From the million-copy bestselling author of

ADULT CHILDREN OF EMOTIONALLY IMMATURE PARENTS

# How to Raise an Emotionally Mature Child



YOUR BLUEPRINT *to a* LIFETIME *of* HAPPINESS *and* SUCCESS *for* YOUR CHILD

Dr Lindsay C. Gibson

Praise for

**How to Raise an Emotionally Mature Child:**

'The wake-up call every parent needs. It pulls you out of reacting from your inner eight-year-old and shows you how to build the emotional foundation for a healthy, lifelong relationship with your kids. They don't need you to be perfect – they need you to be present and willing to truly see who they are.'

**– MEL ROBBINS, author of THE LET THEM THEORY**

'If, like me, you've ever wondered whether you are screwing up your kids, this book is for you. Mercifully, Lindsay Gibson argues that instead of aiming for perfection, you should aim for connection. She has produced a practical guide for teaching kids emotional maturity'

**– DAN HARRIS, author of 10% HAPPIER**

'I love this book. Every parent needs to have a copy. With this book to guide your parenting, you can be sure your child will talk to you when they need guidance. There's no greater benefit possible as a parent.'

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'Lindsay Gibson, who helped us finally understand our emotionally immature parents, is now sharing her wisdom on how to raise emotionally mature kids. Her style is clear and compassionate, helping readers at each age and stage of parenting. I couldn't recommend it more!'

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'Reading this book is like spending a few hours with your wisest friend who also happens to have thirty-plus years of clinical experience. It is a warm, practical guide for the hardest, most rewarding, and most important job you'll ever have. I wish I'd had it years ago.'

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‘For a generation of adults raised by emotionally immature parents, Gibson’s research has offered life-changing insight and understanding. Now, as so many of those adults raise children of their own, she translates those insights into a clear, compassionate guide for parenting differently.’

**– DR BECKY KENNEDY, clinical psychologist and author of GOOD INSIDE**

‘Gibson goes beyond traditional parenting advice to help you truly connect with your child. It’s about shaping the relationships your child will carry into adulthood. By nurturing emotional maturity early, you’re giving your child skills that ripple outward.’

**– NEDRA GLOVER TAWWAB, author of SET BOUNDARIES, FIND PEACE**

‘This book is a gift to every parent who wants to raise emotionally grounded, resilient kids without getting swept up in the anxiety of today’s achievement culture.’

**– JENNIFER BREHENY WALLACE, author of NEVER ENOUGH**

‘Dr Gibson offers a reassuring approach to a simple, essential question: Does your child feel supported, loved and understood? The result is an unusually sensible, grounded and helpful guide to parenting.’

**– FORREST HANSON, host of BEING WELL podcast**

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Your Blueprint to a Lifetime of Happiness and Success for Your Child

Dr Lindsay C. Gibson

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To Skip, the *sine qua non* of my life

and

To Carter, who wouldn't take less than my best

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# Author's Note

This work is intended as a parent's guide to supporting their child's emotional maturation, based on my research, clinical work, and personal experience. It is in no way intended as a substitute for psychotherapy or professional advice. A child's questionable behaviors or symptoms should always be referred for expert evaluation.

All stories are about real people, but identities and names have been changed to protect confidentiality. Some stories have been edited for clarity and concision.

As a parent guide rather than an academic work, reference sources include both primary and secondary source material. Curious readers who want to further explore primary sources noted in secondary source material can find those references in the secondary source's bibliography and index. A suggested reading list of parenting books can be found at the end of this book.

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# Why This Book?

I want to show you how to have a lifelong positive relationship with your child. Simply being there emotionally for them at the outset can help you and your child be happy to see each other for the rest of your lives. Even though you start out at very different ages, you and your child can evolve into having an adult relationship of mutual affection and respect. I want the love between you and your child to continue to nourish you both, long after they have gone on to start their own lives.

This book will also help you believe in yourself as a parent and appreciate the real magnitude of all that you give your child. We will accomplish this not only by learning how to build your child's emotional maturity, but also by noticing what you're already doing right and doing more of it.

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It's a common misconception that parents buy parenting books because they're seeking better techniques. I think it goes deeper than

that. I think many book-buying parents are worried that they won't be good parents and won't discover that until it's too late. They are concerned that they might fail at this most essential part of life.

You might worry about being an ideal parent. I'm here to recommend a more achievable and more important goal: how to *avoid making your child feel lonely, unloved, or misunderstood.* If you pursue this mission, their emotional maturation will take care of itself and it won't matter what anyone else thinks of your parenting, or how you got there. Although your child may sometimes experience those awful feelings anyway, this book is going to make sure that it's not because you didn't know what to do or weren't sure what the goal was. Your child couldn't care less whether you're a paragon of parenting; they just want you to maintain a friendly and devoted connection with them. If you're watching and listening, they will tell you every step of the way when you're going in the right direction.

