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The Book You Wish Your Parents Had Read

(and Your Children Will be Glad That You Did)

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'Helpful for all relationships in life' **Nigella Lawson**

'A fascinating read on the emotional baggage we all carry' **Elizabeth Day**

Philippa Perry

With a new chapter about sibling relationships

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PHILIPPA PERRY

PENGUIN LIFE

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This book is dedicated with love to my sister Belinda

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Foreword

This is not a straightforward parenting book.

I'm not going to go into details about potty-training or weaning.

This book is about how we have relationships with our children, what gets in the way of a good connection and what can enhance it.

It's about how we were brought up and how that has a bearing on how we parent, about the mistakes we'll make – especially those we never wanted to make – and what to do about them.

You will not find many tips, tricks or parenting hacks in this book, and at times it may upset you, make you angry or even make you a better parent.

I wrote the book I wish I had read as a new parent, and I really wish my parents had read it.

Introduction

Recently, I watched a stand-up routine by the comedian Michael McIntyre in which he said there are four things we need to do with our children: get them dressed, feed them, wash them and put them to bed. He said before he had his children he had a fantasy that being a parent would be all running through meadows and eating picnics, but the reality was that each day was an ongoing battle getting them to do just these four basic things. There was much laughter from the audience as he described persuading them to have their hair washed, to put on a coat, to go outside or to eat a vegetable. It was the laughter of parents, maybe parents like us, who've been there too. Being a parent* can be hard work. It can be boring, dispiriting, frustrating and taxing while at the same time being the funniest, most joyful, most love-filled, brilliant thing you'll ever experience.

When you're bogged down in the minutiae of nappies, childhood illnesses, tantrums (toddler and teenage), or when you're doing a full day's work and coming home to your real work, which includes scraping banana out of cracks in the high chair, or another letter from the headteacher summoning you to the school, it can be hard to put being a parent in perspective. This book is about giving you that big picture, to help you pull back,

* When I use the word 'parent' I mean someone who is responsible for children belonging to them, whether biologically, legally or as a close relative or friend; in other words, 'parent' could be interchangeable with 'primary caregiver'. Sometimes I use the word 'carer'; this can mean parent, surrogate parent, step-parent, paid or unpaid help or anyone who has principle responsibility for the child.

to see what matters and what doesn't, and what you can do to help your child be the person they can be.

The core of parenting is the relationship you have with your child. If people were plants, the relationship would be the soil. The relationship supports, nurtures, allows growth – or inhibits it. Without a relationship they can lean on, a child's sense of their security is compromised. You want the relationship to be a source of strength for your child – and, one day, for their children too.

As a psychotherapist, I've had the experience of listening to and talking to people who struggle with different aspects of parenting. Through my work I have had the opportunity to look at how relationships become dysfunctional – and what makes them work well again. The objective of this book is to share with you what is relevant when it comes to parenting. This will include how to work with feelings – yours and theirs – how to attune yourself to your children so you can learn to understand them better and how to have a real connection with them rather than getting stuck in exhausting patterns of conflict or withdrawal.

I take the long-term view on parenting rather than a tips-and-tricks approach. I am interested in how we can relate to our children rather than how we can manipulate them. In this book I encourage you to look at your own babyhood and childhood experiences so that you can pass on the good that was done to you by your own upbringing and hold back on the less helpful aspects of it. I'll be looking at how we can make all our relationships better and good for our children to grow up among. I'll cover how our attitudes in pregnancy can have a bearing on our future bond with our child, and how to be with a baby, a child, an adolescent or an adult child so you can have a relationship with them that is a source of strength to them and satisfaction to you. And, along the way, have far fewer battles about getting them dressed, fed, washed and put to bed.

This book is for parents who not only love their children but want to like them too.

PART ONE

Your Parenting Legacy

The cliché is true: children do not do what we say; they do what we do. Before we even consider the behaviour of our children, it's useful – essential, even – to look at their first role models. And one of them is you.

This section is all about you, because you will be a major influence on your child. In it, I'll give examples of how the past can affect the present when it comes to your relationship with your child. I will talk about how a child can often trigger old feelings in us that we then mistakenly act on in our dealings with them. I'll also be looking at the importance of examining our own inner critic so we do not pass too much of its damaging effects on to the next generation.

