

Trusting Your Child's Natural Development

By Dr Justin Coulson

From the moment our babies arrive, we're bombarded with charts, milestones, and well-meaning advice. Is your two-year-old speaking in sentences yet? Should your four-year-old recognise letters? Can your preschooler sit still during storytime? It's easy to feel like we must constantly coach, correct, and accelerate our children's development.

But decades of research tell a different story: children grow best when we trust their natural development.

Why Trust Matters

A landmark [longitudinal study](#) from McGill University followed families from infancy through primary school, examining how parenting approaches affected children's development. The findings were striking: parents who supported their child's autonomy—trusting that development unfolds naturally rather than needing to be controlled—had children who showed stronger emotional regulation, greater self-motivation, and fewer behaviour problems.

Trusting your child's natural development *doesn't* mean a "hands-off" approach. It means believing that children are biologically wired to grow, learn, and master new skills when they're [developmentally ready](#). Just as no one teaches a baby to smile or crawl, children will talk, climb, share, and self-regulate in their own time—with your warm support and appropriate modelling, not your anxious control.

The Trap of Controlling Parenting

When we doubt this natural process, we can slip into what researchers call "controlling behaviours": pushing children to achieve tasks before they're ready, hovering anxiously over every activity, using excessive rewards or punishments, and feeling responsible for orchestrating every developmental milestone. The McGill research showed this approach **backfires spectacularly**. Children of *highly controlling parents* [often](#) become less curious, more dependent on adult direction, and ironically, slower to develop self-regulation skills.

For parents of two- to five-year-olds, this pressure is particularly intense. This is the age when comparisons run rampant at playgroup, and every barbecue conversation seems to feature someone's prodigy who's already reading chapter books at age four.

What Autonomy-Supportive Parenting Looks Like

The McGill study identified specific parenting behaviours that support healthy development in young children. Here's what actually works:

Maintain Warm Responsiveness

Stay emotionally available and engaged during play and daily routines. Follow your child's lead during activities rather than constantly redirecting them. When your three-year-old wants to "read" you a story by making up the words, listen with genuine interest rather than correcting them.

Provide Developmentally Appropriate Guidance

Offer support that matches your child's current abilities—not where you think they "should" be. If your two-year-old is struggling with a puzzle, sit beside them and point to potential matches rather than solving it for them or walking away entirely. "Is it this one, this one, or that one?"

Respect Their Perspective

Acknowledge your child's feelings and preferences, even when you can't grant every wish. "You really wanted to stay at the park longer. It's disappointing to leave when you're having fun, and it's time for lunch now."

Give Age-Appropriate Autonomy

Offer genuine choices where safe and meaningful: "Would you like to wear your sandals or your boots today?" Allow them to do things themselves—pouring water, choosing books, deciding how to build their block tower—even when it's slower or messier than if you did it.

Trust Transforms Parenting

Trusting development doesn't mean ignoring genuine concerns—seek professional advice if you suspect a significant delay. But within the wide range of typical development, trust frees both you and your child. [Research shows](#) that autonomy-supportive parents report lower stress, greater parenting satisfaction, and more positive relationships with their children. Their children, in turn, become more confident, intrinsically motivated, and emotionally resilient.

The most radical—and rewarding—thing you may do as a parent is to trust your child. Support their curiosity, follow their lead, and enjoy the unfolding journey of who they are becoming.

Your challenge: This week, catch yourself before correcting, redirecting, or "helping" unnecessarily. Pause and ask, *"Does my child actually need my intervention right now, or can I trust them to work this out?"*

For more information, grab a copy of my book [What Your Child Needs From You](#).



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