SUSAN McDOWELL

Parenting Without Fear

A GUIDE TO LOVING YOUR CHILDREN

LOVE · TRUST · RESPECT



Thinking School

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Parenting Without Fear: A *Guide to Loving Your Children*

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Contents

Embracing Parenting Without Fear....1

PART I · FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF RESPECTFUL PARENTING

1 Debunking Discipline Myths: Beyond Rewards and Punishments....12

2 The Power of Parental Example and Empathetic Communication...28

3 The Child You Have: Temperament, Siblings, and Family Culture...42

4 Fear Is Contagious: Protecting Children Without Shrinking Their World....51

PART II · NURTURING DEVELOPMENT AND DAILY LIFE

5 Eating with Freedom: Trusting a Child's Appetite....60

6 The Comfort of Co-Sleeping and Sleep Autonomy....73

7 Cultivating a Genuine Love for Learning and Exploration....86

PART III · GROWING UP IN A CHANGING WORLD

8 Screens Without Fear: Becoming a Tech-Intentional Family....98

9 Guiding Teenagers Without Fear: High Standards, Warm Support....106

Last (Reassuring) Words....114

Sources and Further Reading....120

About Susan McDowell....143

Other Books by the Author....145

INTRODUCTION

Embracing Parenting Without Fear

It's six-thirty, dinner is going cold, and you hear yourself say it: "No dessert until you finish your broccoli." You already know how this goes. Maybe it works tonight. Tomorrow you will need a bigger bribe or a bigger threat, and somewhere along the way the broccoli became the enemy. Most of us parent like this not because we are harsh, but because we are afraid: that our children won't eat, won't sleep, won't learn, won't turn out well. This book is about what happens when you put that fear down, and what you can do instead, from the first spoonful to the teenage years.

I should say who is offering you this. I am not a pediatrician, and I don't write as one. I came to this subject the way I come to every subject: by reading. I read the original studies rather than the headlines about them, I trace each claim back to its source, and I ask who did the research and what it actually measured. Alongside the reading, I listen to parents, because research describes averages and your family is not an average. Again and again I met parents awake at three in the morning, scrolling through advice that contradicted itself from one page to the next. They didn't need more advice. They needed someone to sit with the evidence and tell them, honestly, where it is strong, where it is thin, and where the choice is

theirs. That is what I have tried to do here. Where the research is solid, I say so and name it. Where it is mixed, or where I am giving you my own view, I say that too.

For generations, many parenting practices have been influenced by underlying fears: fear of children not learning, not behaving, or not succeeding. This often translates into the use of pressures, rewards, or even anger over poor performance to elicit desired behaviors. However, as the insights within this framework reveal, such methods often backfire over the long term and can blunt a child's own drive to learn and grow.

The core of *Parenting Without Fear* encourages us to abandon the belief that children must be constantly coerced or incentivized to learn and grow. Instead, it starts from a simple observation: human beings are born wanting to investigate, to know and to learn. The Spanish pediatrician Carlos González, whose books and podcast have shaped much of the thinking behind this book, has long argued that most children would enjoy learning if adults simply left them in peace, because they naturally want to find things out. This approach suggests that instead of imposing external motivators, we should trust a child's natural curiosity and allow them to explore and learn at their own pace, free from undue pressure.

This perspective holds that punishments are as useless as prizes for truly educating children. In my view, both are morally troubling when the aim is to instill genuine ethical principles. Research on how children take values to heart points the same way: in a 2008 review of self-determination research on parenting, Mireille Joussemet and colleagues concluded that children whose autonomy is supported, rather than controlled, are more likely to make rules and values their own. I believe authentic good behavior stems from an internal understanding of what is right, not from the expectation of a reward or the fear of punishment. For instance, someone who refrains from stealing solely out of fear of being caught is, in

essence, a cowardly thief, not a truly honest person. A genuinely kind individual acts out of inherent goodness, not in pursuit of a prize. Rather than relying on rigid rules and imposed consequences, I advocate for a focus on modeling desirable behavior and offering unconditional love and support. Parents should feel empowered, not afraid, to show affection.

> *Fear does not command respect.*

Throughout this book, we will explore how this philosophy translates into practical aspects of daily life. We'll look at fostering healthy eating habits by avoiding insistence and trusting a child's appetite, allowing natural sleep patterns without coercion, and managing challenging behaviors by understanding children's underlying feelings rather than resorting to anger or labels. The approach also advocates for parents to recognize their own imperfections and to model forgiveness, setting a powerful example for their children. Ultimately, by nurturing a child's autonomy, respecting their feelings, and providing consistent affection and presence, we can foster a much deeper, more sustained, and genuine love for learning and exploration. Later chapters look at temperament and siblings, at how parents' fears can be passed on to their children, at screens, and at the teenage years.

