

Break Free of Parenting Pressures:

Embrace Your Natural Guidance

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Introduction

This book has been written for parents who are struggling at their role of parenting and need ideas they can use right away to bring things around; parents who are not struggling but want ideas for building strong, positive connections with their kids; and parents who have made it their mission to be the best they can be and raise kids who will thrive regardless of life circumstances.

The information is relevant regardless of skin colour, financial situation, family makeup, or sexual orientation. The skills and understandings that are important for parenting are based on universal human requirements that do not change with circumstance. It is the *how* of parenting that makes a difference more than the *what*.

As unique as we all are, the pieces of parenting that will most influence our success in raising resilient children is the same. We all have different starting points and dynamics in our homes that will influence how challenging it is for us to focus on this task, but the basic information never changes.

No matter what your situation, you have what it takes to make a difference in your child's life. Yes, it will be more challenging if you do not have the resources available or are lacking the support and assistance of others. Although it would be fantastic to be able to provide each parent with the perfect solution to their every need, it is not realistic for me to believe I could do it. I find parents know their situation better than any outside "expert" and often do a much better job of adapting parenting strategies to make them work for their family. As a result, I've provided a variety of ideas and suggestions throughout the book, with the hope that you will feel inspired to take those that fit your circumstance and adapt them to meet your needs.

If your children are teenagers and you are just starting to make changes, some of the tasks I discuss will be harder to do. You will be best served to focus your energy on the building relationship ideas and only correct your child's behaviour when absolutely necessary. If mutual respect has not been built by this stage, kids tend to rebel with delight, so focusing on building respect and your own personal growth is the best way to make a difference.

Safety concerns and unhealthy living conditions will add extra stress and worry for parents. I hope it's comforting to know that the aspects of parenting that help kids grow into balanced, resilient human beings are centered more on love, acceptance, belonging, and understanding than anything else. Regardless of your socioeconomic background, maturity level, or access to resources, you have what it takes to do the task you have been given.

As a social worker, parent educator, and parent, I have spent the last fifteen years learning why parenting is so challenging and how I can help people feel good about their role as parents. I have been accredited in programs like Triple P, Positive Parenting Program from Australia, and have created several programs of my own. I have learned that parenting brings with it emotional upsets that cannot be anticipated no matter how forward-thinking we might be.

The goal of this book is to provide quick helpful ideas, validations, and reminders to make parenting less stressful and to help remove some of the self-doubt and uncertainty most parents experience. It is meant to give you a laugh, help you feel good about your parenting role, and empower you to embrace your natural guidance.

The chapters have been supplemented with exercises, personal stories, thought-provoking articles, and suggested resources so enthusiastic readers can use this book as a guide towards major life changes. I've also included fun,

realistic, **easy** and **effective** tips, which I call *FREE Parenting tips*, for those who prefer the ideas without any explanation at all.

You know your family and your situation better than anyone else. Use this book for ideas and support, but always remember that you are the expert in your home. In the end, it is you who has to feel good about any changes you decide to make.

I believe every parent starts out wanting to do the best job she can and believing she has what it takes to reach this goal. My job is to help you reconnect with that knowledge.

The Book

Part 1 is meant to remind us why we became a parent in the first place. It focuses on the big idea and challenges us to think about what this job really entails.

Part 2 focuses on understanding what makes humans tick. When we are aware of the traits that make our family unique, it is easier for us to have realistic expectations. The more we know and understand about ourselves, the easier it is to build relationships and feel good about the people in our lives.

Part 3 spotlights our parenting pack, the tools and strategies we use to teach our kids right from wrong and maintain our sanity in the process. It uses the FREE acronym as a guideline for taking common parenting ideas and adjusting them to do what we need them to do.

Part 4 provides a quick peek at things you might do to make your life less stressful and more balanced. It's about making sure you are being your own number-one fan so that you have the endurance and enthusiasm to make things

happen in every area of your life. Kids learn more from what we do than from what we say. We need to model self-care if we want them to get it.

It is natural for people to allow life to flow when things are going well and only make changes when absolutely necessary. If we want to be proactive, we can't wait until things go wrong to act. We need to do some work in those good moments to build a strong family foundation so that when the tough times arise, we come through it okay.

Breaking free of parenting pressures is about taking back our power as parents and embracing our natural guidance. We are all perfectly qualified to do this job, and the sooner we believe it the better.