The past comes back to bite us (and our children)

A child needs warmth and acceptance, physical touch, your physical presence, love plus boundaries, understanding, play with people of all ages, soothing experiences and a lot of your attention and your time. Oh, so that's simple then: the book can end here. Except it can't, because things get in the way. Your life can get in the way: circumstances, childcare, money, school, work, lack of time and busyness . . . and this is not an exhaustive list, as you know.

But what can get in the way more than any of this, however, is what was given to us when we ourselves were babies and children. If we don't look at how we were brought up and the legacy of that, it can come back to bite us. You might have found yourself saying something along the lines of: 'I opened my mouth

and my mother's words came out.' Of course, if theirs were words that made you feel wanted, loved and safe as a child, that would be fine. But so often they are the words that did the opposite.

What can get in the way are things like our own lack of confidence, our pessimism, our defences, which block our feelings, and our fear of being overwhelmed by feelings. Or when it comes specifically to relating to our children, it could be what irritates us about them, our expectations for them, or our fears for them. We are but a link in a chain stretching back through millennia and forward until who knows when.

The good news is you can learn to reshape your link, and this will improve the life of your children and their children, and you can start now. You don't have to do everything that was done to you; you can ditch the things that were unhelpful. If you are a parent or are going to be one, you can unpack and become familiar with your childhood, examine what happened to you, how you felt about it then, how you feel about it now, and, after having done that unpacking and taken a good look at it all, put back only what you need.

If, when you were growing up, you were, for the most part, respected as a unique and valuable individual, shown unconditional love, given enough positive attention and had rewarding relationships with your family members, you will have received a blueprint to create positive, functional relationships. In turn, this would have shown you that you could positively contribute to your family and to your community. If all this is true of you, then the exercise of examining your childhood is unlikely to be too painful.

If you did not have a childhood like this – and that's the case for a large proportion of us – looking back on it may bring emotional discomfort. I think it is necessary to become more self-aware around that discomfort so that we can become more mindful of ways to stop us passing it on. So much of what we have inherited sits just outside of our awareness. That makes it hard sometimes to know whether we are reacting in the here and

now to our child's behaviour or whether our responses are more rooted in our past.

I think this story will help to illustrate what I mean. It was told to me by Tay, a loving mum and senior psychotherapist who trains other psychotherapists. I'm mentioning both her roles to make it clear that even the most self-aware and well-meaning of us can slip into an emotional time warp and find ourselves reacting to our past rather than to what's happening here in the present. This story begins when Tay's daughter Emily, who was nearly seven, shouted to her that she was stuck on a climbing frame, that she needed help to get off.

> I told her to get down and, when she said she couldn't, I suddenly felt furious. I thought she was being ridiculous – she could easily get down herself. I shouted, 'Get down this minute!'
>
> She eventually did. Then she tried to hold my hand, but I was still furious, and I said no, and then she howled.
>
> Once we got home and made tea together she calmed down and I wrote off the whole thing to myself as 'God, kids can be a pain.'
>
> Fast-forward a week: we're at the zoo and there's another climbing frame. Looking at it, I felt a flash of guilt. It obviously reminded Emily of the previous week too, because she looked up at me almost fearfully.
>
> I asked her if she wanted to play on it. This time, instead of sitting on a bench looking at my phone, I stood by the frame and watched her. When she felt she'd got stuck, she held out her arms to me for help. But this time I was more encouraging. I said, 'Put one foot there and the other there and grab that and you'll be able to do it by yourself.' And she did.
>
> When she had got down, she said, 'Why didn't you help me last time?'
>
> I thought about it, and I said, 'When I was little, Nana treated me like a princess and carried me everywhere, told me

to "be careful" all the time. It made me feel incapable of doing anything for myself and I ended up with no confidence. I don't want that to happen to you, which is why I didn't want to help when you asked to be lifted off the climbing frame last week. And it reminded me of being your age, when I wasn't allowed to get down by myself. I was overcome with anger and I took it out on you, and that wasn't fair.'

Emily looked up at me and said, 'Oh, I just thought you didn't care.'

'Oh no,' I said. 'I care, but at that moment I didn't know that I was angry at Nana and not at you. And I'm sorry.'

