

Preface

Since becoming a stay-at-home dad to two fabulous kids, I've read many informative books and scientific articles on parenting. I was startled how poor a guide my intuition was. Many of my assumptions were completely wrong. A few examples:

- Praising a child's intelligence seems a fine idea but actually has harmful consequences. Praising effort is better because a child directly controls their effort.
- Excessively permissive parents damage children as much as excessively authoritarian parents. Children thrive best with clear, thoughtful, age-appropriate rules enforced consistently.
- Praising a child for getting good grades (or winning a game or a trophy) can turn off a child's natural enthusiasm and make school/sports/music feel like a chore or competition.
- Many parents are over-involved in their children's lives, to their children's detriment. Many children would be happier and mature faster if their parents worried about them less, "helped" them less, gave them less advice, drove them to fewer activities, and monitored their lives less.
- When adults emphasize outcomes and external rewards – rather than effort, personal growth, sportsmanship, helping others, etc. – children learn to fear failure. Children focused on beating others are reluctant to explore and try new things; they miss out on activities they might love and thrive at. Children focused on winning are also unhealthy competitive; this impedes their ability to learn listening and cooperation skills and cultivate friendships. Adults should encourage children to focus on learning and effort. Grades, victories, trophies, etc. are merely imperfect reflections of learning and effort. Healthy competition is competition against oneself: to run faster, to learn new skills, to become a more helpful, thoughtful, caring person, to use disappointments to spur improvement.
- Competing against siblings can be even more emotionally damaging than competing against classmates and neighborhood kids. Adults who compare a child, even positively, with a sibling can hurt feelings and drive wedges between siblings. Adults should find the good in each child and help guide each in their unique journey through life.

I hope parents striving to raise mature children will find the scientific discoveries in this book as fascinating and helpful as I do.

Raising Mature Kids gives you up-to-date, scientifically proven advice on raising healthy, wise, resilient, mature, capable, thoughtful, kind, caring, independent, sensible, responsible, creative, conscientious, engaged, tenacious, mindful young people.

After your baby is born, you hug it tight and shower it with affection and emotional bonding. As your daughter or son – once utterly dependent on you – grows up, their continued personal growth requires that you slowly release your grip and give them greater independence. You never stop loving your child, but you want them to rely on you less and less because they're becoming more and more capable. Too many parents believe they're helping by smoothing all obstacles in their children's path, sometimes even ghostwriting college essays. But trying to live your child's life for them sets them up for failure after they leave their comfortable nest. Conversely, pressuring your child to succeed is no more effective than forcing a plant to grow faster by stretching its stem. Unconditional love, quality parental interactions, and expectations/discipline matched to their maturity level are the water, soil and sunlight your child needs.

Another parenting extreme – insufficient interaction due to long work hours earning money to buy expensive things – also damages children. Besides teaching children materialism and the unimportance of family time and relaxation, work-heavy lifestyles prevent what children need most: personal attention from their parents. It's fine to hire a nanny to drive kids to soccer practice, but you'd better show up for some weekend games and spend some time kicking the ball with them. Otherwise, why bother being a parent? Steve Jobs asked Walter Isaacson to write his biography because "I wanted my kids to know me. I wasn't always there for them, and I wanted them to know why."¹ Jobs' children will do fine because they live in beautiful Palo Alto with their devoted mom and \$6.5 billion. But Jobs' children may always regret never really knowing their dad and may even resent the iPad their dad seemed to love more than them. (It's especially ironic since Jobs never forgave his biological father for abandoning him.) Criticizing Jobs' work-family choices, Jeff Atwood said, "If you're going to fail at building something, fail at building the fucking iPad. Don't fail at building children."² Since few of us are building iPads, our optimal time allocation should be even more heavily weighted toward our children.

Cultivating children is about teaching them to think for themselves, make wise decisions, communicate effectively, be considerate and kind to others, set personal goals and strive to achieve them, etc. Parental expectations and discipline are essential tools for helping children mature. When parents explain the logic underlying rules and enforce those rules consistently, children progressively

develop healthier habits and stronger self-discipline.

