

Real parenting for real kids

Enabling parents to bring out the
best in their children

by
Melissa Hood



Practical Inspiration
PUBLISHING

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Praise for *Real Parenting for Real Kids*

“Most people learn how to be the parents they want to be only after their children have fled the nest. Parents say they are too busy with work, with getting by, with coping, to reflect deeply on what they really want for their children, and the values they want to implant. They unconsciously mimic the ways they themselves were brought up, or react strongly against it. This thoughtful book will help parents savour and enjoy to the full the greatest job that life will confer on them – bringing up the next generation”.

– Sir Anthony Seldon, Vice-Chancellor, The University of Buckingham (former Headmaster of Wellington College) and author of *Beyond Happiness*

“With so much pressure and panic swirling around children nowadays, many parents feel overwhelmed and bewildered. *Real Parenting for Real Kids* slices right through that confusion. With clarity, rigour and wisdom, Melissa Hood reminds us what really matters in childhood – and shows us how to give it to our own children. She serves up step-by-step advice for tackling every parenting challenge under the sun, from bullying and screen time to exam pressure and figuring out what ‘success’ means. But she also goes beyond the tools and techniques to deliver a rare gift: a blueprint for building families that allow both parents and children to become their best selves. A wonderful book.”

– Carl Honoré, author of *Under Pressure: Putting the Child back in Childhood*

"*Real Parenting for Real Kids* is an excellent and important book. Children are of course all unique and family dynamics will be correspondingly individualistic. Nevertheless there is

something for every parent and potential parent to take from this book. An abundance of wise advice and counsel and a totally laudable absence of condescension or judgmental criticism. There is reassurance for the parent who is reaching the end of his or her tether that the problems they are dealing with are not unique to them, together with sound practical advice about how to move forward. There is also plenty of encouragement to continue and persevere with a sensible approach to parenting even if results are not immediately obvious. Children don't come with a manual but this book could easily be subtitled 'How to negotiate the pitfalls and navigate your way through the minefield of becoming a successful parent'."

– Michael Spens, Headmaster, Fettes College

"Melissa Hood's *Real Parenting for Real Kids* helps parents reclaim the leadership role in their homes, without resorting to shouting, bribes, threats or punishment. An easy-to-read yet comprehensive guide for any parent who has struggled to get her child to cooperate, loaded with concrete tools to help parents bring out the best in their children. Hood teaches the essential skills to raise wonderful kids, using stories every parent can identify with to illustrate better solutions for everyday parenting challenges, from squabbling and lying to screen time and schoolwork."

– Dr. Laura Markham, author of *Calm Parent, Happy Kid*

"*Real Parenting* is a real step-by-step guide to the nuts and bolts of being in the trenches with 'real kids' everyday. It is laid out in ways that actually help parents figure out their own plan of action with such helpful and positive advice, like 'chat throughs' and the many uses of role play. Unlike so many parenting books, *Real Parenting* is a great balance between not only what helps children do well, but what helps parents parent well."

– Bonnie Harris, author of *When Your Kids Push Your Buttons, And What You Can Do About It*

"*Real Parenting for Real Kids* is excellent – practical, thorough and crammed with wisdom gained from research-based psychology and professional and personal experience. Hood identifies our struggles as parents but always provides both explanation and potential solution. So for readers, every instance of cringing recognition – such as the pre-school breakfast-time narrative that has the adult resentfully asking their 7 year old, 'why does it take you so long to put on a sock?' – is balanced with insight and advice; meaning there are many light-bulb moments. It's enjoyable, informative, and inspirational. I think this book is invaluable – it has the potential to make a huge positive difference to families."

– Anna Maxted, journalist

Note from the author

Hello and welcome to *Real Parenting for Real Kids*. If you've popped your head in for a quick look around be my guest. I'm guessing you are a parent or someone close to you is a parent. So you probably know that for all its rewards, bringing up children can also be hard work. If you want some help with that, with insights to help you understand your child even better and family-tested strategies to bring out the best in them, you're in the right place.