An Overview of the Philosophy

The core philosophy of *Parenting Without Fear* is centered on fostering a child's development through love, trust, and respect, moving away from methods based on fear, control, or traditional discipline like rewards and punishments. The overarching message is simple: do not be afraid to show your child how much you love them. This approach encourages parents to trust in their children's

innate capabilities and their own loving instincts, building a relationship founded on deep affection and understanding.

One of the key aspects of this philosophy is the rejection of traditional disciplinary methods. In my view, punishments, whether physical or psychological, do little to educate a child. For physical punishment the evidence is strong: large reviews link spanking to more aggression, more behavior problems and poorer mental health, and find no sign that it improves children's behavior over time; Chapter 1 describes them. Adults are not punished for laughing, jumping, running or stepping on a sofa, and the many people raised without punishment show that it is not necessary. Physical punishments, like a slap, are explicitly mentioned as unnecessary, and psychological punishments, such as yelling, isolating a child, or withdrawing "privileges" (like the fundamental right to live and play), make little sense to me. In fairness, pediatric guidance draws the line differently: the American Academy of Pediatrics advises against spanking and harsh yelling but still recommends brief time-outs and calm consequences. This book takes a gentler line than the AAP on those milder tools. Fear does not command respect.

Rewards fail for the same reason. Offering prizes for desired behaviors, such as studying or eating well, is seen as inherently problematic because it assumes the child would not perform the action without a reward. In my view, this approach is ethically troubling, because it keeps parents from teaching a genuine ethical framework based on principles of right and wrong. The ideal is for a person to abstain from doing wrong because they understand it is wrong, not out of fear of punishment or desire for gain. Rewards may also weaken the very behavior they are meant to encourage. In a 2008 experiment by Felix Warneken and Michael Tomasello, toddlers who were given a small toy each time they helped an adult later helped less than toddlers who had received only praise or nothing at all. Using manipulation, even through surprise rewards, is

likened to advertising tactics and can feel disrespectful if applied to adults.

> KEY CONCEPT
>
> **Intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation**
>
> *Intrinsic* motivation is the drive to do something because it is interesting, enjoyable, or meaningful in itself. *Extrinsic* motivation comes from outside: doing something to earn a reward or to avoid a punishment. This book argues that the first is the one worth protecting.

Presence, Childcare and Spoiling

What children want most from us is our presence, attention and time, more than things or constant entertainment. Material gifts, while appreciated, cannot compensate for a lack of parental presence. In my view, the idea of "quality time" can become an excuse: a short, intensely focused period with children does not make up for a lack of overall presence. The research is mixed, though. In a large U.S. study, Melissa Milkie and colleagues (2015) found that the sheer number of hours mothers spent with children aged three to eleven was not linked to how the children fared, while time spent engaged with teenagers was linked to fewer risky behaviors. Parents are encouraged to prioritize their children's needs over less crucial tasks, recognizing the fleeting and irreplaceable nature of childhood. Societal and legal structures, such as shorter maternity leave in some countries compared to others, are questioned for forcing parents back to work too soon, separating them from their children during crucial developmental stages. Parents are encouraged to consider personal sacrifices, like spending less on material goods, to afford more time with their children if possible.

Research on early childcare offers a nuanced picture that supports this concern without condemning working parents. The large U.S. study of early child care sponsored by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, in which psychologist Jay Belsky was a leading investigator, found that high-quality care modestly benefited children's language and cognitive development, while many hours of non-parental care beginning in early infancy were associated with slightly more aggression and disobedience when children started school. These effects were small for any individual child, and the family environment mattered far more than childcare. In Norway, where parents usually care for their babies through a year of paid leave before children enter well-staffed, high-quality centers, a large study led by Henrik Daae Zachrisson (2013) found little evidence that time in child care caused behavior problems, a contrast Belsky himself has highlighted. The lesson is not guilt but priorities: when you can, protect the first year, choose the best care available, and remember that what happens at home matters most.

Giving in now and then is not the same as spoiling a child, and it helps to know what spoiling actually looks like. Ron Lieber, the *New York Times* money columnist, looked at how researchers have tried to define a "spoiled" child while writing *The Opposite of Spoiled*, and found that only one of its marks concerns money or possessions. The other three are about structure: a home with no rules, rules that are never followed through, and a child who is never allowed to fail because an adult always smooths the path ahead or cleans up behind. The money mark is abundance received without gratitude, and it can appear in families of modest means too, when parents pour everything they have into their children. By that measure, an occasional warm yes to a toy or a sweet spoils no one. A childhood without limits, or without any chance to struggle, can.

Understanding the Child's Perspective

Understanding a child's perspective is a cornerstone of an approach to child-rearing that prioritizes love, trust, and respect over fear and traditional disciplinary methods. This philosophy suggests that many of a child's actions, which adults might perceive as challenging or manipulative, are actually natural expressions of their needs, developmental stage, or genuine feelings, rather than intentional efforts to annoy or misbehave.

