

PARENTING IN THE AGE *of* PERFECTION

A Modern Guide to Nurturing
a Success Mindset



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*For my late father, my personal
coach whose voice I heard as I wrote
this whole book.*

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*Names throughout this book have been changed
to protect the identity of youth.*

Parent:

“a father or mother”

“a caregiver of offspring”

- Dictionary.com

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PREFACE

I would like to start by qualifying and saying I never thought I would end up in education. Although, I am sure many people start their books out saying they were the unlikeliest person in their field. But, I am the most unlikely teacher. I never gave teaching or education as a life path that much thought. It wasn't in the cards. I was a very A-type personality. Teaching seemed more laid back. I was in the fast lane. I worked in Hollywood, then law for a now Fortune 500 tech company, then a fashion designer, and finally a startup doyenne. I was the girl who seemed on the fast track if I could make up my mind for goodness sakes.

I ended up working with children in the unlikeliest of circumstances. It was 2008. I was one of the few entrepreneurs who thought it was a good idea to start a business that year. Anderson Cooper had pretty much declared the end of the economy, but I thought I could prove everyone wrong. It was the perfect year to raise money because no one else would be doing it! I guess a few others had the same idea because I was invited to join an incubator with a class size of about 8 companies. Needless to say, the business went for a few years but never took off. Go figure—difficult-to-impossible economy.

By the end of 2010, I was looking for an outlet. I wanted something to distract me from the heartlessness of what I was doing. I wanted something more fulfilling than pitching

Venture Capitalists for money for a startup that I no longer believed in. That outlet proved life altering. I didn't know it at the time. I got a little job tutoring two fifth graders. Two very shy and very sweet young elementary age students. It was fabulous. I was in it for the pure joy. Those were the early days.

Before I knew it, I had thrown in the towel on my startup. My parents were beside themselves. How could their very smart, Ivy League educated daughter give up a six-figure salary for a tutoring gig? You could feel the cringe as the thought crossed their minds. I didn't give them a choice. It was more like, "Mom, Dad, this is happening." My father and mother were worried. How would I survive? What would they tell their friends?

Let me tell you that there were more than a few puzzled looks on clients' faces, as the door would open. What was a 34-year-old former attorney in designer clothing doing tutoring? Wasn't this an utter waste of my time? I even had a few mothers try to set me up on other job interviews as they were convinced that I was wasting my valuable skills. But, was I?

I had no idea the sort of issues in education I had stumbled upon. No one was actively talking about the problems I saw. I will admit that for a couple of years, I stayed relatively quiet. I was, after all, an outsider. I didn't have a Master's in Education. I certainly wasn't a psychologist or a neuropsychologist giving diagnoses. I didn't get my Educational Therapy degree as my godmother had so asked.

Who had the time? I didn't. As my business expanded, I started to notice the issues that I hope to help heal in this book.

You have heard the debate on nature versus nurture. In my office, I believe that students no matter their “wiring” can be “nurtured” to be good—if not, great—students and successful people. Those bad behaviors and those learning challenges your child faces can all be molded, shaped for the better and turned around well before that time. If you are coming to this book and your child is 14—good news, you have time. If you are coming to this book and your child is 16—you're still good. If your child is 9, even better, we have a longer runway to make some changes. Their behaviors, performance in school, and confidence are capable of being rewired for the better!

NOTE TO EDUCATORS

This book might be a fun read for you. This is not a technical book on educational theories. Nor is this book a technical argument against the merits of John Dewey's processes or his ideology or the incredible progressive thought that he spawned. This is not a critique of the Waldorf program or the Montessori schools. I truly respect the thought coming out of these schools. We need children to be responsible respectful citizens of the world and these schools of thought are all critical to creating that.

INTRODUCTION

If there was one take-away from the Varsity Blues Cheating scandal, it is that parents and kids today are in a real crisis. Parents are not just helicoptering anymore. They are bulldozing their children's way through life. These bulldozers don't feel comfortable letting their kids' lives play out. They have to intercede. They have to get involved to make certain that everything is going to be okay. They have to control the outcome. They, above all else, must protect their child. The Varsity Blues Cheating Scandal is an extreme of what has been going on for years. Parents are doing "too much." If the parents in the Varsity Blues Scandal could have taken the tests for their kids, they would have. This scandal brought to light the most damaging version of that impulse.