All you have to do is to relinquish a bit of ego and accept that at every age, your child is the expert guiding you toward what they need most. When they're babies, they want you to merge with them. When they're teens, they want you to accept that they don't belong to you and can't want the same things or think the same way as you. It's a steep learning curve, because you're being asked to respond artfully to so many different things. But if you understand how the ground rules of your relationship must change at different ages, your child won't feel misunderstood or lonely.

As we try to meet their needs, it can be hard on us to admit to ourselves that we emotionally need our children as much as we do. We know that children are dependent on our love and attention, but we can overlook how emotionally dependent we are on our children's love. We focus on fulfilling our parenting and family duties—we're trying not to fail, after all—but we're usually too busy to think about how much we emotionally need our kids. It's important to consider, though.

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By admitting how very emotionally vulnerable we really are in

this parent-child intimacy, we can approach our parenting duties with care and gratitude. We can stop taking for granted that our child's love is something that we are entitled to just by being parents. Such a realistic and unpretentious attitude makes us sensitive to our children's feelings and respectful of their thoughts, thereby lowering the chances that we might drift apart later on. How you relate to them while they're little is the basis for a strong lifelong relationship of mutual respect and affection between fellow adults.

Deep down, we need our children to love us back, to remind us of joy, and to make our lives more meaningful—not just to satisfy our role as a parent, but to meet our own deep emotional needs as well. We are madly in love with these little creatures who innocently admire and need us like no one else ever has before. Being the beneficiary of our child's love fulfills us in a very special way. In this book, we're going to learn how to sustain and grow this attachment at each phase of life.

Throughout the book, I refer to "your child" but I mean to include all kinds of caregivers who love and participate in making a difference to a particular child, such as grandparents, foster parents, aunts and uncles, or close family friends. Real parenting is defined by the quality of your devotion to the child and can be offered by anyone who sees and responds to a child's need.

Some parents conduct themselves as though their children were obligated to be loyal and loving, no matter how the parent acts. They act as if they are protected in their role as authorities and thereby bypass the question of whether they are really liked and believed in by their children. Instead of thinking how to make the parent-child relationship mutually satisfying, such parents act as if the child is there to obey them, and they have nothing to learn from the child.

But if parents *demand* loyalty and respect from their child instead of *earning* it, the relationship will start to crumble in adolescence when the teen's emerging sense of identity and independence makes them need the parent less than perhaps the parent needs them.

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Such a child may continue contact in adulthood, but they may be responding out of obligation or guilt rather than love and enjoyment. Instead, what most parents really want is to keep the love flowing in both directions, and that can only happen when parents have crafted a mutually satisfying, respectful relationship with their child.

This requires emotionally mature attitudes from the parent, attitudes that we all can learn, no matter what our experiences growing up. Children aren't the only ones with malleable brains; adults have brain plasticity too and grow from experience. When you set a goal for yourself to relate to your child in ways that encourage emotional maturity and to protect them from emotional loneliness, you will find your own maturity blossoming. You don't need years of therapy—although that can certainly help—to steer your relationship with your child toward mutual growth and trust.

If your parents showed signs of emotional immaturity, you may wonder how you can ensure that you don't pass down their mistakes. I've worked with people in therapy who were so afraid of not being worthy or lovable enough that they worried their own children wouldn't like them. I've also worked with people who didn't want to have children because they feared they might perpetuate the harmful parenting they experienced.

But raising an emotionally mature child doesn't mean that you have to resolve every last problem in your own life, or with your own parent. You just need to be emotionally aware of your past influences, to explore your reactions with self-reflection, and to treat your child as a sensitive individual who has feelings too. It's pretty easy. All you have to do is treat your child like a valued friend you want to keep.

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# Introduction

*What Makes Emotional Maturity So Important?*

Good parenting isn't only about meeting the needs of the child; it's about finding a style of parenting that doesn't exhaust you. Real life always gets in the way of who we hope to be as parents. It keeps throwing us curveballs just when we think we're all lined up for the pitch. It helps to have the big picture of what your child needs emotionally and how to give it to them. Once you conceptualize your child's development in terms of emotional maturity, you'll be parenting toward the best possible outcome, and many of the details will take care of themselves.

Emotional maturation enables your child to grow into an adult who can handle their emotions, love other people, deal with reality, and find purpose in life. To get them to that point, it matters not only what you *do* with your child, but how you *conceptualize* your child. In this book, you'll learn the key parental mindsets that support a child's emotional maturation, along with a few responses to

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avoid that are likely to cause problems. You'll read about what to expect from your child at different ages, as well as which parental responses are most likely to promote sound psychological development.