Key aspects of this understanding include reinterpreting what is commonly known as "misbehavior." Tantrums and crying, for instance, are often not attempts to annoy parents. Instead, crying is best understood as an evolved signal that draws caregivers close and gets a baby's needs met, as anthropologist Joseph Soltis argued in a 2004 review. When a young child cries at midnight, they are usually seeking their parent's presence and comfort, not a toy or a sweet.

Reinterpreting "Misbehavior"

Social interactions and perceived "bad manners" are often rooted in a child's developmental stage. When a child acts out, such as hitting another child, it is frequently due to a perceived slight or frustration, even if the reasons seem illogical to an adult. Similarly, young children might express their desires in ways that adults consider impolite, but this is simply because they have not yet developed the social skills to articulate their needs more politely. Over time, these social skills will develop naturally.

Feelings matter here too. A child's withdrawal or "bad mood" after an incident, like hitting someone, may stem from feelings of shame and guilt. They may not yet possess the social or emotional tools to express these feelings or to apologize directly.

This philosophy of parenting encourages genuine connection and growth for both parent and child. It suggests that

understanding and responding to a child's actions with empathy and flexibility, rather than strict adherence to disciplinary norms, can foster a healthier, more loving family dynamic.

The Absence of a "One-Size-Fits-All" Manual

Parenting advice often contradicts itself. However, a core principle in understanding a child's perspective is the recognition that there is no single "correct" way to parent, nor a "one-size-fits-all" manual for raising children. Instead, parents are empowered to choose solutions that genuinely work best for their unique family.

Three points follow from this. Firstly, it considers the diverse outcomes of individuals despite varied beginnings. Those who experienced different early childhood practices, such as whether they were breastfed or bottle-fed, or if they co-slept or were left to cry at night, are usually impossible to tell apart as adults. Research mostly agrees, with nuance. Breastfeeding has well-documented health benefits (Victora and colleagues, 2016), yet when researchers compare siblings within the same family, many of its apparent long-term effects on children shrink considerably (Colen and Ramey, 2014). And in an Australian randomized trial, children whose parents used gentle sleep training were doing just as well at age six as other children (Price and colleagues, 2012). This suggests that the specific methods used in early parenting may not dictate long-term adult outcomes in the way some rigid advice implies. The underlying message is that the specific methods employed are less critical than the overall environment of love and respect in which a child is raised.

Trusting your instincts and circumstances is another crucial element. Parents are encouraged to make decisions based on their personal beliefs, family economy, and unique circumstances, rather than adhering to rigid societal norms or outside directives. For instance, while laws might dictate an early return to work, parents have the right to consider if they can make personal sacrifices to

spend more time with their child if they feel it's necessary. The core idea is that the manner in which parents interact with their children —with love and respect—is more crucial than the specific outcomes of individual requests or decisions.

Conceding can be constructive. The notion that parents must always maintain a firm stance and never give in to a child's requests or tantrums makes little sense to me. While some situations, like preventing a child from playing with a knife or consuming harmful substances, are non-negotiable for safety, many other instances allow for flexibility. When parents choose to cede gracefully and respectfully, they are not creating a "tyrant" but rather teaching their child the valuable skill of compromise.

Chapter 3 returns to this idea in depth: why each child, even within the same family, needs something slightly different from us.

KEY CONCEPT

Four questions before you react

When fear is pushing you toward a bribe, a threat or a battle, pause and ask: **Is this harm, or only discomfort? Am I offering, or forcing? Am I supporting my child, or accommodating the fear? What will my example teach?** Each question comes back in the chapters ahead: harm and discomfort in Chapters 1 and 4, offering in Chapters 5 to 7, supporting in Chapter 4, and example in Chapter 2.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Parenting should be rooted in love, trust, and respect, not fear, control, or punishment.
- Children have an innate drive to learn and grow when supported.
- Rewards and punishments can buy short-term compliance, but they do little to build lasting motivation, and this book regards them as morally problematic.
- There is no universal parenting manual.
- Regressions are not failures, but natural adjustments.
- Let go of the fear of "spoiling" or being "too soft."
- Parent with empathy, patience, and love.
- Parenting is a journey of growth for both child and parent.

TRY THIS

- Tonight, write down three moments from this week when you bribed, threatened or raised your voice. Next to each, name the fear behind it: not eating, not learning, being judged.
- Pick the moment most likely to happen again tomorrow and decide now what you will say instead, in one calm sentence.
- For one day, simply count how often you say "If you..., then..." or "If you don't...". Count; don't judge yourself.
- Before bed, tell your child one specific thing you enjoyed about being with them today.

PART I

Fundamental Principles of Respectful Parenting