

Parenting Matters

Helpful tips & practical advice for 21st century parents.

By

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my darling mum and dad, Annie and Roger Bennett, who continue to love, inspire and encourage me every day. I am so blessed to have you in my life, and watching you with my own children is an absolute joy. You add so much richness to their lives.

Love you both so much.

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FOREWORD

The title of this book is Parenting Matters. And parenting matters – a lot!

We owe it to ourselves, we owe it to our children and we owe it to each other, to do the best job we can with our children. After all, they are:

- the ones who will care for us in our old age
- the ones who will operate on us or grow us brand new organs to replace our failing ones
- the inventors and problem solvers of the future who will fix the mess we have made of our planet
- the next generation of talent we will employ in our businesses
- the next generation of civic, political and economic leaders who will make big decisions affecting our future, and so much more.

How we parent our children today will determine how they will respond in the situations and positions mentioned above.

If you are reading this, then your children are lucky enough to actually have parents or caregivers who care! How we influence and shape our children should never be underestimated, as illustrated by three and a half year old Jana who was walking along the beach with her dad, Gustav, hand-in-hand.

He noticed that she kept looking over her shoulder as they were walking along. Then she tugged on his hand, stopped and said, “Daddy, you cannot pick up your footprints!”

What words of wisdom from someone so small. Our footprints really are indelible. Nothing is too big or too small that it doesn’t make a mark on, or shape our children in some way – thank goodness children are far more resilient than we actually think, and adversity can be an incredible teacher!

From the time our children are conceived, they make footprints on our hearts too, and we are never the same. No matter how long they are on loan to us, each and every day they make their mark and we are changed.

Whether you are a mum or dad, your children shape your heart and they challenge your mind. They are a reason to get up in the morning, to go out and earn a living, to grow, to love and to lead the best life you can.

INTRODUCTION

Parenting Matters: helpful tips for 21st century parents, is a response to my observation that so many people are parenting out of their heads and losing their common-sense. Parenting is a real combination of head, heart and hands.

With more information available to parents today, you can be forgiven for feeling confused, which is why I have included a chapter on becoming your own parenting expert.

While ignorance is no longer an option, or an excuse, in a society where we are literally drowning in information, there is much to be said for throwing a healthy dose of gut feel and instinct into the parenting mix, while still keeping your head about you.

This little book is a collection of just some of the popular parenting matters I have written about over the past few years that address 21st century parenting issues. If you have ever made these comments or asked some of these questions, then this book is perfect for you:

- With so much information about parenting I'm more confused than ever!
- I seem to be drowning in choices!
- I am scared of my children's future because I don't understand it.
- Stop the world, I want to get off!
- I didn't get the child I expected.
- I'm stressed.
- How can I make parenting more fun?
- Childhood is rough, how can I make it easier for my child?
- The parenting to-do-list just keeps getting longer!
- My child is so busy, is she doing too much?
- How can I be a hero in my child's life-story?

The trademark of much of my writing is to pack a punch, or touch a chord, in as few words as possible because, as a busy parent myself, I know that you don't have a lot of time on your hands. This is also why I have included a short summary of the main parenting tips at the end of each chapter, for quick reference.

I hope that you find some food for thought in these words, that they help you to reach clarity and touch your heart.

Always remember that no matter how many twists and turns in your parenting journey, you are the perfect parent for your precious child and you are more important than you think. Your brand of parenting matters, a lot.

NIKKI BUSH

CHAPTER 1 - Be your own expert

“Nikki Bush is evil. She told my mother I could only watch TV for two hours a month!”
(A Foundation Phase learner overheard speaking to her friends in the playground, and misquoting me.)

One of the challenges of being a 21st century parent is that we are drowning in information and opinions around the raising of our children, largely as a result of technology and connectivity. Information and knowledge are in plentiful supply but much of the inter-generational wisdom has fallen away with the rise of the nuclear family, and large geographic distances separating extended family. Instead, we listen to experts ‘who should know’. Empowered, intuitive parents and common sense parenting skills seem to be in short supply.

My theory is that we are parenting too much from our heads and not connecting with our hearts and our intuitive gut feel – our sense of ‘knowing’. This is because head and heart have become disconnected due to our busyness and multi-tasking, fragmented lifestyles, affecting our own inner confidence and self-esteem around the more emotional issues of life. Many parents fear making the wrong choices or suffering the consequences of any mistakes they might make. Take heart, children are not quite as fragile as you think and you can make course corrections along the way!

Few parents have realised that parenting is about learning and growing with their children, on the run, as life unfolds in its often crooked line. Spanish poet, Antonio Machado said: “We make the path by walking on it.” No two parenting paths are the same and yet we mentally compare ourselves to others all the time. We wonder, “What does this look like from the outside?” instead of asking ourselves, “How does this feel on the inside, for myself and my child?”