My Anonymous Message

When I remind people they should pay attention to how they talk to their kids and make it a habit to use a nice voice, they look at me like I'm pointing out the obvious. Most of us believe we are nice most of the time and would be shocked or disappointed to hear otherwise. I was one of these people until the day when the universe conspired to show me differently.

On this fateful day, my kids and I were hurrying off to an appointment that we were already late for. I was rushing my kids, trying to get them to pick up the pace, and the more I pushed the more they resisted. Finally, I got them buckled into their car seats and started off to my destination. At that point, I should have been able to relax. The drive was going to take us forty-five minutes no matter which route I took and would get me to my appointment only a couple of minutes late.

Here's the amazing part: Somehow, in the struggle to get my kids into the car, I had managed to push a button on my cell phone and call my house. I have

no idea how that happened and knew nothing about it until I returned home and retrieved the message.

There, on my machine, was this evil woman talking to these little kids in an angry, condescending voice. It took me a few moments to even recognize that the voice I was hearing was my own. What shocked me most wasn't what I was saying, it was the voice I was using and the terse way I was saying things.

I heard my sweet little four-year-old ask me to turn on the music. My sharp voice responded, "No, we don't need music right now! I just need some peace and quiet!" My son started to complain, and I responded immediately with little accusations of how he had made me late and how much I hated being late.

I was not being nice and would not have believed it if I hadn't heard it myself. This was definitely not how I like to think I talk to anyone, especially the two most precious people in my life. It was an eye-opener and has resulted in my paying attention to the voice I'm using and altering it when it isn't reflecting the kind of person I believe myself to be.

I've never managed to accidentally phone home again, but I took that little lesson to heart and believe I'm a better mom because of it.

Part 1

Being a Parent

Chapter 1: The Perfect Parent

My Guilt Trip

Guilt is an interesting weight we put on our own shoulders and then carry around as if it's a cross we have to bear. When my son was about four years old, he was bouncing a ball around my home office. I think I asked to him to stop, but because I was so focused on work, I'm not totally sure. His ball (which was a hard little super bouncer) hit the tile in our entranceway and bounced up to set the hanging light swinging before shooting across my desk and onto the floor. That got my attention!

I jumped up, turned to my son, and yelled, "I told you to stop. You almost broke the light, you knocked papers off my desk, and you nearly hit me! Give me your ball—it's gone for the afternoon."

My son started to cry at the same time the doorbell rang. It was a deliveryman from a nearby town, and my cheeks burned as I realized he had heard the whole exchange with my son. I could barely talk or meet the man's eye.

You might be wondering about my strong reaction to someone overhearing me yelling. So let me remind you that I am a parent educator. I am not supposed to yell—I am supposed to be controlled and in charge of any and every parenting situation life throws my way. At least that's what I believed back then.

For the rest of the day, I replayed the scene in my mind wondering at my loss of temper, my lack of parenting skills, and my total hypocrisy at calling myself an educator. I wondered how my son could get over my loss of control in less than an hour while I struggled with it for the rest of the day.

Later, confessing my guilt to a friend, she sighed deeply in frustration. “At what point are you going to stop beating yourself up? You made a mistake,” she said. “You’re a great mom and a great parent educator. Your son accepted your apology, why can’t you?”

Why not, indeed? I like to tell people, you can’t send someone on a guilt trip unless their bags are already packed. I guess my bags were packed and ready to go.

Parenting Is Tough

Becoming a parent is one of the most natural things we do, yet it is also one of the hardest. What other job requires us to be on duty twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year? A friend of mine, who is a stay-at-home mother, joked, “I have the kind of job that if I miss a day, I go to jail.” This might seem exaggerated, and those of us who work outside of the home might find it questionable, but the point is well taken: being a parent is serious business.

Having said that, I’m not sure the demanding hours are what make this job so tough. What seems to wear us down is the amount of emotion that is wrapped up in being a parent and all the stresses and concerns that go with it. When our kids are young, all they have to do is shed a few tears or cling to our leg when we try to leave and their hooks are sunk painfully into our heart. Having a verbal war with them minutes before they leave for school can finish us for the day. They head out the door and often forget a conversation even took place, while we carry it around sharing it with others and wondering if our child will be damaged for life. I’ve seen some very powerful and respected people in the workplace turn to mush after having it out with their child.

The truth is most of us would rather cut off our arm than see our child go through a painful experience. If our child is threatened, we immediately fall into the mother bear role (even fathers can do this) and are ready to mow down anyone or anything we see as threatening to our cub. There's not a lot of thought that goes into that response: it's pure, unfettered emotion.