## The Importance of Emotional Maturation

In success-driven modern cultures, it sometimes seems like the most important assets for our children to develop are their intelligence and social skills. But I want to explain the importance of emotional development as the core of what it means to be a loving and highly motivated human.

Emotions are a huge part of your child's internal guidance system. Awesome intellects are great, but only our emotions can tell us what matters in life. Think about your own feelings: How central have emotions been in the best and worst decisions in your life? How many times have emotional issues impacted your relationships? Emotions are the heart of our living. Yet because they are so close to us—and come and go in such wordless and fleeting ways—it's easy to overlook their importance.

Emotional experiences not only give us energy and fuel our purpose, they are foundational to our sense of self and our closest relationships with other people. Emotional awareness lets us quickly grasp the nature of situations, allowing instantaneous intuitive reactions. We learn cause and effect from how experiences make us feel, and our memories are cemented in place via strong feelings. When you help your child notice, name, and talk about their feelings, you are nourishing and structuring their sense of self and increasing their ability to make sense of their inner world. Initially raw emotional reactions gradually develop into useful information as your child develops self-awareness and learns to read what their feelings are telling them about themselves, other people, and reality in general.

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Your child's eventual emotional maturity is not just a nice perk in an otherwise productive life; it is essential for lasting happiness,

stability, and success in adulthood. I know this because I have spent over three decades practicing psychotherapy and doing more than a thousand psychological evaluations. I have seen firsthand how immature emotional development causes innumerable adjustment problems that undermine a person's ability to live a productive, meaningful life with satisfying long-term relationships.

I have always been fascinated by emotional immaturity, a huge, unacknowledged problem of humanity that hides in plain sight. I made it my mission to explain it to the world at large. I wrote a book called *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents* based on all I had learned about emotional immaturity, and it became an international success and a *New York Times* bestseller. This book and its follow-ups have struck a chord with people around the world because emotionally immature people can be so frustrating and exhausting to deal with. They can seem so normal—even charming—until you get emotionally involved with them. My work has helped many to deal with these relationships, but now I want to use my knowledge to help you raise an adequately emotionally mature child, for their happiness and for yours—and for the good of the world.

**What emotional immaturity looks like.** When babies first get here, they are little bundles of buzzing sensations just waiting for someone to help them make sense of things. Their emotions buffet them about and there's no sense of self yet.

If babies are lucky, their adults take care of their physical needs, calm them, and teach them by example how to relate to other people. As children mature, their caregivers help them develop a sense of self and learn how to regulate their emotions by comforting and connecting with them.

From these all-important interactions with their caregiver, children form their first sense of self, that inner psychological structure that makes them conscious of themselves as individuals and helps regulate their emotions, preparing them to enjoy relationships and perceive reality accurately. At first this sense of self is very egocentric,

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dominated by immediate self-interest. But later on, as the self matures and becomes more complex, it becomes more empathic and objective, able to mediate between self-interest and the fact that other people have opinions and needs too. Reason, self-reflection, and respect for others' rights are the final fulfillment of the emotionally mature self, but refinements continue throughout the lifespan.

People who grow up to be emotionally immature have not yet moved beyond pure egocentrism to this mature, more objective level of self. They're still too busy trying to deal with their own compelling emotional reactions to consider the feelings of others. Instead of learning about reality and relating to other people, they are constantly reacting to their own internal needs and anxieties. Their insecurities and chronically unmet needs make them seem like people with a bad injury who have to keep checking to make sure it hasn't gotten worse. They show a limited ability to empathize with others' emotions and points of view, leading to chronic problems in their relationships. They move through life with unconsciously driven responses, often overlooking the big picture or long-term consequences. Without a mature enough sense of self, they rely heavily on roles and external actions to make their lives feel meaningful. Self-reflection feels destabilizing, so they tend to blame others for their problems, and they have little interest in growing or changing.

Lacking an understanding of their own inner experience, the emotionally immature are often swept away by their emotions. Instead of functioning as advisors, their emotions have become their masters. These individuals jump to conclusions or act impulsively because, under stress, their hair-trigger emotions easily override their reasoning capabilities. Their feelings—not their conscious thoughts—determine what is real to them. Sometimes they are so limited in dealing with emotions that they will distort reality so as not to feel unpleasant things. They cope with uncertainty and ambiguity through oversimplification, distorting reality to make life *seem* easier to deal with. Mentally, they tune out complexity and think too narrowly and

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rigidly, dismissing so much information that they often end up in self-created problems and unnecessary conflict with others.