So what should we do with all the information that we acquire on our parenting journey from books, TV and radio programmes, talks and workshops? And never discount the car park chatter – the information that moves like wildfire along the school grapevine can have a very powerful effect on us when we are not feeling very confident. The trick is to take it all in, internalise it, mull over it, chew on it, measure it against your value system, feel it in your gut and then keep what resonates for you and spit out the rest. Let it go. If you need it, your conscience will be pricked again and you can always go back to it and adopt it at a later stage.

Referring to the quote, or misquote, from the little girl in the playground, it should actually read two hours per day of total on-screen time and not two hours of TV per month! I did have a quiet giggle when this comment was emailed to me a few days after speaking at the school, but I was also saddened by how disempowered parents feel that they have to actually tell their children word for word what they learnt in a parenting workshop, and from whom, quite literally giving away their own power and credibility in the eyes of their child.

Parents, you need to position yourselves as experts in your own homes! Yes, none of us knows it all, and we all make mistakes. Make them confidently, rather than tentatively, with all the skills, knowledge and intuition you have at your disposal. All of parenting is an adventure with attendant risks. Once you have acquired some new information and you have filtered it

through your system – the head and heart of an expert (you are, after all, the perfect parent for your child), then own that information and find a way to incorporate it into your parenting without making a big thing of it in front of your child.

Quietly adopt change as if it was any other day of the week and not necessarily something extra-special, and you may find that your children accommodate changes easier, possibly without even noticing, and will be following you as the leader and expert in your own home.

There is a saying, ‘as within so without’, which refers to the interconnectedness of all things and all people. If you want to see changes in your children, that change first starts with you.

Very often, just a shift in your own perception about something or your commitment to using your time slightly differently, can have a powerful knock-on effect without you actually ‘making your child do something differently’ or without having ‘to fix your child’. It makes parenting a whole lot easier. Perhaps you should give it a try and at the same time, quietly position yourself as an expert in your own home.

PARENTING TIPS

- ✓ Reconnect your head and heart.
- ✓ Your children are not as fragile as you think.
- ✓ Learn and grow with your children.
- ✓ Stop comparing yourself to others.
- ✓ No two parenting paths are the same.
- ✓ Ask yourself how it feels.
- ✓ It’s not always how it looks from the outside that’s important.
- ✓ Keep what resonates for you and spit out the rest.
- ✓ As within, so without.
- ✓ Fix yourself, fix your child.

CHAPTER 2 - Mourn the perfect child

Every parent has, at some point, had a picture in their mind's eye of the perfect child. And when the reality doesn't match the picture, then the journey to fix the child begins — to shape and mould the child to get them as close to picture-perfect as possible. We are usually unconscious of the game we are playing until someone points it out to us.

There are any number of ways to help a child to fulfil their potential, many of which are appropriate and well-intentioned, from extra sports coaching, to extra lessons to therapy, and of course a belief in one's own child (all of which can be taken to extremes).

Indeed, it is part of our responsibility as parents to provide a secure emotional environment and a physical environment rich with learning experiences and opportunities. However, in the words of a very wise teacher, there comes a time when parents must allow themselves to mourn the perfect child and accept who their child is with all their strengths and weaknesses too.

No child is perfect. No child has it all or does it all. Children need to be loved for who they are, for the very essence of their being, and not for what they can do or what they achieve. This can be a bitter pill for parents to swallow, especially around exam and assessment time when gaps, weaknesses or inadequacies tend to be highlighted.

Celebrate your child and work with what was left in, rather than constantly trying to put in what was left out. Be realistic. Be their best cheerleader and, no matter what, love them for who they are. Their time to shine might not yet have arrived. This is why we must also wait in wonder and watch with awe.

Sometimes the best gift is that of a little more time. There is nothing wrong with being a late bloomer – most of us are!

PARENTING TIPS

- ✓ Let go of your picture of what a perfect child ought to be.
- ✓ Celebrate what was left in, not what was left out.
- ✓ Be their best cheerleader, no matter what.
- ✓ Love them for who they are not what they do.
- ✓ Their time to shine might not yet have arrived.
- ✓ There is nothing wrong with a late bloomer.

CHAPTER 3 - Stop over-thinking parenting

When it comes to parenting in the 21st century we are often at risk of over-thinking things and losing our common sense. Sometimes the KISS philosophy – Keep It Simple Stupid – is all that is required. Here are some basic building blocks for good parenting that haven't changed much over time:

See your children. I mean really notice them. In our rushed and hurried lives, it's easy to be together but not be really present. In such instances children can feel invisible causing them to withdraw or to use negative attention seeking behaviour to be noticed by you. They are suckers for recognition. Make sure you show appreciation for their good behaviour and make it clear that you are unimpressed with sub-standard behaviour.

Give them feedback. Feedback is positive and character building versus criticism which breaks children down. Feedback can be done conversationally and in a neutral way rather than in a 'shouty', confrontational manner. We give our children feedback about what is both good and bad in their lives and it includes ideas to help them to improve (in an age-appropriate way, of course). Your conversation could start simply like this: "So what did you think about your performance in/how did you feel about?" followed by, "And how else do you think you could have handled it?" concluding with, "Here are my suggestions....." By giving them feedback children know you are there for them and that you care.

