

Create a positive parenting pattern for life

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your
child
your
way



As seen on
Little Angels and
*The House of
Tiny Tearaways*

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Your Child Your Way
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INTRODUCTION

Your child. Your way?

Why do we need a book to tell us how to do what should be the most instinctive part of our lives? There is so much parenting information and advice out there that is confusing and disempowering. The aim of this book is to help you really think about the kind of parent you are and the kind of parent you want to be, but mostly to understand your child, because once you *understand* their behaviour's meaning, you'll be able to manage it.

This book is not about superficial problem solving, so it's not a prescriptive approach to parenting, although I will offer practical guidance wherever possible. It's about starting off a process that will enable you to manage the first stage of your child's development where their behaviour will be challenging, which is as a toddler, and then find a way of relating to them and their behaviour to set up a positive pattern for the whole of your relationship as a parent rather than just in the short term. You can use this book to help solve some difficulties you are currently experiencing or just to help you think about how you want to parent your child – this book is aimed at anyone with a child and can help prevent behaviour problems as well as solve them but most importantly allow you to define the parent you want to be and to be the expert on your child.

So it's about understanding your child, and more importantly understanding the way you respond to your child based on your own history and personality. And to avoid getting into a notion that there is always a quick fix, understanding that sometimes there are no answers and that's OK. And at times when there are answers it's important to implement the strategies in a way that, yes, in the short term will solve the problems, but also in the longer term will form the kind of relationship you have with your child.

However, I realize that you might be opening this book exhausted and looking for solutions. To a lesser or greater degree you might find yourself caught in a negative cycle with your child where you feel that you are not relating as you want to, that your child is out of control or that you've lost your confidence and just don't feel like a good parent. That's why the first two parts of this book will enable you to break out of that negative cycle and get solving practical problems. So, for example, if your child has a sleep problem – maybe they're in your bed – I will show you what steps you can take to change that pattern and get your child sleeping happily in their own bed. Or, how to reduce the tantrums, or have them eating more confidently, or using the potty without a fuss.

But it's essential to go further than solve the initial problem. As a psychologist, I know that unless you really understand how that problem started in the first place and address that your child will soon be back in your bed/throwing huge tantrums/refusing to eat/not using the potty – or whatever your specific difficulty is. There are three key steps in this process: 'What is the problem?', 'What do you do?' and 'Why was it a problem in the first place?'. By addressing the third stage you can maintain the change.

Each and every child is unique, so therefore it is slightly ludicrous to expect a singular approach to managing children to be the way to go. You need to bring a great deal to this process yourself, take the different blocks and put them together in a way that works for you and your family.

The greatest chefs know that every time they cook the same dish it tastes slightly different, because the ingredients change in flavour just slightly each time, but they understand their raw materials so well that they will add a pinch more of this or a pinch less of that to make the dish work. You need to be just as flexible and sensitive and open when approaching the most important relationship of your life, which is your relationship with your child and your child's relationship with you.

My hope is that by the end of this book you will have a clearer

understanding of child behaviour and positive, practical psychological and behavioural management techniques for the times when you need to help your child learn. More importantly, however, I hope that your experience of reading this book gives you the confidence to take ownership of being your child's parent so that you can implement these strategies in a way that works for you and your child within the context of a loving and nurturing relationship. This relationship between your child and you, their parent, is totally unique and therefore you are the key person who has the real instincts about your child when it comes to their parenting.

Because much of the parenting information available is confusing and leaves you feeling that you are actually the least able person to parent your child I've written this book to be different – this book is about parenting your child, your way.

What is it to be a parent?

'Good or not, we're the only ones they've got.'

During the writing of this book I did a number of focus groups with parents because I felt that I wanted to really understand the current preoccupations that the parents of young children struggle with. In each group, what first struck me was the sense that the members were sitting and waiting for me – the expert – to tell them what they were 'doing wrong' and how they could 'get it right'. These experiences underlined to me even more that what we all need as parents is the permission to take a step back and think less about the superficial solutions to parenting (such as which technique we should use for which behaviour) and more about the core aspects of being a parent that comes with our attitudes and beliefs about ourselves, our children and our families. It was interesting to find how the groups relaxed once we all agreed that there is no 'right way', there is no 'one size fits all' approach to parenting and that in the same way we don't

approach other significant relationships with a prescriptive sense of when and how we communicate, nor should we do so with our parenting. Being an effective parent is underpinned by a set of positive and confident beliefs – hard to achieve when we are feeling so dazed and confused:

'As soon as your baby is born, you've got the midwife telling you how to do this, how to do that; you go to courses and classes beforehand as if there's just one right way to do it. And then you even have your parents or your brother all telling you how to do something, but it's never that simple. I mean techniques that they think should work, might work with one but not the other.'

'It's not natural to be a parent any more. It's like being a robot, something you do automatically. Do this method, follow that technique – you don't have to think about it yourself any more.'

'I think there's too much choice when it comes to advice but then if someone said to me there was one choice, I wouldn't believe them, because I don't think that one particular discipline works all the time or works on every child.'

'We can get so obsessed with getting it right that we can actually set ourselves up to get it wrong.'

'You try one thing after another, and it doesn't work, then you think, Oh no, what am I going to do now? I've tried everything; there's nothing I can do. It makes you feel like you're a bad parent.'

'I think there's a certain amount of pressure on parents to be perfect, have the perfect child. It's not ever going to be like that. You've just got to try your best and see what works for

you, but there is so much pressure from other parents or family or the media.'