I'm guessing one of the things you might like is for your children to do what you ask them without making a drama of it. Just to whet your appetite, would you like to know how to get your kids to follow instructions in 3 easy steps?

What parent wouldn't?

If you'd like to see a short video where I explain how to do just that, go to <http://www.theparentpractice.com/book>. And you can see the face behind the words in this book.

Enjoy! I hope this is the beginning of a fruitful partnership.
Best wishes,

Melissa

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
How to get the best out of this book.....	15
Part I: 7 essential skills for bringing out the best in your children	17
Chapter 1 – Skill 1: Knowing your child	18
<i>Understanding temperament and stages of development. Practical ways to really get to know your child.</i>	
Chapter 2 – Skill 2: Encouraging cooperation and confidence with Descriptive Praise	54
<i>Using Descriptive Praise to foster strong self-esteem, to build strong characteristics and good behaviours in your child; to encourage cooperation and listening.</i>	
Chapter 3 – Skill 3: Listening and connecting.....	84
<i>Using Emotion Coaching to develop emotional intelligence in children, to build empathy and resilience and to encourage them to talk to you.</i>	
Chapter 4 – Skill 4: Setting up for success.....	119
<i>Using many micro skills to manage challenging family situations and to train children in good habits and life skills.</i>	
Chapter 5 – Skill 5: Family values	150
<i>Developing clarity around values and raising children in a purposeful way, using rules and rewards without coercion.</i>	
Chapter 6 – Skill 6: Positive discipline.....	181
<i>Helping parents be in charge in positive ways; dispelling</i>	

the myths around discipline and using a problem-solving approach to behaviours you want to change.

Chapter 7 – Skill 7: Keeping calm – the holy grail of parenting..... 214
Understanding why we get upset and respond ineffectively when things go pear-shaped and how we can keep calm.

Part II: Applying the skills to everyday parenting challenges.....245

Chapter 8 – Their world of relationships..... 246
Fostering harmony and resolving conflict between siblings and others; exploring friendships, bullying, social skills; being an only child.

Chapter 9 – Their intellectual world 271
Bringing out the best in your child at school, managing stress, handling homework, encouraging focus and organisational skills, fostering curiosity and passion and the role of non-academic activities.

Chapter 10 – Their physical world 314
Encouraging your children to have a healthy relationship with their bodies, positive body image and self-care; the role of sport; channelling energy positively.

Chapter 11 – Their digital world 350
Teaching children to be safe and kind online.

Chapter 12 – Their moral world 380
Understanding why lying, stealing, cheating, bullying, swearing and other ‘bad’ behaviours happen and what to do about it; the role of apologies; developing healthy attitudes to sex.

Chapter 13 – Their world of responsibility	413
<i>Teaching children to take responsibility for their own behaviour, chores and possessions and to make contributions to the family.</i>	
Chapter 14 – Beyond their world	445
<i>Encouraging children to take an interest in the world beyond them, developing a sense of community, gratitude, wonder and openness; fostering a sense of something bigger than them.</i>	
What Next?	477
Acknowledgements	480
Index	483

Introduction

My own story

Before I had children I thought I'd be a great parent. Of course. We're all experts before we have kids of our own. The things we were never going to do! Well in truth I didn't think about it much at all, I just *assumed* I'd be fine. I wanted to have children while I was young as I wanted to have lots of energy but apart from that I didn't give it much thought. That doesn't mean I was particularly conceited – I just thought it was easy enough and I had the right background to make me a good parent. I'd been a child, I'd had good parents, I'd looked after my much younger sister – how hard could it be? I thought all you needed to be a good parent was to love your kids. I *did* love my kids, but when it came to it I found I needed a whole lot more than that.