As if that's not enough, our society is very judgmental of parents. They point fingers at us if we don't control our kids to their satisfaction. They tell us to lighten up if we appear to control them too much. With eyebrows raised, they watch what we ingest during pregnancy and blame us for our breastfeeding infant's gassy discomfort. They insist we read to our children daily and spend precious evening hours helping them with homework we don't even understand. Our car seats, cribs, and highchairs must all fit current guidelines, and we should never let our baby sleep with us ... or is it without us?

While some of these concerns are valid and given with positive intentions, we, the parents, can end up feeling judged and criticized no matter what we do. If we don't perform well, there is the fear our child will be removed from our home. If we do too much, there is the fear our child will never leave our home.

If parenting is one of the most natural things we do, why is it so challenging? Perhaps we bring it on ourselves. Despite having no formal training, we seem to feel that we should know all the answers and be perfect at every aspect of its delivery. We allow others to judge us and make us think we need to do things, or avoid things, that we know feel wrong and will regret later.

As parents, we need to stand united and support one another. We need to feel comfortable asking for help with this challenging, sometimes heart-wrenching, task and acknowledge that every one of us can use support at some point in the parenting experience.

Above all, we need to remember that kids are extremely resilient and forgiving. We will not “ruin” them every time we make a mistake. We teach them to be strong and forgiving when we practice being those things ourselves. Parenting, and the many opportunities it provides to make mistakes, allows us ample opportunity to model how to do this for our kids.

People can be sent on a guilt trip only if their bags are already packed. In other words, if we believe we should know everything and be perfect at being a parent, we create guilt every time we make a mistake. On the other hand, if we allow ourselves to admit we don’t have all the answers, some of the pressure will disappear. With that weight removed from our shoulders, perhaps we can allow ourselves to really enjoy the incredible journey we have embarked upon.

FREE Parenting Tip: We are our own worst critics and often make parenting tougher than it needs to be. Allowing others to judge us and make us feel like we are not measuring up is a choice. Believe in yourself! You are a work in progress and absolutely perfect for the job of being you!

Follow the Leader

My definition of a good leader is someone who inspires others to do their best by focusing on being the best he or she can be. In other words, the best way to get our kids to work with us is to focus on ourselves first. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I acting in a way I would like my child to imitate, or am I telling him one thing and modeling another?
- Am I enjoying most of my days by focusing on the positives, or am I pointing out all the things that went wrong and all the problems I have

encountered?

- Am I building myself up on a regular basis, believing in my own ability and taking pride in the things I have accomplished; or am I downplaying the goals I reach and belittling my efforts?

There is no skill involved in bossing people around; there is a lot of skill involved in being a good boss. If we want to be a leader in our family, we must focus first on the one thing within our control—ourselves.

When we focus on being positive, giving others the benefit of the doubt, forgiving mistakes, and controlling our emotions, we feel good about ourselves. We are also inspiring these qualities in our kids.

Our Parenting Dream

We begin to envision the type of person we'd like to become from a young age. We watch others around us, develop ideas about what works or doesn't, and begin modeling ourselves in that image. The feedback we get from other people, along with our own assessment, will accelerate our growth, make it harder for us to achieve, or cause us to change the course we had originally set out on.

When we behave in a way that fits with this image, we feel a wonderful sense of *rightness*. When we fail to measure up to our created image, we feel anxious, frustrated, or disappointed. Often, if we feel we are not measuring up to our mental picture, our sense of self-worth becomes damaged, making it hard for us to reach our full potential.

This is important because if we remember the mental picture we created when we found out a baby was on its way, it can help us understand why we

often have conflicting feelings as we parent. Typically, our picture included lots of loving, caring moments where we consoled and cuddled with our child. We knew how to help him when he was hurting and he confided in us on a regular basis. We avoided many of the errors our caregivers made and came up with new creative ways to work through any challenging situations.

In other words, we were really great parents in our dream, and our child loved us unconditionally as a result. Perhaps this distortion of reality is a protective mechanism. If we pictured all the challenging moments first, we might back out and procreation would become a thing of the past!

One of the problems with our generated picture is that we control how other people behave in our dreamy situations. Our child is rarely cranky or rude. Our partner doesn't lose his cool. Our parenting knowledge is abundant. This dream is within our control, but reality is not. The only person we truly have control over is ourselves, and without all the "real-life stressors" we behave perfectly.