When parents instead ignore misbehavior, fail to correct it, or punish children unpredictably and arbitrarily, children do not develop an internal behavioral compass. Nagging and idle threats annoy children while teaching them to tune parents out and ignore their “rules.” Conversely, enforcing rules in ways that belittle, frighten, injure, ridicule, or shame children severely damages children’s healthy development. Spanking and screaming, for example, may produce immediate compliance but don’t help kids develop self-discipline. And emotional abuse can be every bit as harmful as physical abuse. One study found that about 4% of males and 8-9% of females in the UK and US believe they were severely psychologically abused as children, and experts say “yelling at a child every day and giving the message that the child is a terrible person, and that the parent regrets bringing the child into this world, is an example of a potentially very harmful form of interaction [that] can be as harmful as other types of maltreatment... The effects of psychological maltreatment during the first three years of life can be particularly profound.”³

Cultivating children also involves allowing them freedom to explore, learn about themselves, make mistakes, and pursue personal interests, as Maria Montessori long ago preached. Whereas many parents today behave as if the goal of childhood is getting into the best college, wise parents expect children to work hard but let them decide what to work hard at. Wise parents focus not on maximizing college exclusivity but on sending their children into the world as independent, curious, resilient almost-adults.

Children whose parents help them mature while slowly loosening up on the parental reins generally flourish. Such children don’t always choose the path their parents would choose for them. Some pursue music at Julliard. Bill Gates dropped out of Harvard to follow a crazy dream he called “Microsoft.” Another Harvard dropout built something he called “Facebook.” Jeff Bezos quit his comfortable finance job to start “Cadabra” before realizing it sounded like “Cadaver” and renaming it “Amazon.” One lunatic even dropped out of Reed College to become a hippie, backpacked through India seeking enlightenment, and dropped LSD. At Atari, he was forced to work the night shift because he refused to shower and smelled so bad no one would work with him. He later founded Apple – recently the world’s most valuable company – and NeXT and led a tiny movie startup, Pixar, to greatness.

“Tiger moms” who push, pull and prod their children all the way to Yale are the latest parenting craze, but we’ll examine some of the negative consequences of such overbearing, overintrusive parenting and other forms of extreme parenting. We’ll also discuss the scientific formula for optimal

parenting: Unconditional Love + Appropriate Discipline = Successful Young Adults.

I assumed I'd naturally be a great dad, but studying the science of parenting taught me my intuition is a lousy compass, especially since I had no parenting experience. Consider the power of science applied to the 100-meter dash: In 1900, when training methods were intuitive and crude, the world record was 10.8 seconds. In 1912, someone won in "just" 10.6. The 1920s saw the 10.4 barrier fall. In 1936, Jesse Owens shattered the record, winning in 10.2. The 10.1 barrier fell in 1956. 10.0 in 1960. 9.9 in 1968. 9.8 in 1999. Most recently, Usain Bolt broke 9.7 in 2008 and 9.6 in 2009. The world's greatest sprinter now runs 10% faster than the world's greatest sprinter in 1900! Why? Superior training techniques. Without scientific progress in athletic training, not even Bolt today would be running 100 meters in under ten seconds. Science has made the world's fastest man 10% faster. Imagine how much science can improve the vastly more complex process of raising children!

Sadly, society ignores much of what scientists learn, even when that knowledge could greatly improve our lives. Millions today are in therapy or living unsatisfying lives because their parents relied on intuition when science could have equipped them to be far more nurturing parents. Coaches who rely on instinct can help lousy athletes become good athletes but can never train world-class athletes. Similarly, parents and teachers who ignore scientific parenting principles can do well but are unlikely to bring out the very best in children.

Recently, a young man living across the street was dragged away in handcuffs by dozens of policemen and even a police dog (in case he fled?). Officers have visited his house many times over the past few years, and he has been charged with serious crimes – second-degree breach of peace, second-degree strangulation, disorderly conduct, and first-degree threatening. I've seen him scream at police officers. Last year, neighbors called the police after they heard him threaten to kill his parents. I have little idea what's going on, but I've talked with his father – a friendly, thoughtful man – many times. His mom's a teacher. His sister won a full college scholarship. But something went very wrong with this young man, and poor parenting style – or a mismatch between parenting style and the child's needs – may have played a role. Science shows that children do best when parents are neither authoritarian nor highly permissive. But the ideal mix of rules and freedom depends on the child and changes as the child matures. The very same intelligent and caring parents who raised an academically successful daughter were, likely, either too authoritarian (his father is a former Marine) and/or too permissive (they bought their son a new car after he crashed one) for their son's good. Parenting is not one-size-fits-all. Their parenting style worked well with one child and poorly with the other.

