

We're All Just Making It Up As We Go Along (Even This 'Parenting Expert')

By Dr. Justin Coulson Positive Psychologist

Have you read *The Barefoot Investor*? It's been the number 1 non-fiction book in Australia this year – all about finance. In his introduction to the book Scott Pape, the author, describes the day his family lost their Victorian bushland home to a fire. As they surveyed the damage, he said his first thought was: "I've got this." He knew that despite the drama, he had his financial security sorted and could get his family through.

I've thought a lot about that statement as it relates to parenting. I've got a PhD in psychology (parenting). I've just about finished my fourth book about parenting. I've written countless articles, given seminars to tens of thousands of parents, and counselled parents through caregiving crises. But with all of that experience, I still don't feel like I can look at parenting with an "I've got this" mentality. From time to time we all have good moments, but typically they're fleeting. Parenting feels a little less concrete than finances. And when we get too cocky and think we really do "got this", one of the children humbles us with disarming and clinical precision and incisiveness.

The cliché is that our children don't come with an instruction manual. But there *are* books, textbooks, research papers, and more that are designed to help us. Yet even these resources don't fully prepare us for the unique challenges our children bring us. I haven't yet come across a book that provides a step-by-step outline for how to respond when your three-year-old continually removes her clothes in public places regardless of how many times you put them back on (or how many "inescapable" clothing items you purchase), nor the best words to say to a teenager who just crashed your car... and so on.

We are all making it up as we go along. But I have learned a few things along the way that can help us to feel a little more confident:

1. **Always be calmer than your child.** Steve Biddulph first taught me this principle and it has served me well (when I've implemented it) in dealing with challenging children. When we are calm, we think clearly and respond patiently. "Calm and kind" is my mantra.
2. **Stop trying to control everything.** The kids will grow up just fine without us telling them what to do and when and how and then asking why they didn't do it ten minutes ago.
3. **Words wound.** We're all going to say stuff to our kids we shouldn't. But we need to remember that wounds from words inflict lifelong pain on our children. Bite your tongue. Stay silent. When you're mad, your thinking is foggy... but you don't realise it's foggy because it's foggy. Remember what your mum told you. "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."
4. **Quit whining about how hard being a parent is.** We all know it's hard. We're all sleep-deprived. We've all had to pick up poo out of the bath with our bare hands, or clean texta off walls, or wake up to vomit-stained carpet in the kids' room. We know. It's hard. It's fun to laugh about the challenges, but there is nothing that happens that can't be made worse by whining. So many people would do anything to have what we have – a child. Whining is overrated. Gratitude feels better.
5. **Saying sorry soothes.** Tell your child you are sorry when you get it wrong. Explain what you did and why it was wrong. And ask: "Will you forgive me?" Humbly asking your little one to forgive you will be something that binds you together in deep ways.
6. **Go camping regularly – without wifi or 4G.** Even if you hate sleeping on the ground in a tent with kids who think farting is funny because the whole camp site can hear it. Even if it's only overnight and it takes longer to pack and unpack the car than it takes to camp. Even if the kids complain. Even if you get it all wrong and forget stuff. Your kids will be grateful for the memories and the relationship building.
7. **936.** That's the number of weekends you'll have with your kids from the time they're born until the day they're 18 and are officially adults. Reminding yourself of this makes it easier to remember how important it is to make the most of most moments.

8. **Do something each school holidays.** It doesn't have to cost much. It shouldn't be extravagant. But the kids need time with you and this is the best way to make it happen.
9. **Stop worrying about grades.** Our politicians have created a system that sucks the fire of curiosity out of our kids. Worry about helping them do something that makes them come alive and that satisfies their inner potential for excellence and for contributing. It's inside them, and getting straight A's is typically unlikely to help them get it.
10. **Let them enjoy their favourite music without your criticism.** You hated it when your folks did it to you. Don't do it to them.
11. **Quit frowning and grouching so much and smile more.** Kids need to see us happy.
12. **Speak softly.** They're not deaf. If they're not responding, speak even more quietly. They'll listen more closely.
13. **Your job is to help your child who s/he is supposed to be.** Don't create your child in your image, or in the image of that thing that matters most to you. Let them discover who they are and encourage them to pursue that with vigour.
14. **You cannot ever hug your kids enough.**
15. **Know you'll never be ready for it all.** First birthday, first day of school, first love, first breakup, first time behind the wheel, first... whatever. Your children will always grow up faster than you can believe, and you'll always wonder where the months and years have gone.
16. **Sit on the edge of the bed and watch them sleep** – even when they're big.
17. **Parenting means letting go.** One day your child will be old enough to leave the nest. You will ache and grieve and think they're not ready. And then you will have to watch as they drive away, and you will hurt and be proud and lost and excited all at once.
18. **You are doing your best** – and it's probably better than you think. Judging parents has become a spectator sport. Critics are everywhere. Don't listen to them. If you're doing the best you know how, that will be enough.
19. **Go easy on yourself.** Inside your head is that helpless little 5-year-old child you used to be. If a representative from DOCS could hear how you're talking to yourself, would you get in trouble for abuse?

We're all making it up as we go along. And while some of us may have read more books, had more children, or gained more experience, none of us is ever going to get everything all right. It's the same with being a spouse or partner, doing the work we are employed to do, or even being ourselves. So let go a little, and sit back, smile more, and watch your precious children grow. And be encouraged. Making it up as we go along seems to work out ok for most of us most of the time.