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[**Allison Tate**](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/allison-tate)Author, mother of four BLOG **The Mom Stays in the Picture**  Posted: 10/06/2012 12:30 pm

Last weekend, my family travelled to attend my oldest niece's Sweet Sixteen party. My brother and sister-in-law planned this party for many months and intended it to be a big surprise, and it included a photo booth for the guests.

I showed up to the party a bit late and, as usual, slightly askew from trying to dress myself and all my little people for such a special night out. I'm still carrying a fair amount of baby weight and wearing a nursing bra, and I don't fit into my cute clothes. I felt awkward and tired and rumpled.

I was leaning my aching back against the bar, my now 5-month-old baby sleeping in a carrier on my chest (despite the pounding bass and dulcet tones of LMFAO blasting through the room) when my 5-year-old son ran up to me.

"Come take pictures with me, Mommy," he yelled over the music, "in the photo booth!"

I hesitated. I avoid photographic evidence of my existence these days. To be honest, I avoid even mirrors. When I see myself in pictures, it makes me wince. I know I am far from alone; I know that many of my friends also avoid the camera.

It seems logical. We're sporting mama bodies and we're not as young as we used to be. We don't always have time to blow dry our hair, apply make-up, perhaps even bathe (ducking). The kids are so much cuter than we are; better to just take their pictures, we think.

But we really need to make an effort to get in the picture. Our sons need to see how young and beautiful and human their mamas were. Our daughters need to see us vulnerable and open and just being ourselves -- women, mamas, people living lives. Avoiding the camera because we don't like to see our own pictures? How can that be okay?

Too much of a mama's life goes undocumented and unseen. People, including my children, don't see the way I make sure my kids' favourite stuffed animals are on their beds at night. They don't know how I walk the grocery store aisles looking for treats that will thrill them for a special day. They don't know that I saved their side-snap, paper-thin baby shirts from the hospital where they were born or their little hospital bracelets in keepsake boxes high on the top shelves of their closets. They don't see me tossing and turning in bed wondering if I am doing an okay job as a mother, if they are okay in their schools, where we should take them for a vacation, what we should do for their birthdays. I'm up long past the news on Christmas Eve wrapping presents and eating cookies and milk, and I spend hours hunting the Internet and the local Targets for specially-requested Halloween costumes and birthday presents. They don't see any of that.

Someday, I want them to see me, documented, sitting right there beside them: me, the woman who gave birth to them, whom they can thank for their ample thighs and their pretty hair; me, the woman who nursed them all for the first years of their lives, enduring porn star-sized boobs and leaking through her shirts for months on end; me, who ran around gathering snacks to be the week's parent reader or planning the class Valentine's Day party; me, who cried when I dropped them off at preschool, breathed in the smell of their post-bath hair when I read them bedtime stories, and defied speeding laws when I had to rush them to the pediatric ER in the middle of the night for fill-in-the-blank (ear infections, croup, rotavirus).

I'm everywhere in their young lives, and yet I have very few pictures of me *with* them. Someday I won't be here -- and I don't know if that someday is tomorrow or thirty or forty or fifty years from now -- but I want them to have pictures of me. I want them to see the way I looked at them, see how much I loved them. I am not perfect to look at and I am not perfect to love, but I am perfectly their mother.

When I look at pictures of my own mother, I don't look at cellulite or hair debacles. I just see her -- her kind eyes, her open-mouthed, joyful smile, her familiar clothes. That's the mother I remember. My mother's body is the vessel that carries all the memories of my childhood. I always loved that her stomach was soft, her skin freckled, her fingers long. I didn't care that she didn't look like a model. She was my mama.

So when all is said and done, if I can't do it for myself, I want to do it for my kids. I want to be in the picture, to give them that visual memory of me. I want them to see how much I am here, how my body looks wrapped around them in a hug, how loved they are.

I will save the little printed page with four squares of pictures on it and the words "Morgan's Sweet Sixteen" scrawled across the top with the date. There I am, hair not quite coiffed, make-up minimal, face fuller than I would like -- one hand holding a sleeping baby's head, and the other wrapped around my sweet littlest guy, who could not care less what I look like.