

ISSUE 1 | TERM 2 | 2023

The Parenting Revolution

This history of parenting is, almost universally, horrible. Throughout centuries and millennia gone by, what few records we have depict infanticide, beatings, abuse of all kinds, and indescribable cruelty to children. Childhood over the past several thousands of years (in every culture we can find historical records for) has been a horror story of unrelenting heartlessness and cruelty.

Since the enlightenment, the way children are raised has been (slowly) improving. Science has helped somewhat, but it's been a circuitous route to making life better for kids. And plenty of scientists have made a bigger mess of things. For example, in the early 1900s the founder of modern psychology, John B Watson famously argued:

“Won't you then remember when you are tempted to pet your child that mother love is a dangerous instrument? An instrument which may inflict a never healing wound, a wound which may make infancy unhappy, adolescence a nightmare, an instrument which may wreck your adult son or daughter's vocational future and their chances for marital happiness.”

As the 1900s progressed parenting science fortunately began to improve the way we interact with our children... somewhat. By the end of the 1960s science could point the way to some parenting fundamentals that stand the test of time (and the test of science). Those fundamentals have now been accepted for between 50-60 years. And they distill parenting down to three things that I'm calling the what of parenting:

1. Love your kids and show it
2. Establish developmentally appropriate boundaries
3. Support choice and autonomy

That's it. Parenting at its most fundamental.

Here's the problem...

The scientists who developed these ideas did a great job on the what of raising children well. These three things are exactly what children need. Unfortunately they botched the how part.

So much of how to do these three things was based on flawed ideas. Outdated concepts of discipline and punishment meant that parenting styles built around hurting kids prevailed. Ideas like “you've got to be cruel to be kind”, “this will hurt me much more than it hurts you”, and “children should be seen but not heard” developed during this period and they built on archaic ideas of love and discipline; ideas that are generations old. The frustrating thing is that we have enough great parenting science to not just explain what children need to thrive. We also have enough great parenting science to explain how to do those things.

We know that “what” kids need is unconditional love. And now we know how to give it to them: through non-controlling involvement, empathy, and connection (which helps them feel seen, heard, and valued).

We know that “what” kids need are effective limits and boundaries. And now we know how to give it to them: through non-controlling development of structures, scaffolding, and the building of social expectations collaboratively.

We know that “what” kids need is autonomy support. And now we know how to give it to them. I’ve developed a framework called the 3 Es of Effective discipline, where we explain, explore, and empower our children to find ways through the difficulties we all face.

Research shows that children raised this way are more likely to succeed in school, have positive relationships, and develop a strong moral compass. They’re also less likely to engage in “deviant” behaviours (drinking, drugs, early sexual exploration, and delinquency). In short, they’re more likely to thrive.

How it works

Each person on the planet has three basic psychological needs. They are the need for relatedness (a feeling of connection with others), competence (a sense that they can do things), and autonomy (a feeling that they can make their own decisions).

Old-school parenting strategies run rough-shod over those needs. A smack, a time-out, or being yelled at leaves relationships ruptured, makes a child feel stupid and incompetent, and takes a child’s sense of control and stomps all over it.

The circuit-breaker

It’s time we let go of the fad parenting styles and the old science based on decades and centuries of poor parenting, and we move towards a need-supportive approach to raising our children. How?

1. Support our children’s relatedness needs by being involved and connected
2. Support our children’s competence needs by developing structures and boundaries with them
3. Support our children’s autonomy needs by helping them understand the ‘why’ behind what we ask, and providing choice wherever we can.

The path forward requires perspective, compassion, empathy, and patience. Now and then it will look like it’s not working because it doesn’t operate on quick (but ineffective) ‘fixes’ like the old-school styles.

But the evidence shows that this is the parenting revolution we need as parents, and our kids need to grow resilience and wellbeing.

To revolutionise your parenting and learn how to break the cycle, buy a copy of [The Parenting Revolution](#) now.



AUTHOR

Dr Justin Coulson

Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine’s Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia’s #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 6 books about families and parenting. For further details visit