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INTRODUCTION

WHY READ THIS BOOK?

From the first moment you see, touch, and (yes) smell your newborn child, a relationship is formed—a relationship that can bring countless moments of joy, love, and pride as well as bouts of frustration, sadness, and fear. As author Elizabeth Stone wrote, being a parent “is to decide forever to have your heart go walking outside your body.” The bond you have with your child is unique among all your life’s relationships. When the parent–child relationship is managed well, it is a powerful resource for children. It helps them grow, learn, and make their way through life. But what does it mean to “manage well” the parent–child relationship?

Perhaps you’re reading this book because your relationship with your child is not quite what it should be or what you had imagined. Perhaps you see your *children* as not quite who they should be or what you had imagined. Perhaps you’re a parent who worries about your children’s future or their recent past. Or perhaps you’re simply a parent who wonders, “Am I doing this right?” We assume you’re reading this book because you’re invested in the work of parenting and want what’s best for your children.

This book is meant to *be* two things. First, this book can be a stand-alone guide for parents concerned about parenting or concerned about a child aged 18 years or under who is having emotional

or behavior problems. But it's also a companion to another book we wrote specifically for *therapists* who work with parents whose children are defiant and aggressive (Cavell & Quetsch, 2023). By design, the contents of this book and the therapist book overlap substantially, which should help parents working with a therapist on child- and family-related problems. Hopefully, therapists will use the overlapping content to work collaboratively with parents. We also hope parents will use this book to stay fully informed when seeking the help of a professional therapist.

This book is also meant to *do two things*. First, it will help you gauge those aspects of parenting that are going well and those that might need work. We don't present a long list of parenting skills that invites you to feel lacking or inept; instead, we offer a plan for what matters most in parenting. If your goal is to be a parent good enough to meet your children's needs—not a perfect parent—then this is the book for you. Second, this book will help you build a workable plan for parenting. You'll learn about six major areas of parenting and how to use that information to make a plan that fits your family.

WHY IS PARENTING OFTEN DIFFICULT OR CONFUSING?

There are several reasons why parenting is often difficult or confusing. Here are three of them.

Reason 1: Parenting Is One-Sided

For the most part, parenting is a one-sided gig: Children depend on us for lots of things, for a long time. Willard Hartup, a well-known developmental psychologist, described children's relationships with parents as *vertical attachments*. They are vertical in the sense that parents have greater knowledge and social power than children do.

As babies, our children are entirely dependent on us, both physically and emotionally. As they get older, they become more independent but still need us, only in different ways. With time, children begin to spend less and less time with us, but we still carry that sense of responsibility and concern. Added to the work and the weight of parenting is the fact that you can't expect to get out of parenting as much as you put into it. Yes, having children can greatly enrich our lives and give special meaning to our existence, but parents generally give to children more than they get in return. That's how nature arranged it, and it is certainly true today now that children are less often viewed as essential personnel for the family farm or the family business. But it is also true in terms of the emotional rewards we hope to get from parenting—that sense of love, understanding, and connection we imagine is an essential by-product of parenting. Indeed, there are times when the payoff for parenting seems unfair and one-sided. This book can help you adjust to that likelihood so you won't miss the special, heart-warming, teary-eyed moments that are also a part of child-rearing.

Reason 2: Parents Have Limited Control Over Their Children's Behavior

A second reason why parenting can be difficult or confusing is that *we have limited control over our children's behavior*. Parents play an important role in child development, but even the most effective parents are not puppeteers, able to make children perform however and whenever they choose. In fact, any guilt you feel as a parent could stem from specialists like us putting too much emphasis on how parenting influences children's growth and development. Consider the old saying, "As the twig is bent, so grows the tree," which is often interpreted to mean that good parents raise good kids and bad parents raise bad kids. Today, science tells a different

story about the role of parental influence, even though public opinion still has us judging and often condemning parents whose children are behaving “badly.” If you’re the parent of a child who is overly active, strong-willed, or has trouble learning in the usual way, you know what we mean. Some children will cause *any* parent to struggle.

A more up-to-date story about parenting and child development has several parts. The first is that genes matter a great deal—not just in how children look (skin color, height) but also in their talents, abilities, and personality. Genetic endowment also shapes how children respond to and learn from their environment. For example, some infants have an easy temperament that allows them to fit into whatever schedule of feeding, changing, and sleeping parents prefer. Others have a more difficult temperament and are less predictable and less easily scheduled. Recent studies also show that many psychological disorders involve inherited vulnerabilities that when combined with significant life stress can lead to large problems down the road. In fact, it is fair to say that experts in human development no longer assume that parenting is more important or more influential than genetics. Instead, today’s experts assume that both matter and recognize that both act on the other to influence children’s development. A second part of the story about parenting and child development is that parents are just one source of environmental influence. Scientists now recognize that many other contexts affect children’s development. Among these are their interactions with siblings, peers, grandparents, teachers, and coaches as well as their exposure to technology and various sources of media. Scholars such as Judith Rich Harris have argued that parents actually have *less* influence than other external factors (e.g., peers, teachers) in children’s lives! None of the newer research on nature versus nurture refutes the critical role parents play in children’s lives, but it does help inform parents about what truly matters.

Reason 3: The Myth of Effective Parenting

A third reason why parenting can be difficult or confusing is what we call the *myth of effective parenting*. In today's information age, there is no shortage of advice for parents, but not all of it is helpful, and misplaced emphasis on effective parenting is one of the subtler ways parents can be made to feel like they're stumbling. This myth usually begins with a message that experts have identified a specific set of child-rearing skills that are recommended for all parents regardless of the parent, the child, or the circumstances affecting the family and the context for child-rearing (e.g., culture, divorce, alcoholism, poverty). Next is the implication that if children are behaving "badly," then parents must lack effective parenting skills. The last part of the myth is that effective parenting means using the "right" skill at the "right" time in the "right" way. If parents do this, there should be no reason to struggle and no reason for child misbehavior.

Like many myths, there are kernels of truth. It is true that research has pinpointed the kinds of parenting behavior that are linked with negative child outcomes. Big-ticket items include overly harsh or rejecting parenting; parenting that is lax and without restrictions; and parenting that is neglectful or is physically, emotionally, or sexually abusive. We also know that providing consistent discipline, fostering a sense of belonging, and monitoring children's whereabouts and activities outside the home positively predict children's adjustment. Where these findings become myth is when they are recast as a narrow list of prescribed parenting skills and presented as the definitive statement on how to parent. It's an approach that loses sight of the parent-child relationship. The myth of effective parenting also tends to emphasize the short-term management of children's misbehavior; less emphasis is placed on managing the parent-child relationship over time (i.e., for 18-plus years).

When parenting is framed this way, it can push parents to see the trees but not the forest. Parents whose children are struggling emotionally or behaviorally will feel like failures when problems persist or when the parent–child relationship is further strained. In this book, we take a different approach to parenting. Our goal is to offer a workable, long-term, science-based plan that parents can use to address a wide range of emotional and behavioral issues affecting children and families. We invite you to learn about the six-point plan for good enough parenting. We welcome you to learn about what matters most.