Given these limitations, emotionally immature people end up egocentric and self-involved. Without adequate self-awareness, they don't know how to share their inner lives or emotional experiences to create genuinely close relationships. Emotional intimacy and vulnerability always feel a little unsafe to them, so they often interact in shallow, defensive ways. Because emotions easily overwhelm them, they go to extremes, either distancing themselves from their feelings or indulging them impulsively. This is because they never learned how to regulate their emotions or create truly deep and trusting relationships.

## What Does an Emotionally Maturing Child Look Like?

So what do we hope to see in a child who is maturing emotionally? Very young children who are developing well show brightness, vitality, and a ready trust of loved ones. You can see in their eyes that they are developing self-awareness, and that they see you as real too. They use your support well to calm themselves, and they enjoy affection and emotional closeness. Older children with adequate emotional maturity for their age know how to recognize and express their feelings, and they feel comfortable reaching out for comfort and help as needed. They can self-regulate their emotional stability *within age-expected limits,* and naturally show empathy for others. They have a sense of humor and enjoy their imaginations, but they are beginning to be more reasonable and realistic when necessary. As they mature, they go from being purely reactive to showing the ability to pause and make choices. They like to dream up projects and set little goals. They enjoy getting along with other people, and later show an appreciation for fairness and moral behavior.

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In their close relationships, successfully maturing children express themselves spontaneously and self-protectively: They can say

no to what they don't want, and they expect to be taken seriously when they do speak up. They value their friends and have good instincts about whom to befriend and—although not immune to social pressure—they are not excessively vulnerable to being talked into things by peers. Such children are comfortable and at ease with freely expressing positive emotions, such as joy, love, and playfulness.

One of the most important things to remember about your child is that they are not small adults but immature beings who process experiences *very* differently from grown-ups. Throughout this book, you'll learn how to accommodate your child's level of brain development, and you'll understand what you can and can't expect from them at each stage and why. You'll be able to tell when children are being unavoidably immature rather than "bad," and you'll learn how to repair any missteps you make when you misinterpret your child's behavior.

## The Importance of Meeting Children's Emotional Needs

Children's needs are simple but deep. Fortunately, these needs, though insistent, aren't hard to meet when caregivers are informed and know how to respond. There are many things that will determine the quality of your child's future, but their emotional connection to you is primary. Some kids are introverts and some extroverts, with different levels of social drive, but underneath it all, what they really need is a quality relationship with *you* at a deep enough level. It's the basis that everything else rests upon.

They need the feeling that you enjoy them as individuals and that you care about their inner state. Feeling seen and cared about meets a child's developmental needs for security and psychological support. Feeling understood and liked for who they are not only gives them a feeling of emotional safety, but also makes them feel like a worthy person.

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This emotional support and acceptance by parents is essential. High levels of childhood stress and lack of emotional support have long been associated with children's poorer mental health outcomes and difficulties in regulating emotion. Conversely, reliable relationships offering connection and support seem to have a protective function for children, with fewer mental health and adjustment problems later on. We have no absolute guarantees against such problems arising later, but with trusted parents who are trying to meet their child's emotional needs, the child is much more likely to internalize good coping skills.

## Responding to Needs Doesn't Spoil a Child

It sounds so simple, doesn't it, to show caring for how they feel? Yet there has been a long tradition of cautioning parents not to give in to "demands" or be too soft in their parenting responses. Quick, compassionate responses to children's distress have gotten a bad rap for being overly indulgent, a form of spoiling a child. But babies and small children have no idea how to be polite or considerate; they can only express their needs as demands.

In some quarters, "tough love" is still touted as a sign of solid, principled parenting. This comes from the belief that adversity, hardship, and rugged self-reliance strengthen a person. But that's only true when a person is *already* equipped with the psychological maturity and skills to turn those challenges into assets for personal development. You can't strengthen a vulnerable person through deprivation or hard treatment, and children are genuinely vulnerable.

Many people fear that if a parent is too emotionally responsive or supportive, they will be exploited by power-mad children seeking overthrow of parental authority. It's true that self-respecting children will always push the limits—but only to find out where the limits are, not to weaken their parents. Children don't want to overthrow their parents; they need them too much.

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## Why Emotional Maturity Will Be Increasingly Important

We can't know what kind of world will be waiting for our child in their adulthood, so we have to prepare them to be flexible and take care of their own interests when they have options to do so. It is no longer adaptive to teach them to be unquestioningly compliant, to be obedient, or to always look to authority for direction. In the future, there may be no institutional rewards waiting for our children—no gold star or gold watch—in exchange for their loyalty and good behavior.