It is in our best interest to identify what changes are required to get us back on course and focus on making it happen. Writing the dream off as unrealistic or too hard won't change our uncomfortable feelings. Only working toward matching our dream behaviour to our current behaviour will do.

Being a good parent means doing the best we can with what we have and being open to learning more. Staying aware of the kind of parent we originally envisioned and the kind of relationship we are hoping to build with our kids is very important. It might require some support and being open to help, but it's well worth it. When we align our behaviour and our thoughts with our dreams and aspirations, the sky is the limit. Right now, our kids are envisioning the kind of person they want to be when they grow up; let's help them create a good one.

FREE Parenting Tip: Become aware of the kind of parent you originally thought that you would be and notice how it aligns with the kind of parent you are today. The more these two line up with each other, the better you will feel.

What Is Our Job?

When parents are asked to create a job description for their parenting role, they typically list things along the lines of the following:

- Provide for our children (keep them safe, fed, etc.)
- Teach them right from wrong in a way that makes them want to do the right thing (help them learn from their mistakes)
- Love our kids and help them feel good about who they are as people
- Provide opportunities for our kids to try new things

Rarely do parents believe their job is to do the following:

- Make their kids happy
- Save their kids from pain or predictable mistakes
- Impress other adults
- Control their child's behaviour

Yet this second list is what often comes up when parents start talking about the things that are causing them concern. Let's address these beliefs first.

“I really just want her to be happy.”

“Unless I’m playing with him, he’s bored.”

“Sometimes I give in to make her happy.”

When parents make these comments, they are talking about their child’s happiness as if it is their job to satisfy this need. It is beneficial to provide kids with an emotionally stable environment to grow up in. When people feel loved, understood, accepted, and safe, it is easier for them to be happy. But this is different from actually “making” someone feel a certain way.

True happiness comes from within, and we can drive ourselves crazy if we believe we must create that feeling in another. We can help to make our kids’ environment fun, engaging, and loving, but we cannot guarantee how they will feel. A child can be bored at Disney World and happy at the dentist’s office; we cannot control that. If we could, wouldn’t we use that power for much greater things?

“I lived that when I was young, and I don’t want that to happen to her.”

“I remember what those parties were like. There’s no way he’s going to them.”

“I just don’t want him to fail—I remember how that hurt for me.”

Life is full of contrast, which results in pain or discomfort. This contrast makes us wish for something better and then grow toward that wish. Pain is an important motivator that pushes us to grow. Although we might want to eliminate pain from our child’s life, it is impossible to do so and works against our desire to raise strong, resilient kids. Providing a safe environment is different from eliminating pain and discomfort.

Mistakes are something we often have to live through to appreciate. Although others can share their experiences with us, their lessons do not affect us the same way and therefore do not result in the same type of learning. It is hard for us as parents to predict a mistake our child is making and still allow her the freedom to move in that direction. This is exactly what needs to happen, however, and, no matter how much we interfere, she will continue finding ways to create that experience. In the end, it is our relationship with her that suffers despite our best intentions.

“Everyone was watching. I was so embarrassed.”

“I’m sure the other parents were shocked that I couldn’t stop him.”

“I know the other moms were wishing I hadn’t brought her to the playgroup”

None of us like to think others are judging and finding us lacking. When a teacher calls home, when our child is benched at a game, when people look annoyed because our child is too loud, we feel the pressure and react accordingly. Even when no one else is around, our thoughts will often focus on how other people would react if they knew what just happened.

The truth is that no matter how good we are at something, there will always be people who refuse to be impressed by our abilities. In the end, those other people really don’t matter. We need to let go of what other people think and put our energy where it counts, which is into being the parent we really want to be.

“If I could just make her listen ...”

“He never does what I say! I must be doing it wrong.”

“I told her not to, but she did it anyway. I’m wasting my breath.”

Hand in hand with the idea of impressing other adults is the notion that we should be able to control our children. This influences our behaviour as parents because it makes us think child control is within our ability. True and total control will always be beyond our grasp. Remembering that helps us think more creatively.

So what is our job? The most obvious part of our job as parents is providing for our children's basic needs. Our kids need food, sleep, shelter, and safety. If we cannot provide it, they will have trouble focusing on personal growth and achievement. This does not mean they will not succeed in life; it does mean these things will demand their attention before anything else. For example, if a child is starving, he will struggle to learn at school and might steal even though he knows it's dangerous or wrong.

