

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 3

*Chapter 1. Parenting, Stress, and the Shaping of
Children's Biology 13*

Chapter 2. The Challenges of Contemporary Parenting 39

Chapter 3. Love and Resilience 67

Chapter 4. Parenting Before Birth 93

Chapter 5. Laying the Foundation: The Early Years 121

Chapter 6. In the Mind's Eye: Mentalizing and Empathy 147

*Chapter 7. Tempering the Tantrum: Regulating Children's
Negative Emotions 169*

Chapter 8. Capitalizing on Children's Positive Emotions 197

Chapter 9. Nurturing Your Child's Nature 221

Chapter 10. The Coparent 251

Contents

Epilogue 281

Notes 289

Index 335

About the Authors 000

INTRODUCTION

The idea for writing this book began germinating in our heads a couple of years after we had both received tenure. Now comfortable that we would have jobs for the foreseeable future, we were free to think more broadly about the kind of work we wanted to do. At this point in our lives, we had written dozens of scientific papers, but our children were still young. We were waking up in the middle of the night to face nightmarish monsters, fetch cups of water, and pat our younger children back to sleep. Our older kids were starting school, encountering new challenges with learning and with peers. We had years of training in developmental science at our fingertips, and after reading dozens of books on parenting—how to get children to sleep, what to do to help children be successful—we realized that there was a lack of parenting books focused on the basics of how children thrive emotionally with the goal of building *resilience*.

More specifically, our research and dozens of new studies over the past several decades have identified strategies and parenting behaviors that help children navigate challenges, bounce back from failures, and to thrive. We were interested in writing a back-to-basics book that would provide concrete techniques and tips to help parents with the goal of raising happy and healthy children. We firmly believe that a happy, healthy childhood is what all parents want and that it

is the foundation for all goals and aspirations. We could have waited to write this book, but something about having the early childhood years fresh in our memory motivated us. In addition, there was an urgency about the story we wanted to tell that meant we couldn't put off writing the book.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit. All the supports we had put in place to make our careers feasible collapsed overnight. The precarious arrangement we had previously struck with work-life balance suddenly became a joke and gave us even more reason to wait to write our book. At the same time, though, the need for the book was becoming increasingly apparent. In this world of change, of rapid technological advances, societal upheavals, and natural disasters, what are the most essential aspects of parenting? What matters for children's happiness and well-being? Parents everywhere struggle with these same challenges of how to navigate this complex world in which we have so much information at our fingertips and so much pressure to invest in our children, all of which creates tremendous pressure to know the right thing to do—as if there were a single “right” way to parent. The pandemic took a pot of water that was already at a boiling point and turned it up 50 degrees because, suddenly, the pressure was on to be everything your child needed all at the same time (while also being everything your profession needed). Moreover, evidence was coming out showing an increase in stress, anxiety, and depression in children from toddlers to college students. We decided to write our book.

Becoming a parent may be the single most life-changing event a human being experiences. Despite having 9 months to prepare for this shift (longer, if you've been trying to get pregnant, less if it was a surprise), nothing can truly prepare you for this life change. No amount of babysitting, reading parenting books, or watching other parents as they parent prepares you to understand the gravity of having the sole responsibility for keeping a human being alive; for

inculcating them with the values you wish a person to grow into adulthood with; for being the person your child looks to for guidance, for comfort, and for the answer to all of their woes. And nothing prepares you to turn into the kind of parent you want to be when you bring this person, who is to be your child, into the world. What if you don't have the answer to all of your own woes, let alone all of theirs? Well, of course you don't, because that's what being human is all about: None of us has the answer to our own pains. We travel this path of life not knowing where it ends, or where the path will wind, or where the bumps lie, and the transition to becoming a parent is no exception to this rule.

We, Stacey and Jessie, the authors, come to this book with overlapping and distinct expertise and intentions. One of us (Stacey) is a developmental psychologist by training with expertise on stress and children's biology. The other (Jessie) is a clinical psychologist, an academic and a practicing clinician who specializes in parenting, children, and relationships. This book has been a journey for us and a challenging one in many ways. We wanted to distill the voluminous body of research into something that parents can read and appreciate. We very much wanted to take a "whole person" approach to parenting. When we say, *whole person*, we mean we wanted to explain how biology, the mind, emotions, and thoughts all relate and play out in the context of parenting research. Parents are smart, and they want to know and understand their child. We also understand that parenting is complex and that children's development is influenced by a myriad of factors. We wanted to acknowledge this complexity.

This book, in many ways, is my (Stacey's) own therapy session. I am the first to admit I am not the greatest parent. Compared to my husband, I am impatient and can be harsh. My parenting behavior is likely very much influenced by my father, your stereotypical strict, authoritarian dad. I have written a lot about my father. I have spent years in therapy trying to understand his actions and trying to undo

some of the harm he did. As an adult, I do understand and am more empathetic to his intentions. Yet, at the same time, I rarely write about my mother. She does not occupy my mind in the same way my father does. My mother knew how to love unconditionally. It is because of her love that I am here today. This book, then, is very much a book about her.

