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Introduction

‘What do I do now?’

This is the cry of new parents at home from hospital with their child, alone for the first time and daunted by the responsibility, by the tasks never before performed and by the fear of not getting it right.

It is the feeling that the parent who cannot work out why her screaming colicky 8-week-old just will not be settled.

It is the cry of the mother of a 7-month-old child, crying at night and calling her hourly.

It is the expression on the face of the father unable to stop the 2-year-old temper tantrum in the supermarket, no matter what he tries to do.

‘What do I do now?’ is the expression identified with the stress and struggle of parenting.

It is a cry to get help – to take the stress out of parenting.

This book is the answer to that cry.

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‘How do I love my baby?’

‘Can I love my baby?’

‘Can I keep my baby alive?’

‘What am I supposed to feel?’

‘What does it take to be a mother?’

'If I could only get some sleep!'
'I don't know who I am anymore.'
'I am so alone.'
'Old traumas are coming back to me.'
'I am ... a failure.'
'Shattered.'
'Frightened.'
'Numb.'
'Empty.'
'Resentful.'
'Out of control.'
'I am ... overwhelmed.'

These are some of the statements that parents have expressed to me over the years. While it is normal for parents to have these feelings on occasion, some experience them relentlessly. This causes significant distress, preventing them from living their lives and often resulting in anxiety and/or depression.

Yes, early stages of parenting are naturally stressful. The question is, how can we prevent the natural stress and worry of parenting from becoming excessive. This book contains principles, stories and strategies that help to make the journey more comfortable, more successful, more enjoyable.

Becoming a parent begins with just one moment of intimacy. A brief encounter that leads to a new life. A significant complication of a moment of passion. Or, a long-awaited result of many attempts to create a family. But while becoming a parent is often easy, becoming a *good* parent takes some work. This can feel like a big responsibility, and for some parents, this might translate to impossible expectations and pressure. In fact, I believe **the key to good parenting lies in the opposite: it lies in realistic expectations and in the reduction of stress.** Succeeding at parenting is both about doing what we can

for our baby and at the same time maintaining our own sanity and health. Both rely on reducing our stress levels!

Throughout our parenting life, the greatest battle is not with the child but with our own worries. We are worried about the child getting hurt, the child being upset, the child not liking us, the child being attacked by strangers, failing exams, missing out on opportunities that we see as important ... Especially in the early days, we feel the need to stop our babies from crying, to stop them being upset.

As they grow, we try to protect them. However, all too often, because of *our* anxieties, we stop them exploring in the process. This can keep them in an emotional bubble, restricting their naturally creative and inquisitive behaviour. In trying to reduce our own anxieties, we may in fact be impairing their emotional development, their resilience and their creativity. We clothe them, feed them and house them, but we may forget to prepare them emotionally for life, because we protect them *too much*. They in turn are more anxious, more likely to be depressed, less able to handle disappointment and challenge. This is where it can lead if we excessively over-protect through our anxiety.

And all this anxiety often starts in the early years – and even in the early months – when they are such delicate babies, when we feel so responsible, when our stress is greatest and our experience is limited.

*

For 30 years, as a GP obstetrician, I have been professionally changing nappies, cuddling babies, settling young children, soothing 2-year-olds' temper tantrums, assisting parents with difficult primary schoolchildren, and guiding teenagers through problematic parent and school scenarios. In addition, I deliver regular workshops on various aspects of parenting.

Most importantly, I help parents battle for survival, not against

their children, but rather with their own doubts, anxieties, lack of knowledge and lack of support. I have been their care-giver and guide, their sounding board and confidant.

I have not practised this profession based upon theories and fads, but upon years of education, including the education of experience, of failures and successes, of reading and experimenting. My patients have taught me so much by their sharing and feedback. By putting their trust in me, they have allowed me to develop strategies for solving their problems and reducing their distress. These are the strategies that I now pass on in these pages.

Focus on the principle first

When parents are desperate, they tend to look for absolutes, seeking a definitive answer to their child's issue as though it runs on scientific principles, like gravity or algebra.

‘Exactly what should I do now in this case?’

‘Tell me what will fix my child.’

Many parents seek truths that they can count on. Beneath this is a belief that if they stick to those absolutes, they will be the best parent, control the situation, get their child to do what they want them to do!

Unfortunately, the real world of parenting does not work like this at all.

Absolute laws of parenting do not exist. Each child is different, in personality, age, health and geography. They have different strengths and weaknesses, for which we need nuanced responses. There is never one specific word, sentence or response that will always work. There are, however, principles of parenting behaviour that we can rely on in most circumstances.

Therefore, this book discusses common parental anxieties, and describes those overriding principles that I use in addressing these

anxieties in my medical practice. Scattered among the principles are examples from my patients' experiences, which have been gathered with their approval and with name changes.

A cornerstone of my advice is for parents to **withdraw from the specific detail of the issue and focus on the parenting principle at hand**. Once it is understood at a broad level, the principle can be applied to the specific issue.

Jodie

Jodie presented with her 2-year-old daughter Rose. Jodie felt that Rose seemed to be always saying No: 'I don't want that cup! I want the other cup!'

'No!, no banana!'

'No!, no bath!'

No led to crying and hysterical behaviour. Jodie bought numerous different coloured cups, multiple alternatives to bananas, and struggled each night with Rose refusing to get into the bath. She tried to trick Rose into accepting her wishes, bribing and cajoling, but was frequently in tears alongside her daughter. Jodie did not know how to get out of this pattern.

My response was to first reassure Jodie that this was common and was neither her nor the child's fault. Then I chose a few broad principles to help her to focus upon in order to change this dynamic.

I suggested that she 'unplug' from the specifics by enacting two broad responses: 'First Calm Down' and then 'Distraction'. Firstly, when Jodie was distressed over Rose's screams, I asked her to pause, breathe deeply (focusing on the exhale) and choose to ignore the misdeed. Then, she might create a distraction completely unrelated to the misdeed. Simply pausing and distracting while letting go of the specific issue gave Jodie some control over

her emotions and responses, and as a result there was less crying in her home.

Pausing, reflecting and withdrawing to the principles described in this book can lead parents to learning to understand the deeper factors behind the stressful situation. This then changes their perspective and empowers them to be more successful at parenting not just at that moment but throughout their parenting journey.

I hope in these pages you find something useful and empowering, something to help you soothe parental anxiety and enjoy the transformative experience of being a parent.