Nor can we guarantee that the right school or degree will protect our child's future. Emotional maturity is the most portable asset across all jobs; it makes a person more engaging, more enjoyable to work with, more dependable, accountable, logical, reasonable, ethical, and better at strategy and independent problem-solving. Such resourceful people will be more likely to be chosen for challenging positions and rise within their work system—where they will become even more adept at those all-important skills.

Kids need to grow up able to fit into many different environments. As work systems rapidly evolve in this knowledge economy, your child will need the wide-ranging self-confidence and mental flexibility that emotional maturity brings. Too much anxiety about pleasing parents and other authority figures in childhood narrows their self-assurance and self-knowledge, making it hard for them to feel confident when they have to think for themselves. Emotionally mature qualities are needed in any job that requires spontaneous, adaptive interactions with others, not just conformity and submission.

Children will create more options in life for themselves if they know themselves well, are resilient problem-solvers, pursue what they really want to do, and feel healthily entitled to change course as better opportunities arise. In other words, a child who grows up to feel secure with people and who has been encouraged to have a range of interests will be well suited to work settings that value adaptability. A

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well-balanced, relatable, and reasonable person who shows emotional maturity is going to attract support and opportunity.

## Prioritize Emotional Needs, Not Just Expediency

Life moves so fast now that we often relate to one another—including our children—at a strictly transactional level, hardly pausing to notice the other person's experience. We inadvertently overlook one another just so we can keep up with what we're expected to do each day. Our efficiency drive tells us to get things done, fix what's broken, and make use of whatever we can. Add a sense of certainty to that efficiency compulsion and we'll want to save time by telling our children how they should be, instead of discovering who they are.

When efficacy and goal-achievement take over in child-rearing, we develop a one-track mind for signs of success. Our preoccupation with rankings and efficiency makes it easy to disregard the inner world of feelings. Emotional intimacy with our children suffers whenever we slip into that overly evaluative and outcome-oriented thinking. As a parent, when you prioritize emotional connection, you are pushing back against these dehumanizing trends. In our heart of hearts, all of us need our feelings to matter to someone.

The alarming statistics regarding increases in children's mental health issues are a wake-up call: Adults need to heighten their awareness of their kids' emotions, problems, self-esteem, and *inner experiences*.

This world can be tough on the tender hearts of children. Children are magical and soulful. It isn't enough to meet their physical needs and expect them to develop healthily. Their intense emotions and need for connection mean that they can't tolerate a lack of response from others. Even grown-ups need someone to sit down with them and quietly pay attention so they can get something off their chest and feel understood. Your child is no different. Your emotional availability makes reaching out for emotional intimacy with others

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feel natural to your child, laying the groundwork for trust and openness in their future relationships.

In a competitive society—and often with the best intentions—busy lifestyles and over-planned child activities can take the place of peaceful togetherness and relaxed everyday experiences with family members. Unscheduled downtime offers opportunities for compassion, emotional refueling, and play. Sensitive listening doesn't flourish under an onslaught of activities and task-focused communications. Quiet moments for peaceful co-existing are needed to balance out the day. Yes, school and sports teach our children about teamwork and competition, but kids also need to feel that there's enough free time to trust someone with their small, everyday worries.

Growing up is not easy, and parents can't afford to just assume that maturity will happen automatically with the passage of time. By responding sensitively to your child's life challenges, you teach them that they are worthy of attention and that it works to reach out to other people when they are in need.

## You Are Parenting for the Good of the World

Beyond our personal needs, I believe the quality of humanity's future will depend upon the emotional maturity of coming generations. We parents worry about the profound societal changes that face our children, and we can feel bewildered by the challenge of filtering out the negative effects of our world. This is no small mission. Across the globe, headline-grabbing, emotionally immature behavior is becoming far too common. Emotional immaturity fuels not only conflict, greed, war, and propaganda, but also encourages trends toward paranoia and narcissism.

We are becoming mechanized, standardized, and seduced by the bottom line. Competition and metrics drive our economies, but have nothing to offer our souls. Our deep need for meaning and belonging is losing ground to the immediacy of viral popularity. We

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are being told what to think, how to be, and what to want—all based on the threat of falling behind or being left out. Instead of discovering our own singular path in life, we are being taught to see ourselves from the outside in, to cultivate a role or persona instead of our soul. You won't develop adequate emotional maturity if you can't hear your true self, and you won't know yourself unless someone early in your life cared about what was going on inside of you. Every one of us has the ability to connect with our children to give them security in this increasingly shallow world. With no cost to ourselves, we can be so present and *interested* in them that they cannot help but connect with themselves and others. When a child is in touch with themselves and knows how they feel and what they really think, they will be in command of their life.