Let them practice. I have always maintained that homes and families are the practice ground for everything in life. This is where we learn about good manners, caring, sharing, how to hold a conversation, how to tidy up, how to listen and how to ask for what we need or want and being part of a team. It's where children pick up emotional intelligence and social skills. They practice at home to get it right 'out there' in the big wide world.

Be a good role model. This is the 'show me don't tell me' generation of children who are more likely to do what you do rather than do what you say. Whatever good habits you want them to develop, you need to role model them. Whatever attitudes and beliefs you want them to adopt, you need to live them. Children become what they see.

By focusing on these four common sense parenting strategies, you will develop a positive expectation of your child. You will be able to drop negative phrases such as: "Don't drop it!", "Be careful!", and "Don't fail!", replacing them with: "I know you can do it!", "I believe in you," and "Go for it!", because you genuinely believe they actually can. Stop over-thinking and over-analysing and get back to basics. Keep it simple and remember that it's really all about relationships and communication.

"Parents are often so busy with the physical rearing of children that they miss the glory of parenthood, just as the grandeur of the trees is lost when raking leaves."

Marcelene Cox

PARENTING TIPS

- ✓ Keep It Simple Stupid!
- ✓ Really notice your children.
- ✓ They are suckers for attention and recognition.
- ✓ Feedback lets children know that you are there for them and that you care.
- ✓ Home is the lab. They practice 'in here' to get it right 'out there'.
- ✓ This is the 'show me, don't tell me' generation.
- ✓ They will do what you do not what you say.
- ✓ Children become what they see.

CHAPTER 4 - You have two ears and one mouth!

I have a terrible habit of finishing my husband's sentences. I don't know if this is something that happens when you have been married for over 22 years, but I can tell you that it makes Simon mad and sometimes he just gives me 'that look' and either goes silent or tersely says (through gritted teeth), "Will you stop interrupting and just let me finish!"

How often do we finish our children's sentences or fill in the gaps when they are trying to find the right word? Probably more often than we think, especially when we are in a hurry. And we wonder why our children stop listening to us.

Many years ago I worked very closely with a speech therapist and her favourite saying was: "You have two ears and one mouth, you should listen twice as much as you speak." When someone is there to speak for a child or interrupt their verbalising process, there is no need for them to speak or to improve. We do it to each other as adults and older siblings often do it to their younger brothers or sisters either unwittingly, or in an effort to dominate.

Despite the busy life you lead, you need to role model good listening skills and an interest in other people. Pay attention, take notice. When people are the object of your attention, they feel very important. If we can do this with our children, they, in turn will do it to others and it is a very good character trait that will make them stand out a mile in a crowd.

A good place to start with good listening practice is at the dinner table where we have conversations – taking turns to listen and to speak, to catch up on the news of the day, what is going on in each other's lives and how we feel about it. If you don't want your kids to tune you out you must be both interesting and interested, and this starts with good listening.

Also, observe how much time you spend telling your children what to do and how to do it. You may be surprised when you do this exercise. If you are continually instructing them, how will they learn to do things independently without you constantly cuing them on what to do and when? Sometimes you need to give them a little space – some peace and quiet – to prove how well they have listened and learnt from you, and then you will have greater faith in your own parenting skills.

Our incessant talking makes us our own worst enemies. Shut up and listen more – you might find your children will listen better too and be a whole lot more competent. I think I owe my husband an apology!

"You have two ears and one mouth. You should listen twice as much as you speak."

Debbie Tanner, speech therapist

PARENTING TIPS

- ✓ Stop finishing your child's sentences for them.
- ✓ Allow them time to find the right words.
- ✓ If you speak for your child they will have no need to speak for themselves.
- ✓ If you are always telling your children what to do they will be reliant on instructions and you won't know how competent they really are.
- ✓ Listen twice as much as you speak.
- ✓ Be interesting and interested or be tuned out by your kids.
- ✓ Listen and pay attention, it makes others feel important.

CHAPTER 5 - Within earshot of your children

Children today are exposed to all our conversations. You rarely hear parents applying the “not in front of the children” rule. Do be careful what you say within earshot of your children because the conversations they are exposed to have the power to both harm or heal.

The cellphone era has ushered in a more public approach to conversation because we take calls wherever we are and in the company of whomever we are with. Our children get to hear unfiltered calls, often on bluetooth, so they hear the whole conversation, not just our response. What they hear is shaping their brains, their values and their worldview — how they see the world. You can add what they hear on radio and see TV into the equation and you have a lot of inappropriate information on steroids bombarding our children.

The conversations they hear should strengthen the following:

- Their confidence
- Their character
- Their worldview

This is not always the case. Children are faced with a very challenging world today it would help them enormously to believe that they have everything they need to be okay in it, but many are fast coming to the conclusion that they don't have the resources to cope because they are often privy to disturbing information.