Parenting turned out to be quite different from what I'd expected. But not immediately. My first child, Gemma, came into the world easily and blissfully quickly and was, of course, adorable. Although I was tired she was lovely and caring for her was a new game. Somehow I managed to combine work and parenthood and she grew into a sweet toddler. I was lulled into a false sense of security. Parenting was easy, I thought.

So we had another.

My son, Christian, was born with the umbilical cord around his neck and that was the first of the struggles he encountered with the world. After he stopped being blue he was gorgeous and, drama over, we were happy with our growing family. So happy we went on and had another one, Sam.

By the time number three came into the world I was accomplished at giving birth but what came after the birth was beginning to be more taxing. Babyhood was fine, even

the six o'clock screams of colic were manageable, but after that some of my children's encounters with the world were more trying.

Christian, in particular, tested all my parenting abilities – and they were found wanting. Parenting Christian provided the crisis that set me off on the adventure during which I discovered the skills, strategies and insights set out here, often by seeing what didn't work. He was rough and mean with his brother, he irritated his sister, he got into scrapes at playgroup, he broke things and didn't do as he was told. He was like a whirlwind, getting into everything, especially anything sharp or dangerous. He got lost in busy places as he wandered off, and anything forbidden was like a magnet. He did the opposite of what he was asked to do. Not all the time, but enough for me to not always like being with him much, which made me feel sad and guilty. His early childhood was characterised by him doing one thing or another that got him into trouble, both at home and at school.

Parents were invited to visit his nursery school and when it was my day I was down one end of the room doing an activity with him when up the other end of the room something went wrong. I can't remember what happened but I do remember that several of the children said that Christian had done it. I knew that wasn't true as he had been right next to me. But it made me realise how often he must have been the cause of upsets for them to assume that he was behind this one.

Once he started big school my husband and I spent quite a bit of time in the head's office. We were sat on the sofa and made to feel like we had a uniquely awful child – we thought we were uniquely deficient parents. I wasn't used to being told off as I'd been a compliant child and this felt *really* uncomfortable.

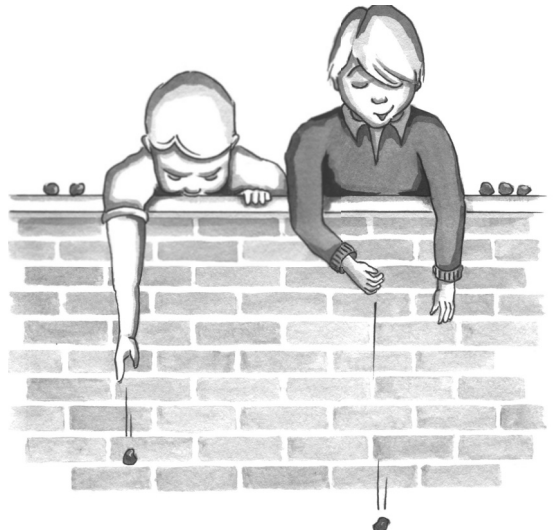
Many's the time I was reduced to tears at my inability to find the secret to keeping the lovely Christian front and

centre. I can remember wondering what I'd done to deserve this. My instinct was to be loving, which I could be. But then he'd do something awful and I'd think – *he needs to be punished*. So I'd do that. That didn't work either and the behaviour continued. We tried all the things that parents were 'supposed to do'. When he was little we'd tried ignoring and distracting only to be met with greater persistence. We sent him to his room, we withdrew privileges – sometimes quite big treats that we'd all been looking forward to for a long time (such as a trip to Warwick castle to see the knights jousting – Christian stayed in the car with an adult) – and he got told off, lectured and scolded. A few times, when my buttons had really been pushed, I smacked. I certainly tried cajoling, pleading and bribing too. None of it worked. We felt powerless.

When Christian was told off for something he'd cry or he'd make excuses, lie or blame someone else. He thought it was terribly unfair. Often he just stayed silent and wouldn't look at us. (Why would he want to look at me when I was yelling at him?) He'd do anything to avoid taking responsibility. Now I understand why but then I just thought it was a character flaw, one that would end with him behind bars.