The second part of our job is to meet the social and emotional needs of our child. Emotional needs involve loving our kids and helping them feel worthy. It includes things like unconditional love, acceptance, trust, self-worth, and understanding. If we do not provide this for our children, they will seek it elsewhere as soon as they are able. This can result in gang membership, sexual promiscuity, or other challenges many of us would prefer to avoid.

A child whose basic needs are not always met can still thrive when emotional needs are looked after. On the other hand, a child whose basic needs are met but whose emotional needs are not, can struggle for a lifetime.

Social needs involve things like getting along with others, empathizing, being compassionate, assertive and practicing self-control. They help us function successfully in our world and allow us to build positive relationships. A person with gaps in these areas can suffer as she tries to move forward in relationships with friends, colleagues, and life partners. The more we can provide for those needs, the more she will grow as a person and build connections with others.

Meeting these needs is not always easy, especially when most of us are not skilled in them ourselves. The trick is to meet the needs you can meet and then put your energy into your own growth in these areas. When you do this, you will naturally model the skills you are trying to teach and everyone will benefit.

That's it. Our job is to satisfy these three areas of need. If we do so, our children will naturally strive to learn and grow. They will look up to us and seek our guidance as life provides them with challenges to learn from, and we can rest assured we are doing our job.

FREE Parenting Tip: Our most important task as parents is to ensure our kids feel loved, accepted, appreciated, and understood. If we focus on their social and emotional needs by working on our own gaps, we will both (all) flourish.

Parenting Job Description

Knowing what we are trying to achieve in our role as parents makes it easier for us to be good at our job. Here's a sample job description of this much-sought-after role.

Your job, should you choose to accept it, is the following:

- Provide your children with structure and boundaries within which they can safely grow to their full potential
- Guide your children toward appropriate behaviour by teaching them *how* to think for themselves
- Provide your kids with opportunities to grow, try, make mistakes and learn
- Teach your kids respect by treating them respectfully and earning (rather than insisting on) their respect
- Be a positive role model especially when it comes to self-discipline, emotional control, and problem solving

- Let your kids know they are loved unconditionally, that they are very important to you, that you will always believe in them and will have their back when they are in need of support
- Other duties as required

Qualities all applicants will benefit from are the following:

- Patience and open-mindedness
- Ability to laugh at ridiculous and often embarrassing moments
- Ability to be a team player
- Willingness to learn and adapt
- Ability to be a self-starter
- Ability to work well under pressure
- Ability to be clear about expectations/beliefs
- Willingness to share with others
- Creativity
- A loving attitude
- Excellent self-control in times of high stress and button-pushing situations
- Ability to forgive self and others for inappropriate behaviour

All individuals welcome to apply; accidental applications accepted!

Exercise: You Are Here ▽

It's hard to get where you are going if you don't know where you are starting from. This exercise will help you get a picture of where you are today so that you can begin to plan where you would like to go in the future.

1. Think about the mental picture you created when you found out you were going to be a parent. Write down a few of the key things that describe the parent you planned on being in the beginning. Sometimes it helps to think about the things you valued most (or swore to change) from your own upbringing and use some of them to get you going.

Examples:

I spend quality time with my child and laugh with him a lot.

My daughter and I can talk about anything. She trusts me and values my opinion. I tuck my kids in nightly, complete with bedtime story, hugs and giggles.

My kids feel safe and loved, they can come to me for anything.

I am ...patient, a good listener, approachable, supportive, funny.

2. On a scale of one to ten (with ten being *definitely agree*), decide how well you are living up to the various aspects of the picture of yourself you just described. You may go back and measure each statement if you like, and then give yourself an overall rating here. Overall rating: _____

3. If your children were asked to talk about the kind of parent you are today, what kinds of things might they say?

Example: Mommy yells loud when I'm bad but she loves me no matter what. She puts me in time-out if I spill my juice because I'm being silly.

Be as honest as you can, and write a brief description of yourself from your child's perspective.

4. Would you change your rating on the scale after using your child's viewpoint? If so, write down the new number and any thoughts you have about that.

Revised rating: _____

5. What would you need to change to make things match up better?

For example: I need to yell less and be more patient. I need to find more time to play.

6. If your children are old enough, you could ask them to describe you after you have finished the exercise. Be prepared for them to remember things differently than you do and try not to lead their answers (for example, “You like how Mommy tucks you in, right?”). Use their comments to guide you, not hurt you. Do not let this turn into a relationship-damaging exercise!

My child’s version:

Awareness helps us recognize if we have gone off course and helps us adjust to get back on course. Use this information to help you recognize any areas of misalignment between the parent you wanted to be and the parent you are today.