We can't predict what kind of world will be waiting for our children. They are going to be on their own and required to adapt to new challenges that don't exist yet. So we have to prepare them to work with their emotions, to develop and rely on their own judgment, to feel comfortable seeking support from others, and to think clearly and realistically about whatever awaits them in the future. All that takes parenting that supports emotional maturity.

As parents, we can no longer afford to raise our children without an awareness of their inner world or their emotional needs and hope for the best. And as a society, we can't afford to let psychological immaturity become the default outcome of childhood. If we're not raising children with deep emotional connections, a secure sense of self, and the ability to handle and effectively communicate intense emotions, future generations will be more prone to emotional instability and impulsive reactions.

As more of us understand how to raise emotionally mature children, trends toward destructive impulsivity and conflict will reverse. Even though opportunities to access the world's temptations—online influencers and artificial intelligence, to name just two—are expanding at a shocking rate, emotionally sensitive and concerned parents

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are still the main source of their child's emotional health and psychological maturity. We *can* raise children who will become thinking adults and face reality on their own terms while still caring about other people's subjective experiences.

## Reading This Book

In this book, as well as drawing on decades of clinical experience and child development research, I will share stories from my own life as a parent, and the results of a small parent survey I conducted regarding proud parenting moments.

You'll notice in this book that I talk about you and your child as if you only have one child clamoring for your attention. If you have more than one child, I know that you often don't have the luxury of pouring all your efforts into one at a time. However, your individual relationship with each of your children—even if it's occurring in the context of multiple siblings—is where much of their emotional development is taking place, so I concentrate on those interactions as if that child were your one and only. From the child's standpoint, you certainly are that to them, siblings or not.

Not every reader will be interested in all ages, so I'd like to suggest that you customize the book for yourself by reading the first three chapters, the specific age you're most interested in, and then the last two chapters. Those chapters will give you a solid overview of how to parent in a way that supports your child's emotional growth. But if you're starting this book feeling a little overwhelmed or discouraged on your parenting journey, I suggest you head straight for chapter ten, where we will talk about why you should feel optimistic about ensuring your child's emotional maturity. If you're interested in a few parenting cautions right up front, try chapter nine, where we will discuss twelve common parenting behaviors that can hinder your child's emotional development.

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You may not feel like reading about teenagers when you've got

your hands full with a toddler, and if your child is well past infancy, reading about babies may not be your immediate concern. However, if you have the time, I do think it's worthwhile to read about the developmental tasks of other ages in the order that they occur. It will increase your overall confidence as a parent when you have a fuller understanding of how emotional maturation proceeds and how the current challenges of your child's age fit into that big picture. Also, kids naturally regress to earlier behaviors when feeling stressed or off-balance, so knowing about other ages can give you a new perspective. For example, an eight-year-old might feel stranger anxiety like a one-year-old when first going off to camp, or a teenager may seem toddler-like in the way they reject your attention one moment and need it so badly the next. Having the full picture of childhood development gives you a reassuring familiarity with the issues that will recur as they grow.

Now let's find out how you can become the architect of your child's emotionally mature personality.

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CHAPTER 1

# Your Job as a Parent

So here you are, trying to do the world's most important job—the psychological construction of another human being. As a parent, you find yourself in situations that challenge parts of yourself you didn't even know existed. You learn embarrassing things about your limitations. You regularly aren't sure what you're doing. You are brave but exhausted. Well-meaning, but more reactive than you'd like. Some days, your stamina and resilience run low. It's hard to keep being resilient when the stress never stops. In this most important of all jobs—parenting—you frequently have to trust your intuitions and hope that there is such a thing as good gut instinct. How are you to approach such a mission? How do you even conceptualize such a job?

It's as if you are an intrepid explorer who has been promised a huge sum of money to show a very important, but utterly inexperienced, client how to survive in a wild and dangerous area that you've come to know well. They've heard you're the best, and you're the one they

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want. You've never met them before, but you will be fellow travelers, equal souls, and you're the only one who knows the area. Your client is a fair but exceedingly demanding person, and they will be writing your review and determining what, if any, bonuses you receive. It's bound to take years, and due to their inexperience, they will inevitably make hair-raising mistakes and endanger you both. You know that your tact and respect are going to be necessary if you're to get along on this journey of survival, not to mention get your bonus at the end.

You watch out for them and show them all the tricks you've learned in this challenging place. After a while, you start to enjoy their curiosity and companionship and manage to still like them even when they begin exploring on their own and put both of you at risk. You started out treating them well for the bonus, but you soon realized that they really are just as smart as you and just as worthy of respect, even though they would surely die out here without you. You notice how weirdly satisfying it is that they've got so much to learn and you're the only one to teach them.