Never forget that little eyes and little ears are constantly upon you. Let's see what has been shaping your children — hurting or healing them in the past week — this is an exercise definitely worth doing (it will probably take you 15 – 20 minutes, and you don't need to make it a thesis, this is just dipstick research):

- Think about all the conversations you have had in the past few days within earshot of your children. You may need to make a list of them — who were you speaking to and what was it about, e.g. your son overheard you talking about his low muscle tone to a friend, or your daughter overheard you talking about a hijacking incident.
- Think about how they have witnessed you living your life — just for the past few days e.g. how have you coped with stress, what was your personal organisation like, how present have you been, etc.
- Now divide a piece of paper in half and on one side write down the positive and negative values you are currently teaching your child based on what they have heard or witnessed above.
- On the other side write down what values you specifically want to be teaching them.
- Now have a critical look at the differences which will give you a good idea of whether there is more hurting or healing going on. It would be rare to find one and not the other so don't panic.
- Finally, you need to have the courage and the character to make the necessary changes to bring what is going on more in line with what you desire, or what you would like your family brand to stand for.

In no way am I advocating wrapping your children in cotton wool and protecting them from the world, as that would leave them in a very risky position. I am, however, encouraging a more conscious and aware approach to what your children are hearing. And when they do hear something that they shouldn't, do turn it into a teachable moment.

Potentially negative and harmful situations can be turned into unbelievably powerful, positive ones depending on the conversations you choose to have with your children.

PARENTING TIPS

- ✓ Words children hear can either harm or heal.
- ✓ Little eyes and ears are constantly upon you.
- ✓ Don't wrap them in cotton wool.
- ✓ Be conscious and aware of what they see and hear.
- ✓ Turn negative experiences into teachable moments.
- ✓ Your job is to strengthen their confidence, character and worldview.

CHAPTER 6 - Something clicked

“Something’s clicked!” were my sister’s words to me when we were discussing her six year old daughter’s progress on the tennis court. “I don’t know what’s happened but it’s starting to come together,” she added.

It reminded me of my boys when they first started off in the game (as with any other sport). To begin with, their shots were almost mechanical in their execution – they were paying attention to every aspect of the shot, overemphasising each movement, making it look awkward. And then at some point in time all those details came together in one flowing motion, which not only looked good but it worked.

When children learn anything – whether it be crawling, walking, speaking, reading, writing or a sport – they need to learn the basics, the constituent parts and then learn to put them together, in the correct sequence. This is the perceptual skill of analysis and synthesis and it takes planning.

Some of the keys to effective learning at all ages are repetition, persistence and perseverance – whether mastering a movement, deciphering a words or grooving a shot.

I am so grateful that my sons’ tennis coach warned me early on to bear with her because not only would it take a while for their shots to look like something, but most importantly, it was essential to get the basics of each stroke absolutely correct from the beginning.

I have to admit there have been times when, like my sister, I have wondered when exactly it would all come together. And then, suddenly, something clicks and they go from functional to stylish and competent, almost overnight. But, of course, it has been weeks, months or years in the making.

As our children’s cheerleaders, our gifts are patience, time and encouragement, for Rome wasn’t built in a day. We need to step back every now and again, and sit and watch with wonder and amazement at the miracle that is our child, marvelling at the power of the brain-body connection. Life takes practice and time. We must support the journey.

PARENTING TIPS

- ✓ They must learn the basics first before mastery.
- ✓ Rome wasn’t built in a day and neither is your child.
- ✓ Honour the journey of ‘getting there’.
- ✓ Marvel at the brain-body connection.
- ✓ Life takes time.

CHAPTER 7 - When the going gets tough

It's never nice watching your child suffer some kind of pain or loss. Sometimes you physically hurt for them and would do anything to take their pain away. While childhood is full of fun, joy and new adventures, it also brings its fair share of disappointments such as:

- Not making the desired sports team
- Not getting a role in the school play
- Not getting the teacher they want
- Doing badly in a test or exam
- The break-up of a friendship
- Not being selected for a leadership position
- Suffering from illness or injury
- Moving town or country
- Dealing with death or divorce in the family

Working through these hurdles and coming out stronger on the other side requires a level of mental toughness that top athletes understand, says mental performance coach, Christo Spies. He lost his leg in a motorbike accident at the age of 18 and went on to become a Springbok athlete, receiving the State President's Award for his achievements in sport.

He has some words of wisdom that might help you to help your child in these challenging situations. The most important lesson Christo discovered through his accident was that when something goes wrong in one area of your life, you must not confuse it with the bigger context of your life. "I couldn't confuse my missing leg with my whole life. My whole life wasn't just about my leg, I still had potential," he explains. "Many people tend to focus on what they have lost instead of what they have left."

Whatever your child's loss or disappointment, you need to help them to recognise that they always have potential regardless of the circumstances they find themselves in. What they do with their potential moving forward is their choice. Spies has a formula that he uses in his mental toughness coaching: $\text{Performance} = \text{Potential} - \text{Interference}$.