Like Tay, it's easy to fall into making instant judgements or assumptions about our emotional reaction without considering that it may be as much to do with what's being triggered in our own background as with what's happening now.

But when you feel anger – or any other difficult emotions, including resentment, frustration, envy, disgust, panic, irritation, dread, fear, et cetera – in response to something your child has done or requested, it's a good idea to think of it as a warning. Not a warning that your child or children are necessarily doing anything wrong but that your own buttons are being pressed.

Often the pattern works like this: when you react with anger or another overly charged emotion around your child it is because it's a way you have learned to defend yourself from feeling what you felt at their age. Outside of your awareness, their behaviour is threatening to trigger your own past feelings of despair, of longing, of loneliness, jealousy or neediness. And so you unknowingly take the easier option: rather than empathizing with what your child is feeling, you short-circuit to being angry or frustrated or panicked.

Sometimes the feelings from the past that are being re-triggered go back more than one generation. My mother used to find the shrieks of children at play irritating. I noticed that I too went into

a sort of alert state when my own child and her friends were making a noise, even though they were enjoying themselves appropriately. I wanted to find out more, so I asked my mother what would have happened to her if she had played noisily as a child. She told me her father – my grandfather – had been over fifty when she was born, he often had bad headaches and all the children had to tiptoe around the house or they got into trouble.

Maybe you're scared if you admit that, at times, your irritation with your child gets the upper hand, thinking it will intensify those angry feelings or somehow make them more real. But, in fact, naming our inconvenient feelings to ourselves and finding an alternative narrative for them – one where we don't hold our children responsible – means we won't judge our children as being somehow at fault for having triggered them. If you can do this, it makes you less likely to act out on that feeling at the expense of your child. You will not always be able to trace a story that makes sense of how you feel, but that doesn't mean there isn't one, and it can be helpful to hold on to that.

One issue might be that as a child you felt that the people who loved you perhaps didn't always like you. They might sometimes have found you annoying, hard work, disappointing, unimportant, exasperating, clumsy or stupid. When you're reminded of this by your own child's behaviour, you are triggered and you end up shouting or acting out whatever your default negative behaviour is.

There's no doubt it can feel hard, becoming a parent. Overnight, your child becomes your most demanding priority, 24/7. Having a child may have even made you finally realize what your own parents had to deal with, maybe to appreciate them more, to identify with them more or to feel more compassion for them. But you need to identify with your own child or children too. Time spent contemplating what it may have felt like for you as a baby or a child around the same age as your own child will help you develop empathy for your child. That will

help you understand and feel with them when they behave in a way that triggers you into wanting to push them away.

I had a client, Oskar, who had adopted a little boy of eighteen months old. Every time his son dropped food on the floor, or left his food, Oskar felt rage rise up in him. I asked him what would have happened to him as a child if he'd dropped or left food? He remembered his grandfather rapping his knuckles with the handle of a knife then making him leave the room. After he got back in touch with what it had felt like for him as a little boy when he was treated like that, he found compassion for his own self as a toddler, which in turn helped him find patience for his child.

It's easy to assume our feelings belong with what's happening in front of us and are not simply a reaction to what happened in the past. As an example, imagine you have a four-year-old child who gets a huge pile of presents on their birthday and you sharply call them 'spoilt' for not sharing one of their new toys.

What is happening here? Logically, it's not their fault if they are the recipient of so much stuff. You may unconsciously be assuming they are undeserving of so many things and your irritation at that leaks out in a sharp tone or by you unreasonably expecting them to be more mature.

If you stop to look back, to become interested in your irritation towards them, what you might find is that your own inner four-year-old is jealous or feels competitive. Maybe at the age of four you were told to share something you didn't want to share, or you simply weren't given many things and, in order not to feel sad for four-year-old you, you lash out at your child.

I'm reminded of the hate mail and negative social media attention anyone in the public eye receives from anonymous sources. If you read between the lines, what it seems to be saying more than anything is, *It's not fair that you're famous and I'm not*. It's not so unusual to feel jealous of our children. If you do, you need to own it, not act out negatively towards your child because of it. They don't need parental trolling.

Throughout this book I have put in exercises that may help you have a deeper understanding of what I'm talking about. If you find them unhelpful or overwhelming, you can skip them, and perhaps come back to them when you feel more ready.