You were always equal as human beings, certainly, but toward the end of their training with you, you two gradually become competent equals in this risky land. In fact, they've become such adept explorers after mastering your teachings, they will be going on and discovering new lands themselves that you have never visited. If you've been a good guide and mentor, they will want to return periodically and tell you all about their travels because they know you love a good yarn and because after all you've been through together, there's a bond there. You get paid your bonuses, but by then you realize that your time with them was in some ways even more rewarding than those new lands you still explore yourself. You feel good about training them up to be capable explorers, and you look forward to hearing about their latest adventures too. They'll want to come back to visit because you were so kind to them when they were ignorant, and you took such good care of them when they were difficult and discouraged. They won't forget a mentor like that.

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Like that explorer-guide, you hope to somehow transform the raw, uncivilized essence of your child into a reasonable adult, an independent human with a moral sense, intellectual ability, and good judgment. How does this happen? It happens one tiny act at a time, and it happens only because you are brave enough to try to do what the moment requires, even when—especially when—you don't feel up to the task. By doing this a million times—especially when you don't want to—you build the kind of connection with your child that makes them feel loved, contained, safe, and understood. And children who experience those things have a head start in emotional maturity.

When we contemplate becoming a parent, we want to do a good job, so we fall back on what we know about accomplishment. Maybe we've worked hard at a job or obtained a degree, and we know that being smart and capable earns recognition. But now we're parents, and the rules are different. We're not going to get a good grade or a promotion, and all we have to offer is ourselves. In this most important job of all, there are few external metrics to tell you if you're doing it right.

So how do you know if you're being a good enough parent?

## The Good Enough Parent

No relationship is perfect. You can do all your parenting jobs just right and still have bad days. Even the most conscientious parent is going to misread cues or get irritated. And children . . . well, children just aren't very fair or evenhanded about how they assign blame. The opportunities for hurt feelings between parents and children are enormous.

If you worry about how you're going to do all the right things as a parent, the good news is that you don't have to be perfect. Pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott observed that babies don't need a perfect mother, they only need a "good enough" mother.

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Although the early weeks of the newborn's life require a caregiver's constant close attention, Winnicott observed that after that period the caregiver's attentiveness just needed to be "good enough" for there to be a secure and happy attachment between parent and child. This meant that the caregiver of course was still responsive and available but could relax a little and attend to other things because the older baby could now amuse themselves a little, enjoy some time to themselves, and most importantly, know that they *could* summon their caregiver as needed.

Later, infancy researcher Ed Tronick decided to define what constituted this "good enough" parenting by observing the interactions of healthy mothers and babies in moment-to-moment detail.

By meticulously scoring countless interactions, Tronick and his colleagues discovered that the most important element of good enough parenting was not that the caregiver was *constantly* highly attuned to the baby, but that the caregiver noticed and *repaired* their connection when the baby reacted negatively to the caregiver's lapses in attunement. The results were clear: The parent-child relationship could still remain sturdy and secure even if connection was temporarily lost, as long as emotional repair was sought and given.

Tronick and his colleagues found that, in fact, healthy, well-attached mothers engaged in highly focused, mutually synchronized interactions with their babies only about one-third of their time spent together. The parent was of course available and aware of their child but wasn't tuned in every second. Around two-thirds of the time, the interactions between mother and child were not synchronized, meaning that they were looking at different things or not actively engaged in mutually responsive back-and-forth communications. Sounds like comfortable coexistence in normal life, doesn't it?

Of course, we're *not* talking about neglecting or ignoring your baby two-thirds of the time! Parents must remain vigilant and responsive overall, but this research suggests that after the intensive newborn stage, we have some leeway when we have a lot on our

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plate or just need a break for a few moments, *as long as we reengage and repair our emotional connection whenever our child begins to show distress*.

Tronick also did experiments to see how healthily attached babies reacted when their mothers deliberately stopped responding to them in the middle of high-attunement moments, briefly interrupting their mutual connection. In these famous "still-face" experiments, the babies were playfully interacting face-to-face with their mothers when their mothers were cued to briefly stop showing any facial expression at all. At that point, when the babies couldn't elicit a smile or any acknowledgment from their mothers, they became distressed and behaviorally unraveled—beseeching their mothers, looking away, crying, and even losing muscular coordination. Tronick's fascinating experiments can be seen on YouTube by searching for "Tronick's Still-Face Experiments." Other researchers have shown how babies' stress hormones rise with an absence of maternal response, confirming that the lack of caregiver engagement is distressing at even a physical level.

However, Tronick and his colleagues found that once the mother actively reengaged with the baby, they could reconnect. The babies had made things better through their own efforts: They complained, they entreated their mothers, and they were persistent until they got results.