Here is one story from the family annals, now infamous as a particularly terrible example of the behaviour at the time.

We had gone on holiday to Australia and were with my family on the Gold Coast in Queensland, staying in high-rise apartments. We were



living in the UK at the time and it was a special treat for all my Australian family to be together for a beach holiday. Expectations were high. The apartments had balconies on which were planters with pebbles in them. Christian, by now aged 7, and his younger cousin decided it would be fun to drop the pebbles off the balcony. I'm sure they thought this was a great game (there may have been a quite scientific analysis of the trajectory of the missile) and maybe they didn't stop to think of the consequences, but several of the pebbles had landed on a car parked below before one of the adults twigged what was going on and put a stop to it. The car was of course damaged and the parents had to pay for repairs.

Christian had been suspended from his primary school twice and I'd been a parent for nearly ten years before we found the help we needed. My husband and I took a parenting course at The New Learning Centre in north London and our lives turned a corner. What we were seeking was peace in our family, an end to the shouting, scolding, punishing and tears. We weren't just looking for cooperation – we wanted happiness. It's not overstating it to say that when we crossed that threshold we stepped into a new world.

Before I had children I was a solicitor. I had studied for years and had two degrees. I was well educated and I think reasonably intelligent. I was competent at my job. I was analytical and had good attention to detail. But none of the skills or knowledge I'd acquired equipped me to parent this boy. What John and I learnt initially from Noël Janis-Norton and then from many other writers and educators completely transformed our family.

I now know that Christian wasn't uniquely awful – in fact many parents have told me stories of similar behaviour, some just as bad as the pebble-throwing incident. And I know that my husband and I weren't awful parents either. We were doing the best we could with the resources that we

had and actually getting quite a bit right – especially with our other two, who were easier at that time. We just didn't have the tools we needed or a real understanding of what made him tick. Later we learnt that Christian had dyslexia and that much of his behaviour at school served as a distraction from his difficulties in the classroom. Other behaviours were attributable to his then low self-esteem and to our inconsistent approaches. I wish I had understood sooner his temperament and how to work with it to get cooperation and kinder behaviour. Christian was intense, persistent, highly distractible, impulsive and energetic and he is also an introvert, so being with others for protracted periods exhausted him. It took me some years to discover the tools that helped me understand him, appreciate him and redirect his behaviour. Now as an adult those qualities serve him very well as he is tenacious, creative, perceptive and very loving, and while he's socially adept he still likes just being alone with his wife to recharge.

Thank goodness we found the skills we needed before our children hit adolescence, which was comparatively plain sailing! It wasn't a quick turn-around, although I began to feel more confident very quickly. I can remember learning about Descriptive Praise on day one and thinking it was a wonderful idea in principle but I couldn't see how to use it with *my* son. After all, I *would* praise him if he ever did anything remotely praise-worthy! Crucially we found tools to help us understand what our children were going through in different developmental stages and to appreciate each of their temperaments. We learnt strategies for building self-esteem, which was really vital for Christian. We learnt how to teach him better and he learnt to take responsibility. We were able to show him and to teach him empathy and to control his impulsivity. He coped with secondary school and excelled at university and is now working hard in an industry he loves. He is able to admit when he's wrong and to put it right. He

has very good emotional intelligence and I'm confident that his future doesn't involve any time in jail!

Had I had a more straightforward child I would never have learnt as much as I did. I remember once reading that you are sent the child you need to learn the lessons you need to know in life. Certainly our children are our teachers.

The transformation in my own family was so profound that I wanted to share it with others. I did my parenting facilitation training at The New Learning Centre where I worked for six years and also took a post-graduate certificate in Systemic Therapy for Families and Couples at the Institute of Family Therapy. In 2004, together with Camilla McGill, I founded The Parent Practice. I have found sharing these ideas with families and coaching them to have happier family lives and bring out the best in their children is so much more rewarding than anything I had done before. When I was a solicitor no one told me how the agreement I'd drafted for them had changed their lives, whereas that is our daily experience at The Parent Practice! Camilla left The Parent Practice in 2009 and I was joined at the helm by Elaine Halligan.

