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## Introduction

Most parents will agree that raising a child is the most challenging and multifaceted job we've ever done. Many of us are thrown into parenthood without any caregiving experience, and the skills required to parent lovingly and effectively can seem endless and bewildering. It's natural, then, that many of us parent in an unplanned and reactive way, often making up (and changing up!) the rules as we go along. Many days, despite holding boundless love for our young person, it can feel like we're just trying to make it to bedtime in one piece.

My work for the past twenty-five years as a clinical psychologist who focuses on treating young people, as well as my work for twenty of those years as a mother, has taken me on a huge learning trajectory. Through that work, among the many trials and errors, and endless reading and research, I have gathered a personalised collection of parenting strategies that have been used to great success by parents the world over, including myself.

Of course, parenthood remains confusing and overwhelming at times, regardless of your skillset – I still make parenting choices I'm not proud of and have to apologise to my children. But I've observed with myself and my clients that the more you practise, the less frequently these instances occur.

These strategies are not intended to be the magic solution to all your difficulties, but rather, a solid set of tools to help you conduct yourself in ways you can feel proud of, and to help you

create structure, peace and stronger outcomes for your child over time.

Every single day, parenting challenges our competence, our energy and our emotions. Our kids need us to affirm their emotional experience, while giving them firm, consistent, clear, predictable and loving boundaries. Children will always test out how elastic these boundaries are and how far they can be stretched. This is a normal part of growing up and is how a child gets ready to be in charge of their life as an adult. All children will be 'hard work', 'difficult' or 'challenging' at times. This book is intended to give you the tools you need to navigate your way through your child's middle years (ages six to twelve) and beyond with assertiveness, decisiveness, confidence, empathy and compassion.

The strategies I use are all about directing and guiding rather than controlling our children. They come from a place of acknowledgement that children, by virtue of being children, will make unconstructive choices and 'act out' when they're having big feelings and/or are in overwhelm. Children are not mini adults. Their world revolves around them, and this is developmentally as it should be. They are incapable of regulating their emotions and making good choices without our loving support and clear guidance.

It is a myth to think that they should be well behaved and always do as they are told. As Louise Porter (2001) reminds us, if we punish children for acting thoughtlessly, impulsively or carelessly, then we would be punishing them for being children. My approach, above all, aims to meet and honour the child exactly where they're at, and offers ways to guide them towards being the team player they want to be, without compromising or shaming their stage of development or their unique spirit.

This book contains powerful ideas that appeal to children's

pride, reason, logic and concern for others while teaching the expression of negative emotions in appropriate ways. When all the strategies in this book come together, you'll start witnessing some big changes in your child and in the mood, tone and pace of family life.

I want to describe those big changes from your child's perspective, so you can see how their world is made better through the application of my 'skillful-parenting' approach:

**Your home life will be more peaceful and less conflictual.** There will be less shouting, fewer threats, fewer unanswerable questions and less guilt placed on children. This means they will not feel bombarded or like they are hurting anyone by their actions. They will be less anxious because they will not worry about their relationship with their parents and about being a 'bad' or 'naughty' person.

**Your child will feel more secure and unconditionally loved and accepted.** Children may squirm and dismiss the positive things that you say, but that doesn't stop the positive impact on their sense of self. They'll feel like you believe in them and that the little things they do get noticed. This will help them to believe in themselves and will embed a love of working with you rather than against you.

**Your child will still make mistakes, but their relationship with making mistakes will improve.** Children will notice the adults in their lives doing exactly what they said they would, and not getting wound up nor giving in when they meet resistance. They will see their parents setting clear limits while affirming their feelings, and listening receptively to their requests and questions. They'll see someone who's demonstrating emotional regulation, which is deeply soothing and builds their secure, trusting relationship with you.

**Your child will see you being the best version of yourself. This doesn't mean being perfect.** It means we're always working towards making choices we can feel proud of and making reparations when we fall short of that. Our children's relationship with us strengthens and their goodwill towards us grows. The more goodwill our children feel towards us, the more they trust us to guide them. They increasingly seek our advice and value our opinion, and are more likely to want to do the right thing.

It's normal for children to initially rile against changes to the way you parent them. They will test the rules, beg, get angry, blame, play on your emotions and try any number of other creative techniques. Ultimately, they will recognise that old patterns of behaviour are no longer effective, and will be drawn to take on their new responsibilities with grace and cooperation. In doing so, they will feel more competent and secure in themselves. They will notice changes in the way their family spends time together – chatting, laughing and enjoying the feeling of meaningful connection on occasions that used to be the most stressful and conflictual. And this will convince them that the change is worthwhile.

This picture may sound unrealistic, but I promise you that it is absolutely achievable. I have witnessed thousands of parents and caregivers who have developed their own personal strategies based on what I have to offer, and found that these methods radically improve their family's daily life.

These techniques work best when you make them yours – you're the one who knows your family inside out. If you add your own personal language and style, making little changes here or there, you'll develop a parenting approach that's both effective and genuine – and that kind of approach resonates so strongly with children, because it feels true.

I want to take a moment to applaud you in your choice, between



all the tasks of your day and amongst the countless demands for your attention, to pick up a parenting book. Your time is precious and you're using it to better yourself and your family. That's a big deal. I hope you use this book as a point of reference: a practical guide that you can return to over the coming years.

Don't expect yourself to go from zero to a hundred and then feel guilty when you fall short of those unrealistic expectations – be kind and reasonable with yourself! Start with the simple and effective strategies we aim to use frequently every day first – and then build and hone your skills from there. The parents and caregivers I work with notice big changes at home after a few weeks, thanks to these core strategies. They report feeling confident and equipped, and observe that their children are more regulated, in control of their feelings, and inclined to make constructive choices.

No matter how practised we become, there will always be better and worse days, breakdowns and breakthroughs, on our journey to being the kind of parents our children need. And that's okay. We're here to play the long game: persistently practising the kind of parenting that raises joyful, self-caring, confident, curious, compassionate young people, who grow into wonderful community members and empowered adults.

What gets us through our roughest parenting days? I think it's that long-game mindset, a ton of self-forgiveness, and the awareness that choosing to parent compassionately, peacefully and effectively is the richest gift we can offer to the next generation.