Underneath all that competition, we—parents, educators, and kids—have become a culture wildly afraid of imperfection. As an educator, I see this displayed as helicopter parenting and over-parenting. In our insta-everything world, all we want to do is show everyone what we think they want to see. We have become obsessed with not letting people see how imperfect we—and our kids—are. We pose. We curate. We give people our "good side."

Instead of criticizing what appears to be outrageous "displays of wealth" and "hubris" and "laziness" in that cheating scandal, I think we should embrace this moment as an opportunity to look at the root of these issues: fear of

imperfection, fear of failure, and fear that our kids are not good enough.

Parents today know that something is amiss. To be honest, we all are worried. There is a myriad of issues that are running out of control. Kids can swipe right yet struggle to read. Videos are replacing teachers because kids don't have the "attention span" to listen to a real teacher anymore! Times tables and phonics lessons are being traded in for group projects and fad mathematics.¹ It's getting harder to get our children to focus, to start tasks and to finish just about anything. If they do finish, it is with the help of a parent or an adult. No one teaches kids how to learn! But the problem is deeper—kids today don't have resilience. Young kids and teens can't seem to take the reins of life anymore. When parents do too much for their kids, kids can't do for themselves. Now, troves of articles are dedicated to the problem of "Millennials" out in the workforce who lack life skills, *stick-to-itiveness* and resilience. Since the Varsity Blues scandal broke, it seems that everyone finally recognizes there is a problem, but where is anyone with a solution for parents?

Welcome to what I call the Perfection Age. In 2016, Mike Wadhera in TechCrunch had declared the death of the Information Age, an era characterized by telling people about yourself.² Think Facebook status updates and Twitter feeds. Remember those days, way back in 2016, when we used to tell people what we thought and what we were up to in 140 characters or less?³ He singlehandedly declared the dawn

of the “Experience Age” in which people favored showing people who they were on social media sites like Instagram and Snapchat.⁴ Now, we didn’t have to bother wasting time telling people anything; we could show them through a stream of picture updates!

But forget the Experience Age. We have zoomed way past that. I would argue that we are now in an “uber curated” Perfection Age, where you are no longer showing people who you are. An Instagram page is no longer an extension of a Facebook page with pictured memories but rather a distinctly curated hyper-real version of who you are. Instead of posting the first photo taken, kids, teens and adults are stylizing their experiences as if they are on a professional fashion shoot. They must take the perfect photo in the perfect outfit. They must write the perfect hashtags. It is no longer enough to have your friends following you. Popularity is measured on a global scale. The concern is not winning homecoming princess or queen. Kids want to grow vast followings based on likes rather than genuine in real life exchanges. In a world like this, kids, teens, and parents are under far more pressure to appear perfect. That pressure for surface appearances is creating a host of new issues to resolve.

Issue #1: My child is going to school but doesn't know how to study

Around the spring of 2015, I started to notice a recurring pattern in this new age. Many parents were coming to me frustrated. They were annoyed that their child's school had taught them times tables or writing, but their child wasn't picking it up fast enough. Many parents lamented. How many times would their child need to be taught something for it to stick? Their children were learning information but it just wasn't sticking or happening fast enough!

Issue #2: The unstructured learning environment

Another problem brewing in the Perfection Age is the trendy "unstructured" and "inquiry-based" schooling. It looks good on the surface until you dig a little deeper and realize your child might not be getting a proper education. Many of these "current" and "progressive" schools have done away with teaching the very information that is necessary for a child to succeed in life. They have absolutely done away with tests, assessments, a curriculum, and above all else, *structure* in favor of inquiry-based learning. Students are allowed to pursue whatever peaks their interest. What sounded like a utopian experience free of the competition and the frustration we all dealt with in school has now turned 7th grade into a nightmare. Your child can't complete homework or projects

without feeling overwhelmed because they didn't ease into homework over time. Now they have to catch up. You realize they have never read a book for comprehension. They have never learned their multiplication tables, so they are still counting on their fingers. You're panicked! You ask yourself—how on earth is my child going to move into high school, let alone the workforce?