Exercise: Where does this emotion come from?

The next time you feel anger towards your child (or any other overly charged emotion), rather than unthinkingly responding, stop to ask yourself: Does this feeling wholly belong to this situation and my child in the present? How am I stopping myself seeing the situation from their standpoint?

One good way to stop yourself from reacting is to say, 'I need some time to think about what's happening,' and to use that time to calm down. Even if your child does need some guidance, there's not much point in doing it when you're angry. If you give it then, they will hear only your anger and not what you are trying to tell them.

You can do this second variation of the exercise even if you do not yet have a child. Just notice how often you feel angry, or self-righteous, or indignant, or panicky or perhaps ashamed, or self-loathing or disconnected. Look for patterns in your responses. Look back to when you first felt this feeling, tracing it back to your childhood, where you began to respond like this, and you may begin to understand to what extent this reaction has become a habit. In other words, the response is at least as much due to it having become a habit in you than it is to do with the situation in the present.

Rupture and repair

In an ideal world, we would catch ourselves before we ever acted out on a feeling inappropriately. We would never shout at our child or threaten them or make them feel bad about themselves

in any way. Of course, it's unrealistic to think we would be able to do this every time. Look at Tay – she's an experienced psychotherapist and she still acted on her fury because she thought it belonged to the present. But one thing she did do, and what we can all learn to do, to mend the hurt is called 'rupture and repair'. Ruptures – those times when we misunderstand each other, where we make wrong assumptions, where we hurt someone – are inevitable in every important, intimate and familial relationship. It is not the rupture that is so important, it is the repair that matters.

The way to make repairs in relationships is firstly by working to change your responses, that is, to recognize your triggers and use that knowledge to react in a different way. Or, if your child is old enough to understand, you can use words and apologize, as Tay did to Emily. Even if you only realize that you acted wrongly towards your child many moons after it happened, you can still tell them where you got it wrong. It can mean a tremendous amount to a child, even an adult child, when a parent makes a repair. Look at the belief that Emily was carrying. She assumed Tay, on some level, did not care about her. What a relief to learn her mother did care and had merely been in a muddle.

A parent once asked me whether it was dangerous to apologize to children. 'But don't they need you to be right, otherwise they won't feel secure?' she asked. No! What children need is for us to be real and authentic, not perfect.

Think back to your childhood: were you made to feel 'bad' or in the wrong, or even responsible for your parents' bad moods? If it happened to you, it is all too easy to try to repair your feeling of being wrong by making someone else feel wrong, and the victims of this are, far too often, our children.

A child's own instincts will tell them when we are not in tune with them or with what's happening and, if we pretend that we are, we will dull their instincts. For example, if we pretend that, as adults, we are never wrong, the result can be a child who

overadapts – not only to what you say, but to what anyone may say. Then they can become more vulnerable to people who may not have their best interests at heart. Instinct is a major component in confidence, competence and intelligence, so it's a good idea not to damage or warp your child's.

I met Mark when he came to a parenting workshop I was running – his wife, Toni, had suggested he attend. At the time, their son, Toby, was nearly two. Mark told me he and his wife had agreed not to have children but that, at the age of forty, Toni changed her mind. After a year of trying and a year of IVF, she got pregnant.

> Considering we worked so hard in getting there, it surprises me now, looking back, how hazy I was about what life with a baby would be like. I think I must've got my idea of parenthood from watching television, when the baby is miraculously mostly asleep in a cot and hardly ever cries.
>
> Once Toby was born, the reality of no longer having any spontaneity and flexibility, of the tedium of a baby, of one of us always being on baby duty around the clock, meant I began to swing between feeling resentful or depressed or both.
>
> Two years on, I'm still not enjoying my life. Toni and I don't talk about anything other than Toby and, if I try to talk about something else, it reverts to him in under a minute. I know I'm being selfish but that doesn't stop me feeling like I'm on a short fuse. I don't see myself living with Toni and Toby for much longer, to be honest.

I asked Mark to tell me about his childhood. All he could say was that he wasn't very interested in exploring it with me, as it had been completely normal. As a psychotherapist, I took 'not being interested' as a clue he wanted to distance himself from it. I suspected that being a parent was triggering feelings in him that he wanted to run away from.