In his own situation, he had to acknowledge his potential minus the interference of the loss of his leg from the knee down. He could have got stuck in asking himself why this had happened to him but, instead, he decided that the question shouldn't be "Why?" but rather, "What can I do on one leg?"

Asking the right questions enables you to live with hope. According to leadership expert, Dr John Maxwell, hope in the future provides power in the present. This is the secret to mental toughness.

Life will bring all of our children a dose of interference from time-to-time. This might make them angry, anxious, depressed or upset. These feelings are normal, as long as they are short-lived and appropriately managed for the lessons they can teach and the growth they bring, albeit uncomfortable or even painful at the time.

I think Christo's example of not confusing his leg with his whole life is a very powerful way to remind your child that he/she is bigger than the problem or disappointment currently at hand, and they are still filled with the potential to reach their dreams and succeed in life.

Helping your child work through the challenges of childhood with all your love, support, perspective and guidance provides the foundations for mental toughness training needed in adulthood.

PARENTING TIPS

- ✓ Life will run interference from time-to-time.
- ✓ When one thing goes wrong, not everything is wrong.
- ✓ Your child is bigger than the problem at hand.
- ✓ What you do with your potential in the future is a choice.
- ✓ Performance = potential – interference.
- ✓ Hope in the future provides power in the present.
- ✓ Don't try and take all tough situations away from your child or they won't learn mental toughness.
- ✓ Opportunities to develop mental toughness in childhood are good training for adulthood.

CHAPTER 8 - Reaching your child's head through the funny-bone

When nagging isn't working and you feel you are being ignored, it might just be time to take a chill pill and introduce some humour. Humour is a great tension reliever. It can galvanise children into action and lift the mood in your home in an instant.

If your natural sense of fun has fizzled out from the daily grind of living with kids, here are a few ideas that just might reignite your sense of humour and energise your parenting:

1. Use another voice or accent. It infuses a spirit of play in the task at hand. One father said his kids' favourite was his robot voice: "This-is-RC3C. The-next-person-who-takes-ice-and-doesn't-refill-the-tray-will-be-orbited-into-outer-space. Please-take-affirmative-action."
2. When my children have to explain what they have been studying for a test, or are presenting their mind maps to me in full sentences, sometimes they use a foreign or funny accent in a dramatic way. They have more fun and have a better recall too.
3. Play a game of charades/30 seconds to bring your child's attention to things that irritate you or chores that are not being done such as feeding the dog, closing the curtains, picking up and hang up towels, etc.
4. Use reverse humour instead of nagging. Try this for effect: "Please remember to forget to hang up your towel, do leave your clothes in a pile on the floor and do sleep with your curtains open. Oh, and don't forget to starve the dog!"

It's amazing how you can get your children's attention if you do something a little differently. The funny-bone and the head are definitely connected!

PARENTING TIPS

- ✓ Humour is a great tension reliever.
- ✓ Humour can create energy when energy is low.
- ✓ Turn nagging into humour, it can grab your children's attention.
- ✓ There is a definite connection between the head and the funny bone.

CHAPTER 9 - Are your children living in the red zone?

Children of all ages are suffering from burnout and it's starting as early as preschool. Stressed children is one of the most common concerns I come across amongst school heads, teachers, and parents alike. I, myself, am in the process of re-examining how many extra mural activities my children are involved in because they don't have enough down time.

What are we doing? Are our children living in the red zone called overload? If your child has no time for play dates with friends and you no longer have time to play games with each other, then you are in the red zone. Get out, as quickly as you can!

Sensory overload is not something reserved only for children with sensory integration dysfunction – it is becoming an epidemic among many, many families today. Let's look at why our children may be suffering from a form of sensory overload resulting in early burnout:

- Too many extra-mural activities from too young an age
- Too few play dates
- Too little downtime where they can just potter around and consolidate their thoughts and emotions
- Too many supervised activities, too few unstructured "free play" opportunities
- Too many marketing messages bombarding them 24/7 enticing them to "buy in" to the values of brands and purchase the products (or nag their parents for them!)
- Too many choices to make from an early age – this generation are given choices all the time
- Too many on screen activities available across multiple platforms demanding their attention
- Too little sleep
- Too much exposure to inappropriate and possibly disturbing information
- Too few opportunities to dig deep and be resourceful, stunting their resilience and creativity
- Too many disturbances at a cellular level due to high frequency security systems, radiation from power lines, WiFi, computers, cellphones etc.

When the demands on us and our children move into the red zone called 'overload', it impacts on our communication, our quality of connection and our emotional responses to each other, let alone our energy levels. All of us can become irritable, ratty, stroppy, depressed, hyper, withdrawn, sleep deprived, exhausted. Our children are falling out of touch with themselves as we are with ourselves.

