



Taking it Back in 2016

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When my daughter first got asthma, I could tell the doctor when she needed her inhaler, which ones she used and exactly what days she had woken up coughing. But time passed, and asthma become more normal and I quickly let that fall behind to more important concerns like who had OT and when everyone needed a ride. So that day in January when the doctor asked me a billion questions that I couldn't answer, I felt the sting of Mommy Guilt. What kind of mom doesn't know how many times her daughter woke up from coughing? So as I drove home chastising myself I came to a new resolve, this year I was taking it back. I would cast off the days of looking confused, frazzled, and disorganized and embrace the new super organized, on-top-of-it Me.

We have four kids. And in their own way they all have lots of needs, asthma, extra worries, glasses, hockey practice, teenage-ism to name a few. But my boys' needs had trumped everyone else's, and it had finally reached the point where I could no longer keep track of my daughter's asthma, and my teen who could adeptly work the chaos of our house to his advantage. And I was tired of feeling inept, incapable, and like I wasn't giving enough, and so "I'm taking it back in 2016" became my rallying cry.

It is one thing to make a New Year's Resolution, and quite another to actually achieve it. Where on Earth would I begin? As I look back, I think the very first thing I did was lay my cards on the table at all 3 schools. I had so much guilt that someone's form wasn't signed, or I didn't check a backpack, and I was trying to get every project done and have the perfect IEP. I was trying to be Super Mom, and these things couldn't slip! So I told them about my children. You see, my kids are the sweet ones that teachers love during the day and they couldn't possibly imagine the chaos we swam through at home. I explained that there was more than one child who was high needs, and that explosive outbursts were the norm and that I was struggling to stay on top of it all, and I couldn't do the homework part anymore. I called my teen's school and spoke with the counselor and told her I couldn't keep up with his grades and missing assignments and told all his teachers that our home was one battling crisis after another on a regular basis. I told them all, then I gave myself permission to fail. The schools knew I couldn't do it all anymore, and they knew they would have to seek me out if there was a problem. The relief I felt from this one tiny step lit the fire of change.

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Next, I knew our home needed some changes. At our busiest, we had 6 standing appointments every week and three specialists we needed to see every three months plus check-ups and glasses. Between that and cleaning up after 4 wildebeests who left oceans of toys and dishes in their wake, it was just too much!! I was struggling to get everything done, and I'm pretty sure we had a re-dirtying machine because no matter how hard I cleaned, the house remained messy. So I prescribed myself one big task a day. I could clean. Or I could do appointments. But I would NOT do both. It was hard to adjust. And I wonder if my husband thought I didn't do anything all day. But honestly, it looked just about as messy as before. And suddenly, I wasn't quite so anxious and tired and grumpy, and felt a little more okay with the real status of things. I liked these rules. They seemed to be working.

The next few phases were harder. I didn't quite know where to go. My parent support match had suggested the need to take care of myself, but I couldn't remember who I had been or what I needed. I had spent so much of the last 5 years managing the needs of the rest of my household, that I had forgotten. Then one day, my son's therapist suggested I might benefit from some therapy myself. I'm sure she thought I was just plain crazy. I would pack 3 hungry, grumpy kids in the car, drive their dad to work 30 minutes early, and rush to therapy and not once did I ever actually have enough time to get there. Getting those kids to therapy at 8 in the morning was like trying to move a mountain, I just didn't know it. So of course it made sense that I came in frazzled, anxious, stressed, and probably looking a tad crazy. So I tried not to be offended. Thankfully, my parent support person had told me that I was living in unusual circumstances, and that many families raising children with complex issues benefit from having therapy to help them get through this time. And so nervously I gave the therapist a call. The changes became more rapid after I started therapy. She validated my feelings, and taught me how to help my children, and soon I began feeling stronger, and more capable, and less anxious. We took baby steps. But soon this change became evident in my posture, my clothes, and my whole being. I began to feel confident again. I began to feel less crazy. I was living in unusual circumstances. My kids were high needs. And it was okay that I couldn't be the Super Mom I had always wanted to be. I was getting the most important things done.