Issue #3: The unstructured home

The third issue that impacts parents is establishing routines at home. A lot of parents absolutely don't want to set rules at home for fear of confrontation or even being *disliked*. Parents don't want their friends to think they are “bad parents” or have a “problem child.” There are no bedtimes, no dinner times, and no homework times. Out of a need to create the “perfect” childhood for your children, kids are allowed to do what they want when they want. And, they never have to do anything they *don't* want to do. But, kids need the structure at home to remind them to eat when they are hungry and to go to bed, so they aren't grumpy in the morning. Otherwise, the next day is shot. They must be taught the skill of applying themselves to things they don't want to do. When they don't have structure, homework doesn't get completed on time and kids don't go to bed on time. Let's stop the pattern before it becomes a runaway train of hungry, angry, lonely and tired!

Issue #4: Technology and distractions

The fourth problem that seems to elude parents is technology and distractions. With all of that posing, curating, DMing and texting, kids today aren't reading and learning the way they used to. They are distracted. I often get an initial call from a parent that homework is taking their child well over 4 to 5 hours to complete. They are worried that the school is assigning too much homework. I will then arrive in homes to observe that this same child is doing homework with the TV on in the background, notifications pinging on their computer and a phone next to that computer—all away from the prying eyes of their parents. It isn't the school or homework. Children aren't able to put their full focus on homework. How on earth is anyone, let alone a young teenager supposed to complete anything with that level of distraction? No wonder our kids don't remember what they are reading. Or parents feel that their kids have focus issues. Their brains are being trained for constant interruption and distraction.

Issue #5: Avoidance

We come full circle to the helicopter parenting issue, the issue that prompted this guide. I observe many parents that are over-involved and kids who are equally *avoidant*. These young tweens and teens are mistaken: the gift of life is building the courage to face your obstacles head on. Instead, they speed

through life trying to avoid confrontation and discomfort. They avoid office hours with teachers. They ignore their authority figures or coaches after something has gone awry in the hopes that they can avoid that feeling of disappointment. They then look to their parents to advocate for them. Those same parents go into a school or gym or dance company, guns blazing. Hoping to curate the perfect childhood, parents have started to do everything for their kids, including fight their battles. You know—the helicopter parent or the bulldozer! Although you might dread it, your teen’s moments of discomfort are their opportunities for growth. Deciding to face a teacher after a bad grade is monumental! It’s critical they learn how to spring back from failure and rebuild that confidence. It’s important to learn how to navigate our conflicts; otherwise our lives become very small.

Issue #6: My child has trouble finishing a task or turning in homework.

Ah...*attention failure*, or the failure to maintain attention on any one task. The newest dis-*ease* of the Perfection Age. People—kids, teens and adults—are so addicted to their devices they don’t stay focused on any single task. They “need” to switch. They can’t finish an assignment without switching to look something up online that is unrelated. They are so used to having a TV, a watch, and an iPhone all grabbing for their attention, that doing reading for homework seems boring.

More and more kids are landing on my doorstep, not with classic ADD or ADHD, but rather with executive functioning issues and attention failure. Children that experience these issues might understand what steps are to be taken, but have difficulty sticking to the steps. They have trouble moving from one phase of a project to another. They might have issues initiating a process altogether. Remember that executive functioning, focus and attention are being built in the brain.⁵ No one is born with perfectly functioning executive abilities like planning and organization.⁶ Yet, imagine how a child's confidence can tumble when they think they should be able to finish a simple task or set of tasks without getting lost, but they can't. It is frustrating. With these students, the issue is compounded when they go to a progressive or non-traditional school. They are working in an unstructured environment, without modeling of basic study skills. They also lack the ability to follow through because their brain is still developing. How do they thrive and feel safe? It's maddening!