I asked Mark what 'normal' meant. He told me his dad left when he was three and, as he grew up, his father's visits became less and less frequent. Mark is right: this is a normal childhood. However, that does not mean that the disappearance of his father didn't matter to him.

I asked Mark how he'd felt about his father's desertion, and he couldn't remember. I suggested it was perhaps too painful to remember. And perhaps it felt easier to be like his own dad and to leave Toni and Toby because then he didn't have to unlock his own box of difficult emotions. I told him I thought it was important that he did indeed unlock and open it because, otherwise, he wouldn't be sensitive to the needs of his own son and would pass down to Toby what had been passed down to him. I wasn't sure from his response if he heard what I was actually saying.

I didn't see Mark until six months later, at a different workshop. He told me he'd been feeling depressed and, rather than just dismissing it, he'd decided to start having therapy. To his surprise, he told me, he found himself crying and shouting in the therapist's room about his own father leaving him.

> Therapy helped me put the feelings where they needed to be – with the desertion of my dad, rather than thinking I just wasn't cut out to be in this relationship or to be a parent.
>
> I'm not saying I don't still feel bored, or even resentful sometimes, but I know that resentment belongs in my past. I know it's not about Toby.
>
> I can see the point of all the attention I give to Toby now; it's to make him feel good, not just now but in the future. Toni and I are filling him up with love and, hopefully, that will mean he has love to give when he's older, so he will feel valuable. I have no relationship with my own father. I know Toby is getting from me what I didn't get from my own dad, that we are laying the foundations of a great relationship.

> Seeing the point of what I'm doing has turned most of my discontent to hope and gratitude. I feel closer to Toni again now too. Now I am more interested in and present with Toby, it has freed Toni up to think of other things apart from him.

Mark repaired the rupture with Toby – his desire to desert him – by looking into his own past in order to understand what was happening in the present. Then he was able to change his attitude towards being with his son. It was as though he could not unlock his love until he had unlocked his grief.

Repairing the past

Some time ago, a mother-to-be asked me what my one suggestion for a new parent would be. I told her, whatever age your child is, they are liable to remind you, on a bodily level, of the emotions you went through when you were at a similar stage. She looked at me, a bit bemused.

A year or so later, with a toddler at her feet, that same mum told me that she hadn't understood what I meant at the time. But she'd remembered it and, as she grew into her new role, it had begun to make so much sense and had helped her to feel for her child as well. You won't remember consciously what it's like to be a baby, but on other levels you will remember, and your child will keep reminding you.

It is common for a parent to withdraw from their child at a very similar age to when that parent's parent became unavailable to them. Or a parent will want to pull away emotionally when their child is the same age as they were when they felt alone. Mark is a classic example of someone who didn't want to face up to the feelings his child was bringing up in him.

You might want to run away from these feelings, and from

your child too, but if you do you will pass down what was done to you. There will be plenty of good stuff you will be passing on too – all that love you received – but what you don't want to pass on is your inherited fear, hate, loneliness or resentment. There will be times when you feel unpleasant emotions towards or around your child, just like you occasionally may towards your partner, your parent, your friend or yourself. If you admit this, then you will be less likely to be unthinkingly punishing them for whatever feeling they have brought up in you.

If you find, as Mark did, that you resent family life because you feel pushed aside, it could be because you were pushed aside as a child and not considered in one or both of your parents' lives. Sometimes this resentment can feel more like boredom or a feeling of disconnection from your child.

Some parents think I'm exaggerating when I use words like 'desertion' and 'resentment'. 'I don't resent my children,' they say. 'Sometimes I want to be left alone in peace, but I love them.' I think of desertion as a spectrum. On the most severe end, there's the actual desertion of physically removing yourself from the child's life entirely, like Mark's father did. But I also consider desertion to include pushing a child away when they want your attention or not really listening to them when they are trying to, for example, show you their painting (which is your child trying to show you, on one level, who they really are).

This feeling of wanting to push children away, of wanting them to sleep long and to play independently before they are ready so they don't take up your time, can come about when you're trying not to feel with your child because they're such a painful reminder of your childhood. Because of this, you're unable to surrender to their needs. It's true we may tell ourselves we push our children away because we want more of the other areas of our lives, such as work, friends and Netflix, but we are the grown-ups here. We know that this needy stage is just that,