Here are a few ideas for resolving this situation:

- Parents need to make conscious, sensible, common sense decisions. Protect your children and your family life as well as your own sanity with the choices you make around all of the above.
- Parents must take responsibility for their own stress levels. There are few children in the red zone whose parents are not there also. We need to learn how to read our own

pressure gauge and how to reset to zero from time-to-time. According to research, one of our children's greatest wishes is that we would be less stressed and less tired when we are with them.

- Schools / teachers who are advising parents to reduce the overload and pressure on their children may need to reassess recognition and award structures in their schools. Many are still geared towards children who can do it all, or do a lot very well. Perhaps these structures need to be revised, just as we need to revisit what success looks like and what it means against this new backdrop of "too much, too soon" resulting in overload. We are all having to find our feet in our new-look, warp-speed world.
- Let's move away from extremes and take the middle road which is a healthily busy child and a workable family life. Family is where hope lives today and we are the values creators in society. If family life is falling apart due to overload, then where are we?

Make sure that your child is not living on the edge or in continual fight or flight. Getting stuck on high revs or in first gear, unable to drop down between periods of high stress and peak performance is dangerous at any age. Let's reclaim childhood and stand up for our families.

PARENTING TIPS

- ✓ Children are stuck in the high revs of first gear.
- ✓ Do your children have playdates with friends?
- ✓ Do you have time to play with your children?
- ✓ Sensory overload is affecting everyone.
- ✓ You live with the consequences of your choices.
- ✓ Making no choice is a choice.
- ✓ Our children are falling out of touch with themselves as we are with ourselves.
- ✓ How many extra-murals does your child do every week?
- ✓ Do you have a healthily busy child?
- ✓ Do you have a workable family life?
- ✓ Family is where hope lives today.
- ✓ Do you offer family as a value?
- ✓ Reclaim childhood.

CHAPTER 10 - It's all a blur

We are living life in the fast lane. That's the 21st century for you. And in the fast lane, when you look out of your window, things often pass by in a blur – a fast moving landscape that you are never really able to focus on or truly appreciate. But does this type of daily living actually feed the soul? Does it give us the opportunity to look at our lives objectively, and to engage fully with our emotions? And what about the relationships we have with our children, and other people we love? Are they just a passing blur too?

Both parents and children can feel the negative effects of living in a blur. Our diaries are bursting at the seams and it is the same for our children who mirror our busy existence, moving from one extramural activity to another and rarely having time to potter around at home undirected by an adult or not watching a screen. Downtime, unplugged, is essential for them (at any age) to consolidate and process all their experiences and emotions from the day. A child's day is packed full of so much that is new that their hearts and minds need time to create meaning out of it all. For many children, the first time in the day that life is not passing by in a blur is when they go to bed. This is when they begin processing their day for the very first time, and that is not conducive to sleep!

Exactly the same happens to their parents who are living in a blur. Do you ever find yourself lying in bed writing lists, thoughts or ideas down? This may be the first time you have hit the stop button in the day and actually have the space and time to let your thoughts really bubble to the surface. And we wonder why we find it difficult to let go and fall asleep!

One way to cope with the state of “blur” is to create intentional white space in your life. You might find it a challenge to do this daily to begin with, but try and do it once a week for just 15 – 20 minutes for starters. By white space I mean setting aside time when nothing is scheduled or expected of you, where you are alone and unplugged from all your devices, and where your mind is free to wonder and think, to play around on the edges of challenges and issues that you face. Pay attention to what emerges in the absence of the “noise” of your normal activity. Ignore your urge to do something and just be, for a while.

By the same token, allowing over-scheduled children downtime to simply potter and ponder, is so important for their holistic development. To begin with you might find them at a loss of what to do with undirected, screen-free time and they may even claim to be bored. Boredom is good! It provides fertile ground for creativity and resourcefulness, traits which are currently in short supply, and yet are going to be essential X-factors for their success in the world of work one day.

If you are searching for solutions, ideas or even a bit of perspective, create some intentional white space in your life. Slow down to a blur, as they say, and you will see more, hear more, feel more, think more, create more meaning, and appreciate more about your life. As busy as childhood has become, the ability to potter and ponder might just become a critical factor in your child's ability to succeed in an increasingly blurred and demanding world.

“When our children see us take time for ourselves, they learn that they deserve alone time, too.”
Anne Wilson Schaefer

PARENTING TIPS

- ✓ Feed your soul.
- ✓ Engage fully with your emotions.
- ✓ Take a few minutes to unplug and be alone, to create intentional white space.
- ✓ Stop doing and just ‘be’ in this time.
- ✓ Time out helps you to appreciate life more.
- ✓ Stepping back from life gives you more perspective.
- ✓ Children also need time to process their day.
- ✓ They need time to potter, undirected by an adult,
- ✓ Boredom is good for children as it leads to creativity and resourcefulness.

CHAPTER 11 - You really can make homework fun

When it comes to doing homework at the end of a long day, it can be a bit of a mission to motivate your kids to be enthusiastic about what has to be done. They have already spent hours in class with pens, pencils and paper and now they must do more of the same.

