do well to look at how we build them in ourselves too. Perfectionism, and the fear of failure that often accompanies it, decreases the likelihood that we will take chances. When we have the expectation that everyone will do everything right, all of the time, we place an unrealistic burden on ourselves. Faced with the expectation of perfection we are likely to take the safe option, rather than take a risk. And yet how often does the most interesting learning come from a mistake or unintended circumstance?

As we seek to improve our practice it sounds almost contradictory to say that perfection is not the answer. But, as educators, we would do well to shake off the idea that perfection is what we should be aiming for. While ‘good enough’ doesn’t sound quite as inspiring as ‘perfect’, it is a lot more achievable. And it is still good. It just isn’t perfection. But if that means that we feel better about ourselves, and if it allows us more opportunities to take a chance and try something new or different without fear of failure, then all the better. Perhaps, seen in this light, being ‘good enough’ really is enough.

References:
<http://quotes.dictionary.com/i_would_rather_be_the_child_of_a>