Tronick concluded that repaired trust is stronger and sturdier than a mythical perfect trust that has never been disappointed. When parents responded to their distress, the babies seemed to learn that they could ask for help and get it, infusing life with positive meaning by practicing optimism and resilient determination. They were establishing a solid trust based on repeated experiences: *My caregiver cares and can be reached emotionally when I try.* Rather than constructing a brittle trust based on a super-parent who had never failed them, the babies were learning a robust, realistic trust of an imperfect parent who could nevertheless be counted on to quickly notice and repair their mistakes.

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## Emotional Repair Teaches Hope and Resilience

Tronick's most amazing discovery was that the child's sense of efficacy and trust seemed to grow every time they actively communicated their distress and successfully received a comforting response. The babies were learning that *they themselves* could actively change their inner emotional states for the better by doing something—cooing, crying, fussing, or screaming to alert their caregiver. The babies were learning that conditions improved when they acted on their own behalf—a conviction that supports resilience, trust, and optimism later in life.

As long as we are trying to be sensitive to our child's needs and as long as we care enough to patch things up when we've let them down, we can be that good enough parent. That's good news for any parent who is trying hard yet feels terrible about parenting missteps.

Here's an example of repair from the mother of three little girls:

> I was having a really rough day. I had lost it multiple times at the kids, using a tone I wasn't proud of. All my stress was consuming me that day and my poor kids heard and felt the majority of it. As we were driving home that evening, I said to all three of my girls, "I'm so sorry Mommy had such a hard day. It wasn't fair of me to take it out on all of you. I'm so sorry, I'll try to be a better mom to you girls." My middle child, Dana, age six, said to me, without skipping a beat, "Mommy, you already are the best mom."

This mother was genuinely sorry and did the difficult thing of taking accountability for her actions. She and her daughters felt even closer for wrapping up this difficult day with tenderness and sensitivity to one another.

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Children have good hearts, just like adults do. They easily forgive when we fall short, if we acknowledge and apologize. They don't

need their parents to be perfect. But they do need parents to be willing to take their feelings into account, and to communicate in order to resolve problems. When that happens, children can get past the rough spots because they know their parent cares about their feelings.

Even so, some emotional injuries can have serious effects, so we can't expect trauma, abuse, or abandonment to be quickly resolved like it never happened. If there's been significant relational or physical trauma, we have to accept that our attempts at repair and recovery may need professional therapeutic assistance.

Rather than setting the unachievable goal of never making mistakes with your child, it's more realistic to learn the art of how to constructively repair them. This way you are showing your child how relationship repair works, and how it can bring us even closer. A child develops a deeper sense of security when they learn that relationships can withstand inevitable bumps in the road.

Children actually give us a lot of guidance on how to do this because they communicate their needs to us all the time. They couldn't be more obvious about it. If we don't respond, they will communicate louder or in different ways. They'll let us know when they are upset or just need us to take them seriously. It only takes a little bit of empathy to notice their emotional state and check in to see what might be going on.

Here is another example of how a mother used emotional repair for an incident she regretted:

> On one of our family hikes, my young daughter showed me some unknown berries she had found. My husband immediately said, "Don't eat those, they're poisonous!" I freaked out and slapped the berries from her hand. She got scared and started to cry while my husband tried to console her. I came to her as well, but she was mad at me and told me to go away. I felt terrible and kept apologizing, but she kept telling me to go away. I walked alone for a bit, feeling awful, but

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soon she got over it and we were laughing and enjoying the walk again.

When we came back home, I apologized again. This time, she was more receptive. I said I was sorry, and told her she was right to be mad, and that it was wrong of me to slap her hand. I explained to her that I was so scared she would get hurt, as she is the most important thing in the world to me.

This mother let her daughter know that it was normal for her daughter to be mad at being hit. She didn't invalidate her daughter's feelings by insisting that she was only trying to protect her daughter. Instead, she put herself in her daughter's shoes and treated her daughter as an emotional equal. This mother was proud of herself for exemplifying their family values of mutual respect, apologizing for mistakes, and talking frankly about emotions.

When you apologize or otherwise repair a lapse in connection, your child learns that they don't have to be perfect all the time either, and that people can reconnect even if they make mistakes or hurt each other's feelings. They learn that our actions with each other are meaningful and make sense, that we can get over misunderstandings through contrition and amends. Realizing this is a relief to any child, who in spite of their best intentions, inevitably will miss things, forget things, or otherwise make mistakes due to their immaturity. They learn that all is not lost when we mess up, and we can always find our way back to each other.

## Your Four Main Parenting Jobs

Your job as caregiver is to give your child the four gifts of good parenting: protection, nurturing, guidance, and limits. Protection keeps

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