I often talk about being a source of magic, wonder and surprise for your children — not every day, but from time-to-time, and when you are wearing your homework motivator hat, this is the time to pull a cat out of that hat. Now here is the trick to keep up your sleeve for those desperate moments — change the medium!

By this I mean, if the homework doesn't have to be done in a specific book and handed in to the teacher the next day (such as times tables, number bonds and spelling), then ditch the pen and paper and use something else. I can guarantee you will have your child's attention on the job in an instant and they will also think you are a hero (not a bad position to seek every now and then). So here are some creative ideas on changing the medium:

- Sprinkle flour on a tray or on the kitchen table and get your child to write their spelling or sums in the flour.
- Window Crayons are a great find – yes, twistable crayons specially designed for use on glass and are easy to wipe off. They give a wonderful sensory experience.
- Use pavement chalk on the driveway, which also give lots of sensory feedback due the roughness of the surface.
- Use bath crayons on the tiles or side of the bath. My son has even written his spelling words on the bottom of the bath while sitting in the water.
- Make a fan with a piece of paper and get your child to write a different spelling word on each space.
- Use whiteboard markers on mirrors, windows or sliding patio doors.
- Use a flipchart or whiteboard with coloured pens.
- Even writing spelling words with a ballpoint pen down legs and arms will be a memorable experience.

Rather than having a meltdown over homework, why not choose to have some fun by changing the medium and perhaps reaching superhero status at the same time!

PARENTING TIPS

- ✓ Be a source of magic, wonder and surprise.
- ✓ Change the medium – ditch pen and paper!
- ✓ Think out of the box.
- ✓ Create multi-sensory experiences.
- ✓ Have fun.
- ✓ Create a memory.

CHAPTER 12 - What's in it for me?

Have you recently asked your child to do something: to watch their manners, to go somewhere, to dress or behave in a certain way, and met with a “What’s in it for me?” attitude? It’s a very common mind set today and why are we surprised?

Our children are living in a society that is increasingly extrinsically motivated to do things through a proliferation of loyalty and reward systems. Just take a look in your purse or wallet for the evidence! As we are rewarded at every turn for very regular things such as exercising and eating healthily (in addition to spending our money!), so our children are coming to expect to be rewarded for very normal behaviour too.

Let’s consider what normal behaviour for children is, and I want you to flick through the list and see what you might actually be offering rewards for:

- Getting a child to eat a meal
- Staying in their car seat
- Buckling up
- Hanging up their towels
- Making their beds
- Saying please and thank you
- Putting on sunblock
- Washing their hands
- Taking their vitamins
- Brushing their teeth
- Going to bed on time
- Doing their homework

Now star charts are an external reward system and they are very handy when teaching your child a new habit, such as hanging up their towel after bathing. They also play an important role in motivating children to do additional activities such as daily occupational therapy homework or eye exercises, however, we must not let our children become too reliant on them.

So often we plead and negotiate with children, from really young ones to teenagers, “If you do this then you can have a”. By constantly coaxing them and being coercive, they are in danger of becoming too dependent on us for motivation and instruction about what to do and when and how to do it, that we create a situation of *learned helplessness*.

After learning a new habit, we need to replace the external reward system with having a positive expectation of our children – they are actually fully capable, for the most part. For our own peace of mind and their own long term good, we need to ensure that our children reach a place of knowing:

I can, I am, I will.

If the reward for normal behaviour is our respect, appreciation and admiration, we are well on the road to creating internally motivated children who are self-disciplined and self-confident in their own ability to get on with life. That's what's in it for them!

PARENTING TIPS

- ✓ Notice how often you are being externally motivated to do things.
- ✓ Children are being motivated in the same way.
- ✓ Constant rewards lead to a consistent 'what's in it for me?' attitude.
- ✓ Star charts should be used from time-to-time but not for everything or they lose their impact.
- ✓ Learned helplessness will not create resilient and resourceful children.
- ✓ Develop a positive expectation of your children to honour and encourage their capable nature.

CHAPTER 13 - The un-photographed moments are the most important

I recently completed putting together four family photo books (printed albums that look like coffee table books). They are beautiful, filled with memories of high days, holidays and celebrations from Mother's Day to birthdays, to award ceremonies and special dinners to school sports, the birth of new family members and more. In most photographs everyone is clean, reasonably well-dressed and smiling.

Have you noticed that your photo albums do not capture many of the in-between moments that make up our parenting experience or our children's childhood? These consist of everyday chores, cooking, cleaning, fetching, carrying, instructions, encouragement, praise, reprimands, discipline, tears, laughter, sulking, shopping, nappy changes, muddy shoes, grazes, fevers in the night, wet towels on the floor, homework, test anxiety, friendship break-ups, trying and failing, persevering and succeeding, and the list goes on.

This is real life. These moments are not always happy and smiley, sometimes they are hard and tiring, hurtful and sad, disappointing and challenging, as well as all the good stuff. These everyday moments, and the emotions that go with them, shape and mould our children. This is the real fabric of parenting and childhood. And most of it is between us and our children, it is not photographed, it is not public.