'It's like you're meant to have a textbook baby. No wonder we're all so neurotic – from the moment when you first fall pregnant, you're told you're not to smoke, not to do this, not to eat that. And then breastfeeding is best. You can feel guilty and inadequate almost from day one.'

'I've got a daughter of eleven and a son of eight, and my personal feeling is that my children are completely different characters: what works for my daughter doesn't always work for my son, and vice versa, and if you try to take some kind of formula, and say this is the way to do it, it's going to fail because children are children and they're individuals.'

That last quote is me. At times we all feel overwhelmed, confused and paranoid about our abilities as parents. We all resent the conflicting information thrown at us, and how it seems to confuse rather than inform. It leaves us feeling less able and less in control. Yet we continue to watch the programmes and buy the books because what we also experience is a profound sense that there must be a 'right' way, a 'magic' answer, if only we could find it.

It's nonsense. We are all trapped in the marketing executives' dream and are lining the pockets of those who have found a way of turning this most natural process into something that we can buy off the shelf. In the same way that we have become trapped into the notion that by buying gym membership and a number of slimming magazines we can lose weight and feel better about ourselves, we are beginning to believe that being a great parent comes from a book or television programme. My career working as a clinician with children and their families has taught me that the issues involved are complex and unique to each individual. In this age of the quick fix, I am increasingly concerned that the

'parenting approaches' offered via television, books and articles are becoming so slick and glossy that they are missing the fundamental point – the issue at the heart of each and any family difficulty – that it's all about relationships and about the thoughts and feelings we have for each other.

Feeling good about oneself as a parent and about one's child, in the same way as feeling good and healthy about one's diet and body, comes with an examination of ourselves and who we are (our thoughts and feelings about ourselves) and not just a number of superficial behaviour changes. If we overeat, for example, unless we examine the role that food plays in our life (comfort, for example) and address the emotions that are behind our eating behaviour, we will only manage to stop overeating in the short term until will power runs out and our feelings of emptiness and failure kick back in. Unless we look at why we cannot parent our child in a way that feels positive and consistent even when they are being at their most challenging (because they are children and that is what children do), any 'parenting behaviour programmes' will only enable us to effect change in the short term until things slide back to where they were and – as with the moment we binge on a packet of biscuits and 'break the diet' – we begin to feel like a failure again.

In life, information can only empower if the person reading it is in the correct frame of mind to use it in a way that works for them. But, if we are trapped in a mindset that causes us to seek out the information because we feel insecure and negative about ourselves and our abilities, that information will do nothing for us as we will use it in an anxious, rigid and ineffective manner. As we all know from different experiences throughout our lives, the times that we have approached an issue to be tackled or mastered in a positive frame of mind, underpinned by a belief that we will succeed despite any challenges along the way, we not only accomplish those goals but also do so with pleasure even if at times the going got tricky.

Parenting cannot be learned in a step-by-step recipe-book

approach that guarantees the best-slept, best-fed, best-behaved child. It is a process that requires courage and flexibility, the ability to not always understand and to make mistakes, an attitude underpinned by fun and enthusiasm. It is a process that is unpredictable, exciting and frightening – the greatest experience of our lives.

I realize that I am not offering you a quick fix – but, if you are up for thinking beyond the quick-fix solutions to ensure longer-term success and happiness for all – for solving the immediate challenge with your young child but also for laying down the foundations for a healthy and strongly bonded relationship with your child for the many further challenges that come with their development – then this is your book. You *will* find approaches and techniques that, applied with positive attitudes and beliefs, will make a real difference to your child, yourself and your family. However, these techniques will only work in the long term if they are used as part of a process that requires a great deal of emotional thinking on your part. This book will ask you the questions to enable you to do the emotional thinking that will give you the fundamental confidence to be a parent – a confidence that will remain even when your child is challenging you at other times in their (and your) development because of a central belief that you have in the relationship and because of the respect that exists between you.

So, what kind of parent are you?

Although many of you will have thought, Not a very good one, to the question above, I urge you to think further. This book hasn't been written for 'bad' parents and 'bad' children. It's been written for confused and anxious parents and their children who are possibly feeling quite similar things. You have bought this book because you see me as the 'expert' who – if you read hard enough and really concentrate (despite the fact that you're exhausted and

would rather be watching telly with a glass of something chilled) will give you the magic answer you've been looking for. You're hoping for flow charts and bullet points, diagrams and neatly boxed-off sections with case studies; you want easy-to-follow, step-by-step, totally successful idiot-proof management plans. But let me ask you this: haven't you already got lots of those books on your shelves and aren't you still feeling confused, some of you possibly feeling worse – out of control and unable to cope? I'd say that you are but that your anxiety drives you on to read further, make more notes, compile more lists, stick up more charts and try, if it kills you, to find the magic answer. Well, the truth is that if those approaches worked you wouldn't have wanted to buy this book, so maybe there has to be another way.

I suspect you may find that concept quite challenging and it may make some of you feel rather panic stricken but actually the good news is that you don't need a book to tell you what to do because inside yourself you actually have a very good idea. No, you need a book to enable you to relax enough to allow you to be that parent – the parent who instinctively knows what works and what doesn't for their child; the parent who allows themselves and their child to sometimes not know; the parent who believes that they are the expert when it comes to parenting their child above anybody else.

So what kind of parent are you? You are the best parent your child could have. You are the parent who raises your child, your way.

My hope is that this book will help to get you there.