Perhaps diligent, academically engaged children can thrive with more lax parenting, while fun-loving, academically disengaged children may do better with greater structure, supervision, and rewards/punishments? Parents must try to see the world through each child's unique pair of eyes and adapt our parenting style to their unique needs. Scientists recently demonstrated that parents need to adjust their degree of control to each child's need for control/autonomy. Children with strong self-control suffered when parents tried to excessively control them, and children with weak self-control suffered when parents insufficiently controlled them:

the right match between parenting styles and the child's personality led to half as many depression and anxiety symptoms in school-aged children. But mismatches led to twice as many depression and anxiety symptoms during the same three years...

"Parenting is a balance between stepping in and stepping out with guidance, support and structure based on cues from kids."

...When children were higher in effortful control but their parents used higher levels of guidance or provided little autonomy, those children showed higher levels of depression and anxiety.

Children with low effortful control had less anxiety when mothers provided more structuring and less autonomy.

Children low in effortful control doubled their anxiety symptoms if they had mothers who provided little control.⁴

Wherever parents fall along the authoritarian-permissive spectrum, they must enforce rules consistently. Children who understand the family's rules, why they exist, and what will happen if they violate them are very likely to conform. Children suffer when parents sometimes tolerate behavior they should punish while other times exploding over minor infractions or violations of "rules" parents never explained.

When punishment is arbitrary, rather than predictable, children cannot adapt to parental expectations because those expectations – as embodied in rules and enforcement – aren't clear. In 1972, psychologist Martin Seligman published "Learned Helplessness," demonstrating that animals and people who are punished randomly feel emotionally battered and just give up: "uncontrollable events can significantly debilitate organisms: they produce passivity in the face of trauma, inability to learn that responding is effective, and emotional stress in animals, and possibly depression in man."⁵ After dogs learned helplessness in an environment where they could not control shocks being administered to them, moving them to another situation where they could prevent the shocks had no effect because the

traumatized dogs had already given up. A sense of control over one's life is essential to development and mental health. The clearer parents are about rules and expectations and consequences of deviating from those rules and expectations, the better off a child is.

Consistency also involves parents living our lives as examples for our children to follow. If you have a "no hitting" rule but punish violations with spanking, you're sending horribly mixed messages because you're implicitly telling your children the way to get others to behave is by hitting them. My 5-year-old boy occasionally catches me not living up to rules and expectations I have for him. I acknowledge my mistake, explain that no one is perfect, and resolve to do better. This models the thought process I hope my children adopt when they fall short of my expectations and, eventually, their expectations for themselves.

I've learned so much from scientific research on raising self-motivated, self-disciplined children that I know it can greatly benefit all parents. So it's sad prospective parents attend childbirth classes but receive no parenting training. Because many parents are unfamiliar with the scientific evidence, millions today use scientifically unsuccessful parenting styles, quite often duplicating whatever style their parents happened to use.

Science generates ideas and tests them. An idea – like the creative power of "brainstorming sessions" – may sound obviously true. We may all feel in our guts that it *must* be true, perhaps because we've participated in "successful" brainstorming sessions. But no one can know for sure until an idea has been tested against an alternative:

forty-eight students working by themselves... came up with roughly twice as many solutions as [48 students working in] brainstorming groups, and a panel of judges deemed their solutions more "feasible" and "effective." Brainstorming didn't unleash the potential of the group, but rather made each individual less creative. Although the findings did nothing to hurt brainstorming's popularity, numerous follow-up studies have come to the same conclusion. Keith Sawyer, a psychologist at Washington University, has summarized the science: "Decades of research have consistently shown that brainstorming groups think of far fewer ideas than the same number of people who work alone and later pool their ideas."⁶

This demonstrates two important facts: 1) The scientific method can disprove widely held false beliefs; and, 2) Conventional idiocy – masquerading as conventional wisdom – can retain a powerful hold on our minds, even in the face of decades of overwhelming scientific evidence. "Brainstorming sessions" should have gone out of style decades ago. Businesses would do better asking everyone – especially shy/introverted people, many of whom are highly creative and unlikely to speak up in groups

– to submit their ideas. Instead, brainstorming sessions remain popular either because people are not aware of the scientific evidence of their inferiority or because people choose to ignore that evidence since brainstorming sessions feel so productive.

I'm excited to share with you – and, I hope, my kids some day – what I've learned about parenting from science because science is a true gold mine of practical ideas.