This experience of being hit over the head by the reality of parenthood cannot be any more humbling than having a PhD in child development and clinical psychology like I (Jessie) do. I spent years studying parent–child relationships and the importance of healthy emotional development in laying the foundation for a lifetime of health before I had my first child. Imagine what you might expect of yourself if you had earned a doctorate in parenting (effectively speaking) only then to become a parent and realize that the academic study of parenting is a far cry from the reality! I had also spent years working clinically with parents and children—hearing their stories, catching their tears, and weeping alongside them for their struggles—but even this could not prepare me for what it felt like to step into a parent’s shoes.

Early in my (Jessie’s) clinical training, the parent of one of my clients told me this:

I would never fully trust a psychologist who hadn’t been a parent before. If you haven’t held a baby who wouldn’t stop crying at four in the morning and had no idea what to do, how to soothe that baby—really experienced what it is like when there is nobody to call but you—then I just don’t buy that you get what it’s like to be me.

I remember thinking (in my naive therapist voice) that this might be the client’s lens but that my lack of firsthand experience was made up for by my objectivity and ability see the situation clearly, unclouded by my own experience of parenting. Now, standing on the other side

of 11½ years of being a parent, I see things completely differently. I know what it's like to be up in the middle of the night unable to soothe my crying baby, having nobody to rely on (or blame) but myself. I know that feeling of desperation and pain and fear. I know the questions that emerge: Will this ever end? Do I have what it takes to see this through? What can I possibly try next? In addition to these challenges of parenting an infant, I also know firsthand the deeper scars that come from parenting an older child, the gut-wrenching sadness that comes from watching your child experience something unkind in the outside world (like teasing or bullying) and knowing there's nothing you can do to shield your child from such pain. Parents of children who have qualities that likely will lead to teasing, bullying, or discrimination and racism know this kind of pain all too well. We release our children into this big world, knowing that the world isn't a safe place for them.

I (Jessie) wish I could go back to that parent and tell her that I now understand—and that I couldn't possibly have been as good of a therapist to her child then as I could now—or to her. There is no way I could have ever understood what it's like to have your child's heart sewn into your own in such a way that there is no mine and theirs. There is just an *us* and *ours*.

Our children grow and change in ways that surprise, delight, and dismay us, and we may similarly grow and change as parents. Our job is to shift alongside them, to adapt in the ways they need us to adapt so that we can be there with them. Where, though, are we to look for guidance about parenting? The amount of information out there in the media and our daily lives about parenting is dizzying. Now, more than ever, we are inundated with advice! Everyone from your grandmother to *The Economist* to Kim Kardashian has an opinion on everything related to parenting. The advice churns out unsolicited; it begins from the moment a pregnancy is announced, and it ends—well, it never really seems to end. The one thing that

seems to be universal about parenting advice is that everyone is certain they've got it right, and people are quite dogmatic about their advice. And yet the advice given is completely conflicting, so one self-proclaimed expert may tell you that exclusively breastfeeding is the only way to go, and another one will tell you that formula feeding is absolutely guaranteed to help your baby.

The problem with all of these messages, too, is that somehow what is implied is that if you don't follow the given advice, you will have made a terrible mistake, taken a wrong turn, and have done something that will somehow exact irrevocable harm on your child. The other important corollary from these messages is that parents are incredibly powerful creatures: They have the power to exert tremendous influence over their children's future. Specifically, parents have the power to make horrible mistakes that could mess up their children's ability to realize their potential. Such pressure! You receive no training before you get there, and yet you somehow have all the pressure in the world to do it the right way the first time out of the gate!

Then there is an upsurge in the public discussion of biological and genetic underpinnings of personality and behavior, which often leaves parents feeling as though their children's struggles boil down to their fault because of (a) their genetics or (b) their parenting practices. The end result is that parents' anxiety has spiraled out of control. Worries—about one's own ability to parent, the extent to which parenting matters, and the thousands of ways the things we do (or don't do) can inadvertently hurt our kids—abound in social media and popular writings. At the same time, recent data suggest that parents and children are more stressed than ever. Rates of depression are rising with the most rapid increase seen in young people. Something has gone very wrong here. We aren't helping parents cope with the challenges of parenthood, and we might just be harming them. How are you, as a parent, to sort through this mess when all of these messages are coming at you from every which way?

All of this provided the motivation for this book. We felt the need for some sound, science-based, practical guidance for parents who do not want to be talked down to and don't want to be judged while parenting. The overarching goal of this book is to provide a science-based framework for best parenting practices that foster children's social-emotional development and adaptive stress-regulation strategies. Furthermore, in writing this book, we are seeking to balance equally the need to promote mental health within the whole family based on the understanding that children will suffer if parents' emotional needs are unmet. Thus, in our writing, you will feel us moving back and forth between considering the emotional needs of children and the emotional needs of parents, and advocating for approaches that optimize whole family health and well-being in the service of moving closer to open communication regarding everyone's rights and needs within the family system.