Elaine's story

Let me tell you Elaine's story. Elaine has two children, Sam and Issy. When we first met them Elaine and Tony's son Sam was 7 and they were struggling with him. He had already had a tough life up until that point. He is very dyslexic and had been diagnosed with Oppositional Defiance Disorder as well as Attention Deficit Disorder and possible placement on the Autistic Spectrum. He felt very different and most inadequate. He believed he was a bad person. Indeed he was a very angry young boy. The first time I met him he brought his fist down really hard on his mother's foot, which she'd injured. He was generally quite aggressive and definitely oppositional. His parents were at their wits' end, having

received much conflicting advice and having tried most opportunities available for a child with his set of difficulties. Travelling on public transport was a complete nightmare as he was all over the place and wouldn't listen to anything anyone told him to do – it was sometimes dangerous and always embarrassing. He had been to three schools including one special needs school and been excluded from all of them. One school had been so unable to manage his behaviour that they shut him in a room and told him to calm down!

Luckily his parents did not give up on him. Parents don't generally give up on their children but sometimes they do accept that there are limits to what can be achieved. Elaine and Tony took our positive parenting courses and trained hard to help him. They discovered the strategies they needed and practised using them. They knew he was a good and capable person. Elaine says, "We had a rock covered in mud, but over time, peeling back layers, we discovered a diamond underneath."

They found schools that could support him and it finally became possible for him to attend school again because of all the work they put in at home. In all the years I've known him I've always been amazed at the way Sam progressed. He has always had drive and a self-belief that I think comes, not in small part, from his parents' belief in him. Literacy is still a struggle for him but this young man will not be stopped by that. He has great resilience and a maturity well beyond his years. His social skills are very acute and he has insights about people rare in someone his age. He earned the respect of his peers and teachers and was made head boy for his final year of school, which speaks volumes about his leadership abilities. In his gap year he took on a challenging car rally from London to Mongolia, which says a lot about his confidence. (The anxiety nearly killed his mother!) He coped with all kinds of difficulties en route. At the time of writing he has just started university. Who would have thought that was possible 11 years ago?

What about you?

Your children may not have any of the difficulties that Sam was landed with. They may not be exhibiting the same behaviours that Christian showed when he was young. The challenges you face with your children may be different but some of those stories may have resonated with you. Some of you will have the intense children that Mary Sheedy Kurcinka calls ‘spirited’¹ and will therefore have much greater calls on your parenting skills. You will need to drill down to understand your children better and find reserves within yourselves. It’s important to realise that this is where we do our most important parenting. The easy bits are easy, although of course they do count. The tough bits are where we really do the very best possible...

Over my 18 years of working with parents I have encountered many different issues that families grapple with. In a recent survey of our clients the top issues that currently concerned them were:

- finding ways to discipline calmly and positively, without shouting, threatening and scolding
- encouraging harmony and managing conflict between siblings
- cooperation; getting kids to listen to parents
- building confidence and resilience
- getting kids to communicate more
- helping children deal with emotions
- encouraging respect for others
- homework; getting children to do it to a satisfactory standard, helping them to be focused and organised

¹ *Raising Your Spirited Child*, 2009

- helping children deal with exam pressure
- friendship difficulties
- fostering a united front between partners and with other child carers
- finding a balance between keeping children safe and encouraging independence

Whatever the issues that you are facing in your family, you don't need to face them alone. When I was struggling I felt really alone. I felt embarrassed around parents of Christian's peers, sensing their judgment; my family were on the other side of the world and I was floundering. I felt as if I should know how to do this. By this time I'd left my job as a solicitor – my family was my job now. I thought parenting was supposed to be instinctive.