All our deliberations and choices, our feelings of disappointment, joy and pride, these are things that are difficult to capture in a photograph. Photos often miss the process, the journey, and usually only show the end result, and then selectively so as we most often choose the happy endings to showcase in our albums.

Funnily enough when children leave home it is the un-photographed moments of childhood that parents seem to miss, so make the most of each and every one. Childhood is fleeting and doesn't last forever, and it's the in-between moments that really count.

"Life doesn't unfold in a straight line, and our children aren't computer programs. Parenting is far from a scientific pursuit; it's messy and risky and a huge leap of faith."

Dan Allender, *How Children Raise Parents*

PARENTING TIPS

- ✓ Photographs do not capture the in-between, every day moments.
- ✓ Photographs often miss the journey, only documenting the final result.
- ✓ It's the in-between, everyday moments that shape our children most, not the expensive gifts and overseas holidays.
- ✓ Pay attention to the un-photographed moments.

CONCLUSION

I started this book discussing how we influence and shape our children and how our parenting experience grows and changes us. I firmly believe that the day you become a parent you cannot remain unchanged. In the words of Carl Jung, “The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.”

I have always maintained that my children are as much teachers to me as I am to them. While my husband and I lead our family we also sit at the feet of our children, prepared to learn from them also. “What can we learn from them? How can we grow from them?” Whatever the circumstances or situations, these questions are there for the asking. And in the answering comes our growth.

At times children push you forward, at others they slow you down. Are you awake enough, and conscious enough to see the lessons along the way? Are you brave enough to read the signs and take the appropriate action?

Children invariably know how to press your hot buttons. Are they doing this just because, or, in order to get your attention? Do they need you to really see them, understand them and give them the kind of attention that they truly need, or are they shining a light on an issue in your life that you need to address and heal? You can only see the front of you while your children can see the back too. I believe that they are like mirrors, revealing parts of you that you would never otherwise be able to see except through them. This is why they so often create opportunities for their parents to heal past wounds from their own childhood.

Whether you are ready to dance with the lessons your children bring, or not, is entirely up to you, but of one thing I am certain – you cannot remain unchanged. This is the nature of parenting.

Step gently but boldly on your parenting journey because you cannot pick up your footprints, and neither can your children.

*“Some people come into our lives
Make footprints on our hearts
And we are never the same.”*

FLAVIA

INVITATION

This collection of musings is just a taste of so much more support, insight and inspiration that I have to offer busy 21st century parents who want to really connect with their children and prepare them for an interesting and fast-changing future.

Thanks so much for your interest in my work and consider yourself invited to be part of our community!

What that means is I'll share the best content I have to help you future-proof your child so that together we can build a better world.

If you haven't joined already, I'd be delighted to welcome you to our online community:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/parentingmatters/>

A FAVOUR

May I ask a favour?

I'm on a mission to change the world one parent, one teacher and one leader at a time and I can't do this on my own. There's nothing like word of mouth to spread the word that parenting matters, a lot. If you enjoyed the read, please help me to get this ebook into more hands - I'd be extremely grateful.

Who of your friends would appreciate an email from you recommending this book? Simply send them to www.nikkibush.com.

If you're active on Facebook or Twitter, would you mind giving a brief mention and a link to www.nikkibush.com?

Thank you for helping me support more parents!

Nikki

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Inspirational speaker and best-selling author, Nikki Bush, is highly regarded among parents, educators and business people alike. Her work is fuelled by her passion for play, connection and relationships.

Through her keynote [talks, interactive workshops](#), books and games, she inspires her audiences to find creative ways of connecting with today's children, and themselves, in a fast-changing world.

Nikki is the co-author of two bestselling books: [Future-proof Your Child](#) (Penguin 2008), now in its sixth reprint, and [Easy Answers to Awkward Questions](#) (Metz Press, 2009), a book on sexuality development for children under 13, which was endorsed by Childline and is in its third reprint. She is working on a number of new books at the moment including *Parenting on the Run*, *Raising Entrepreneurs* and *Bridging the Digital Divide*.

Nikki has developed seven educational [games](#) including board games for well-known brands such as Barney, Thomas and Barbie, and she is also a toy judge, running a very popular annual event called Toy Talk®.

Nikki writes prolifically for the media and is a regular guest on radio and TV. She is the parenting expert on SABC3's Espresso, the family expert for Longevity magazine and is on the advisory board of Living & Loving magazine. Nikki is often quoted in the print media. Click [here](#) for more details.

Nikki writes a weekly column called [Parenting Matters®](#) which is used in many school and corporate newsletters around the country. She is a guest lecturer for the Wits Business School Executive Development Programme, because parenting is a leadership issue!

Nikki is married to Simon and they have two teenage sons, Ryan and Matthew, who are the light of her life and the inspiration for so much of her work. They live in Johannesburg, South Africa.

For more information visit: www.nikkibush.com