Issue #7: I have a teenager. Am I too late to make a difference?

We get calls from parents of 16-year-old teens struggling in high school completely panicked that their child is somehow done developing. They think the wiring is a foregone conclusion. According to Harvard University Neuroscientist Dr. Frances E. Jensen, the myth that your intelligence and IQ

are fixed is just that—a myth.⁷ Jensen argues that there is solid research to “show that your IQ can change during your teen years.”⁸ The brain is still forming. The prefrontal cortex, which controls awareness, planning, consequence, and urgency, is the last part of the brain to develop fully.⁹

It is now fairly common knowledge amongst educators, but most parents don’t realize that brains don’t fully form until about age 25. In neuroscience, they call the shaping of the brain from experience “plasticity.”¹⁰ It means that the brain is capable of change based on environment and experience. Pretty great news, right?

Now, What?

I hope we can help heal this “Culture of Perfectionism” and/or “overparenting” by doing the opposite—empowering you and other parents to let their kids be imperfect. We need to tighten the reins on technology, boundaries and routines. We need to loosen the reins on image, appearance and perfection. We need to let our kids try, fall down and even fail. We need to let them learn and we need to embrace them where they are at—imperfections and all. Parents need to stop over-parenting in certain areas and stop under-parenting in other areas so kids can fly solo and start to do for themselves. We need to teach children to see their mistakes not as catastrophic failures but as feedback: “it’s okay that you are not good at calculus-not a big deal. Listen, I wasn’t great at chemistry either but that didn’t

stop me from going to an Ivy League school.” A mistake is an opportunity to strengthen a muscle. Sometimes that muscle is a math muscle, an SAT or ACT muscle or even a resilience muscle.

This book is the ideal guidebook for a parent that needs a hand to walk them step-by-step through the process of instilling strong habits, life skills and resilience. I use all my favorite meta-learning tools and blend them with a little tough love. Although, I assure you no one is slapping anyone’s hand with a ruler. I give you all the science behind why each tool works so if you have a “child who loves to debate you at home” you have some ammo. Finally, I give you all my field experience.

Are you seeing major distraction? There is a tool for that. Are you noticing your child is avoiding their teacher? I can help. Is your child engaging in a lot of negative self-talk, check! Are you the parents having feelings about implementing structure? No problem. We will work through it.

HOW THIS WORKBOOK WORKS

The following chapters outline seven (7) critical habits and life skills that will help your student thrive in life.

You will notice that I talk a lot about school as well as study habits but school is their environment and their world. It is where our children learn the tools of the trade. They learn how to navigate their world. They learn the habits and skills that set the tone for the rest of their life.

The book is divided into three parts:

Part I is about creating the environment. The right environment is essential for a child to thrive. Chapter two is dedicated to creating the right environment so your child can be focused and organized with all the right tools at their fingertips.

Part II is about the right behaviors. Children don't know what they don't know. The four chapters in Part II help you create and model the right behaviors so that your child can feel confident and even get that A.

Part III is about the right mindset. With environment and behavior under control, we fine-tune attitude, positivity, and cooperation. Once we remove the stressors that create avoidance and evasiveness, we focus your child on how to get to the next level. Mindset is the key. We will work on activities that help your child think positively to create the best possible outcomes with all of their teachers, tutors, and other authority figures.

A SHOPPING LIST

Before we begin, get these items on the list below! They are the basics school supplies for children from the Third grade up:

1. 3 ring binder
2. Paper: lined
3. Paper: printer
4. Spiral bound notebooks
5. Pens: blue and black ink
6. Pencils: no. 2 (either mechanical or old fashioned)
7. Dividers

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is a roadmap for parents who need help closing the gaps in their child's development. It is a guidebook for those parents who need reassurance that their instincts are correct. You aren't crazy. Your children may not be getting the study skills and structure they need. I am in the trenches alongside you. I was scratching my head for a while wondering how to fix it until I figured out what was working with my clients.

This field guide gives you answers so that you can ask the right questions or close those gaps yourself.