Then one day my husband got hurt and ended up at home every day. As I rushed the children out the door one morning, I realized he didn't know which medications were given when, which doctor handled what, or when the kids had appointments. I kept our house running, but I was running it alone and he had no idea what was going on. It left me feeling overworked and him feeling out of the loop and unneeded. He started taking on jobs, getting meds ready, making the calendar, making kids lunches. Then one day I sat in my therapist's office saying he's doing the dishes wrong. My therapist looked at me said, "At least he is doing it." For a few minutes I

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still grumbled under my breath, and then I realized nothing fell apart when he did it, it was just different. So I tried to let it go. I tried not to check on it, or at least not too often. Begrudgingly handing over these tasks freed up time to do little things, like finish a warm cup of coffee. It may not seem like much but I hadn't had a warm cup in years and wow, it tasted so much better.

Soon, my husband began attending therapy too. Don't ask me how that happened. It was hard to convince him, but the stars aligned, or fate intervened, or he fell and got hurt and ended up bored on disability. Either way he too began seeing her. And eventually we began going together. We started small. The therapist recommended the simple step of not answering the kids' basic questions til saying "let me talk to your dad/mom." We began consulting each other for things like snack, TV, or park time. And while we are still working on it, I began to feel less like having another person who needed my attention, and more like having a partner on my side. Its hard sharing the responsibility of raising little humans. So I was surprised how one little change slowly effected our parenting dynamic.

Perhaps the most difficult step of my journey was letting go. My son has separation anxiety and has always been glued to his Mommy. I didn't leave the children for more than a couple of hours and I always worried about what I would come home to. I told myself he needed me, and so I put his needs first and began to put away my needs, like haircuts, peaceful child-free trips to Target, and coffee dates with friends. It wasn't worth the tears, crying, and chaos that followed the separation. And then he began Kindergarten and things fell apart. And I began to wonder if maybe I had done him a disservice. It was easier to stay there and make sure everything was the right way. But now I couldn't. I needed to get a job, and he needed to go to school, and he had never learned how to be away from me. So I left. I left them with their dad, or their grandparents and began to go to work, or the store alone. And soon, the crying stopped. The chaos became smaller and smaller. And I was working again and doing things I enjoyed. Little by little, I began to remember me. Who I was. What I needed. What I wanted out of life. Soon, I was a Me again.

In the very first conversation I had with my parent support match she recommended I "prioritize myself, my marriage, my children, and the child we had added to our family" in that order. I thought she was crazy. I had been doing it completely the opposite. Our lives revolved around this hurt little soul and my son's anxiety. I had nothing left for myself or my husband, we were the grown-ups. When I began crying out "I'm taking it back in 2016" I had only one goal: to not feel so stressed, frazzled, and disorganized. But once I started acknowledging and validating my needs, I began to have the empathy and energy to help my husband with his. And as we began to work together, soon I felt comfortable letting go of the responsibility, the

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knowledge, and the decision making and eventually we were able to better help the kids and give them what they need. As I sit here on the close of 2016, taking it all in, I realize that somehow through the chaos and turmoil my support parent's idea had naturally come to fruition, we had begun to prioritize ourselves, and our marriage before the kids. I am still stressed and way too disorganized. Except now I am okay with it. The pull of being Super Mom has faded and morphed to where I define success as when everyone is getting most of their needs met. I'm still embarrassed when people pop over and see the toy-nado of a house I live in, but I have my permission to do the minimum. And though I did not set out this year intending to shift my priorities, I realize I did. Slowly we shifted everything and I can now say that I am a recovering Super Mom living a much more peaceful life. I still go to my daughter's appointments and have no idea what day she coughed herself awake. But she is healthy and we spend time together where we play and have fun together, and I realized that is worth so much more to me.

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