I do think parents should trust their instincts but sometimes what we think are instincts about how to bring up children are in fact deep conditioning, legacies of the way we were brought up ourselves or conventions around parenting that we've heard so often we believe them to be truths. It occurred to me that I think of driving as 'instinctive' in that I do it largely without thinking (and I don't run into things) but of course it's not instinctive, it's just that I've been doing it for so long that I no longer have to think about it. So it is with beliefs that have been around a long time. Let's just check to make sure that we're not confusing learned behaviours, what 'everyone else is doing', with *our* values, what feels right to us. When Christian was behaving badly I followed the accepted belief that punishment would teach him how to behave. Not only did it not change the behaviour but it damaged his self-esteem and made it harder for me to connect with him. His behaviour grew worse.

“Believe nothing, no matter where you read it or who has said it, not even if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and your own common sense.”

– Buddha.

Running is an instinctive behaviour but the science around how the body works gives athletes a greater understanding of how to achieve maximum performance and it takes a good coach to make an exceptional athlete.

“Parents need a special way of relating and talking with their children. How would any of us feel if a surgeon came into the operating room and before the anaesthesiologist put us under, said ‘I really don’t have much training in surgery but I love my patients and use common sense’? We would probably panic and run for our lives. But it’s not that easy for children whose parents believe that love and common sense are enough. Like surgeons, parents, too, need to learn special skills to become competent in coping with the daily demands of children. Like a trained surgeon who is careful where he cuts, parents, too, need to become skilled in the use of words. Because words are like knives. They can inflict, if not physical, many painful emotional wounds.” – Dr Haim Ginott

There is much knowledge that has accumulated around child development and neuroscience which greatly enhances our understanding of how our children grow. Such understanding allows us to be compassionate, strategic and effective in our parenting. But as well as theory we want to know what works in practice in busy families.

The masters of parenting

A few years ago I came across the remarkable work of Drs John and Julie Gottman. They have researched and worked

with couples and families for many, many years. I did their Bringing Baby Home training (about the transition from a couple to a family) in Australia in 2011 and then took their couples relationship training in Iceland in 2012. They have studied what makes a successful couple relationship and have analysed the elements that make these relationships work. They call these successful couples the ‘masters of relationship’.

I realised that in the work we do at The Parent Practice we also have a unique opportunity to observe masters at work. In our face-to-face work with parents, in courses, workshops and consultations at our centres in London, New York and Sydney we have learnt much from our clients. We hear about the issues they have faced and the solutions they have devised. We have incorporated into our trainings many of the ideas generated by these masters of parenting. They would hasten to deny that they are masters but we are not talking about attaining any kind of perfection, just continuing to improve all the time, getting to know our children better and devising solutions that work in our own families.

Many parents when they hear about these skills feel guilty that they have not been parenting this way up until now. Well of course they haven’t. They were doing the best they could with the resources they had at the time. And they may have been doing a perfectly good job too. If you’re reading this book it means you’re open to new ideas so ditch the guilt and add some more really effective tools to your existing tool basket and recognise the good things you’ve been doing as we celebrate the masters of parenting. As Ellen Williams and Erin Dynowski say, “if you’re worried about being a good parent then you already are one.”²

Guilt and anxiety are common feelings for parents today. Now as Ericka Christakis put it, “we live in the information

² Sisterhood of The Sensible Moms bloggers, speaking as part of the Happy Families Summit in June 2015,

age and that causes huge stress for families... because now we're aware of what crummy parents we are."³ Christakis was speaking on The Purpose of Parenting at the Aspen Festival of Ideas in 2012 and she referred to a 'crisis of information'. The proliferation of information about what is healthy and unhealthy and the culture of judgment of parents in the media has certainly contributed to parents' anxiety. My aim is to allay some of that anxiety by pointing to examples from perfectly ordinary families who have become the masters of parenting with the help of the skills herein.