This book accomplishes these goals by reviewing and translating cutting-edge research on parenting in pursuit of the thesis that biology and parenting behavior are integrally intertwined. We make complex scientific insights regarding child development understandable for readers and underscore the practical implications of such understanding. We focus on best parenting practices that foster children's social-emotional development and adaptive stress-regulation strategies, and we offer concrete strategies parents can use to enhance their parenting in the service of promoting children's emotional well-being.

To make our points more concrete, we use examples from real parents and children, including from our own children's lives, and from our friends and colleagues. We also use examples from the families we have worked with in our research laboratories or clinical practice. When quoting our sources, we have made changes to preserve their confidentiality while remaining true to their stories. We often find that using examples helps us make our points more effectively, and we hope you will agree.

One thing you'll notice: We frequently try to illustrate how to use a parenting strategy effectively. Showing this means that we are probably talking about our parenting successes more than we are talking about our parenting struggles (although we do some of that, too). However, we don't want to give the impression that our parenting is full of successes and devoid of struggles. Like every parent, we find the experience of parenting to be one of ups and downs, trials and tribulations, frustration and reward. Oftentimes we present advice from experts in a way that is simplified to make it clear, but we know (from our own experiences) that parenting is *anything* but simple. Please keep this in mind as you go through the book and know that we are in this adventure alongside you—and that we strongly believe that being “in it” with your child is what matters more than arriving at a certain place.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

Who did we write this book for, you may be wondering? We wrote it for any parent or caregiver who is interested in joining this conversation about the impact of parenting on their child's development. The intention of this book is to help parents consider their parenting from different vantage points, to open up new ways of thinking and viewing their relationship with their child. As such, much of what we do in this book is invite you to engage in reflective practices and to consider information and how it pertains to your relationship with your child, rather than offer prescriptive or one-size-fits-all advice.

We wrote this book for parents who do not have any background in science, statistics, psychology, or medicine, so the terms we use and the way we describe the research studies used as examples throughout the book are designed to be accessible. Most importantly, we wrote this book for parents or caregivers of any gender or from any racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious background. Parenting

practices undoubtedly vary across these demographic dimensions, however, and much of the research we have to draw on will, unfortunately, not feature people from all demographic backgrounds equally. Nonetheless, we intend for this book to be inclusive and for the messages we offer to be open to all parents and caregivers of children.

We believe this book will be most useful to parents of children under age 12 years; parents of children at this age have a stronger influence on their day-to-day lives. However, it's never too late to be reflective and intentional about your parenting, and even parents of late adolescents may find some of the topics we discuss to have relevance to their parenting experiences.

A SELF-GUIDED TOUR

Consider this book a self-guided tour through some of the latest ideas in the field of developmental psychology. You can think of it as something of a conversation with me (Stacey), a developmental health psychologist who designs laboratory-based studies on children's responses to stress, and with me (Jessie), a developmental clinical psychologist who sees clients and does research. As academics, we believe in the power of evidence and research. As parents, we also understand the importance of practical advice and the application of science. We cover a lot in this book and recommend you read the chapters in order—but take your time! At the end of each chapter, we also have a “Too Long, Didn't Read” box (with the heading “TL, DR”) in which we quickly summarize the chapter's key points. We understand that, as a parent, sometimes the only free time available is the walk from the car seat to the driver's seat!

In Chapter 1, we lay out the complexities of the nature versus nurture debate in light of the recent work on *epigenetics*, the discipline devoted to understanding the influence of the environment on

gene expression. We also make the case that parenting matters much more than we could have ever realized. Parenting behaviors can shape biology; they can also shape your children's genes. In Chapter 2, we discuss the nature of contemporary parenting with particular emphasis on the increased levels of stress and anxiety. We put forth the critical premise that, to be good parents, we need to be able take care of ourselves. In Chapter 3, we review the literature on love with an emphasis on why it is essential for resilience. We also seek to demystify "love" by being explicit about what it means. Chapter 4 focuses on prenatal development. The reality of the matter is that what "good parenting" looks like varies a lot as a child ages. Young children are unique, and in this chapter, we discuss strategies for helping very young children to develop into happy and healthy adults. Chapter 5 focuses on parenting during the early years of children's lives. Chapters 6 through 8 discuss concrete strategies that parents should nurture in themselves (e.g., empathy, mentalizing) and strategies for parents to try to regulate children's negative affect and also to capitalize on their positive emotions. In Chapter 9, we discuss the idea that your child's personality plays a role in how you parent (sometimes called an "individual differences approach"). In Chapter 10, we discuss the dynamics of co-parenting and focus on how the complex interactions between parents can influence children's development. We round out the book with an epilogue.

On the whole, you can view this book as a user-friendly tour of the latest science out there on the ways in which parenting influences children's development. This tour focuses in particular on helping you raise children who will be resilient in the face of stress.

We thank you for going on this journey with us. Let's start, shall we?