One such master sent us this note from her husband (she was away visiting family at the time).

At bedtime, Lucas was quite chatty, and explained to me why he preferred you to cuddle him than me! "No offence, dad" he said "but..." He mentioned three reasons:

- 1. You're softer/cuddlier (I know you'll think fat, but get rid of such a negative thought – we like to cuddle you!)*
- 2. When he does half of what he was supposed to do, you praise the bit he has done and then remind/explain about the bit he hasn't.*
- 3. You understand him... You understand him when he doesn't explain anything.*

You may be familiar with a progression of learning characterised by different stages:

- 1. neophyte** – this is a state of blissful ignorance where we don't know what we don't know. We are unconscious of our incompetence.
- 2. beginner** – at this uncomfortable stage we have enough learning to be aware of what we don't know or can't do – we are consciously incompetent.
- 3. competent** – by this stage we have developed skills

³ <http://www.aspenideas.org/session/what-goal-parenting>

and strategies but it takes effort to implement them – we are consciously competent, at least some of the time, in some areas

4. **mastery** – by now there are some areas where we use our skills without too much effort, maybe even without thinking about it – we have achieved unconscious competence.

Once we have taken on the initial learning we will oscillate between stages 3 and 4 and our mood, hormones, sleep levels and general wellbeing will affect our competence on a daily basis. As parents we have the power to impact our children's development in a profound way. Our responses to our children's behaviour will be governed by these variable factors and also by more deep-seated factors such as how we were parented ourselves – what are the habitual learned behaviours for us? – and our temperament or how we tend to respond to the world generally. Awareness can help us alter these ingrained factors too. When we're busy and stressed of course we will default to 'automatic parenting', when we revert to our less-considered responses, the parenting habits that are in our subconscious. It will take time to make the new ways of doing things the habit that takes over. The more we practise the more we create new neural pathways.

At The Parent Practice our work is based on sound, well-researched psychological theories and the latest research in child development and brain science but it is also tested at the coal face with busy families in everyday life. We draw on the experiences of our own team of facilitators but also on those of the parents we work with – the masters. Here we offer you the accumulated wisdom of the masters of parenting as you help your child navigate their world en route to adulthood.

How to get the best out of this book

So welcome to *Real Parenting for Real Kids*. I'm Melissa and I'll be your guide through 7 essential skills that every parent needs to understand their children and bring out the best in them. Then we'll explore 7 spheres in which those skills can be applied. *Real Parenting for Real Kids* is written primarily with parents of primary school-aged children in mind but the skills have applications for children from the age of 2 right through adolescence and beyond so if your child is older, say 14 or 44, then don't think it's too late for you.

I recommend you read the 7 skills chapters first and then go on to dip in and out of the chapters in the second part, which look at how these skills apply to everyday challenges in your child's world. There will be lots of stories generously shared by our team and by the parents we've been privileged to work with. And in accordance with our practical philosophy I invite you to get into action with your own family and do the exercises throughout each chapter. You can get PDFs of these exercises and many additional resources from our website here: www.theparentpractice.com/book-resources. Where there are references to our website it will be to the appropriate chapter on this page; so for example if you are reading chapter 8 and there is a reference to a problem-solving discussion for siblings, go to the chapter 8 section on the web page to find it.

On a note of authorship you will see that to avoid cumbersome references to 'he or she' throughout I have referred alternately to he/him or she/her. It doesn't imply any gender bias. Many of the stories I've used have been sent in or told to us by mums but we know of plenty of dads who have

also changed their parenting approach with phenomenal results. In fact one dad also reported using some of the skills on his sales team at work with a great effect on the bottom line.

I have also referred to children as ‘kids’ sometimes. I know some adults don’t like this so I want to reassure you that I am not comparing your offspring to baby goats but sometimes some variety in expression and a more informal tone is a good thing, I think. I apologise if this offends anyone.

Keep developing your own parenting practice and watch those areas of mastery grow.

Part One

*7 essential skills for bringing out the
best in your children*

1

Skill 1: Knowing your child

Parenting isn't a one-size-fits-all science. You need to have a real understanding of the real child in front of you at the stage he is at *now* to know how to apply the techniques and strategies that follow. Bespoke parenting, tailored to the needs of the individual child, means that the strategies you use will really fit. Without this understanding the skills may not work as well.

An understanding of what is taking place in your child's brain and what he is capable of at each stage of development as well as his temperament and any special needs he may have will help you to adjust your expectations of him and adapt your approach so you can provide the right kind of support and environment, encouragement and discipline for your child.

Ages and stages of development

"A 3 year old is not half a 6 year old."

- Ken Robinson

When Sue was driving with Nick aged 12 and she said "I wish that blue car would hurry up," he just said "It's not blue." "What do you mean it's not blue?" They then started one of those surreal conversations until she realised he just had to disagree with her whatever she said - because he was approaching adolescence and arguing is something they have to do - so she dropped it.

One of my LPMs (low parenting moments) involved me stamping my foot and yelling at my boys (then aged 7 and 5) in a very immature manner (before I learnt better skills), “*Why are you being so childish?*” An understanding of how behaviour fits with what’s happening in our children’s brains at the time makes it more likely that we can be compassionate and effective in our approaches (and less childish ourselves).

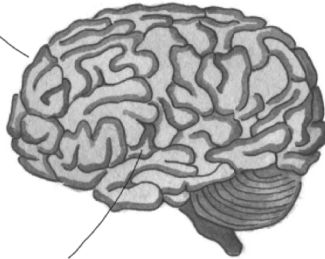
Children go through genetically determined distinct phases of development as they progress through childhood to adolescence and adulthood but they develop at their own pace so any information about stages of development should be seen only as a guide, not as prescriptive. It’s not that ‘my child SHOULD’ be over tantrums by 4 years old, just about understanding that with language development, in the normal course, children can use words to express themselves better around the age of 4. We all know children much older than that (and indeed some adults) who have tantrums if they haven’t yet learnt better strategies. Children can revert to behaviour characteristic of an earlier stage if they are stressed or distressed. Older children often engage in babyish behaviours when a new baby comes along.

William’s father was a bit concerned when, a few years ago, William, aged 12, decided to take up colouring again in a smart restaurant. His mum realised that as William was about to start secondary school and embark on adolescence it was a last opportunity to engage in some childish activities. At the time of writing adult colouring has actually become a popular craze.

So, when we learn about developmental stages it is not to establish standards for our children to live up to but general indicators to guide adult understanding, empathy and teaching.

Our brains have evolved into three sections governing different functions. The rational or higher brain, in the frontal lobes, deals with reasoning, logic and problem-solving.

Frontal Cortex:
decision-making, self-control



Limbic system:
learning, emotions
(Amygdala)

Psychologist and author Walter Mischel⁴ calls this reflective part the cool brain. The mammalian or emotional brain, in the limbic system, deals with emotions and impulses. Mischel calls this reflexive part the hot brain. There is also the ancient or reptilian brain which controls essential bodily functions. We are concerned with

the first two parts of the brain and how they interact with each other. The cool brain can regulate the impulses of the hot brain but its success depends on age, parental input and the child's exposure to stress. The frontal lobes won't be fully developed until the early 20s!

Babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers (Newborn to 4 years)

The human baby is born in a very immature state. Enormous growth and development in the body and brain happens in the first four years after birth. This age group is not the focus of this book so we mention it here only to summarise what's gone before and to distinguish what the school-aged child is now capable of.

When your child was a toddler he was developing a growing awareness of himself that started as a baby. This stage of development is egocentric, in the sense that a child in this age group is only beginning to develop awareness of others and their feelings. It does not mean your child is selfish if they want what they want and they want it now.

⁴ Walter Mischel, The Marshmallow Test