

Eileen Kennedy-Moore

Mark S. Lowenthal

SMART
PARENTING
FOR
Smart
Kids

Nurturing
Your Child's
True
Potential



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More Praise for *Smart Parenting for Smart Kids*

“Having had the experience of raising a smart, perfectionistic child myself, this book is a literal godsend. Packed with familiar anecdotes and valuable advice, parents will find great wisdom in its pages.”

—Stephen R. Covey, author, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and *The Leader in Me*

“*Smart Parenting for Smart Kids* is a fresh parenting book filled with vignettes and strategies for raising smart kids to become healthy, happy, and contributing adults. It shines light on the mindset needed to counter the effects on our children of our high-stakes culture and education system.”

—Vicki Abeles, producer and codirector, *Race to Nowhere*

“*Smart Parenting for Smart Kids* is a really important book for parents who are immersed in the wave of pressure parenting. The authors have done parents a favor by exposing the flaws in the argument that our kids must be pushed ever harder to succeed. This book helps parents see how to encourage their children to develop as whole people with feelings, ideas, and the ability to cope with the occasional disappointment too.”

—Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, PhD, professor, University of Delaware; author, *Einstein Never Used Flash Cards* and *A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool*

“This book offers warm, sensible, and practical ways that parents can help their children build positive relationships and develop effective coping skills. The authors make parents aware of the fine line between encouragement and over-involvement. I highly recommend it.”

—Nancy Samalin, MS, parent educator and best-selling author, *Loving Without Spoiling*

“If you wish to be a smart parent, get this book and absorb its messages about how to help your children learn from experience, grow despite setbacks, work well with those around them, and find their own motivation and joy.”

—Maurice J. Elias, PhD, director, Clinical Training, Psychology Department, Rutgers University; coauthor, *Emotionally Intelligent Parenting*

“This book is a treat—smart guidance for parents of bright children in a stressed-out world! Kennedy-Moore and Lowenthal engage you with their comfortable writing style, psychological expertise, compelling examples of children’s core challenges, and sound parenting strategies. I recommend it for parents who want to help their children achieve and thrive, without pressure.”

—Carol D. Goodheart, EdD, 2010 president, American Psychological Association

“Parents will identify their children in the case studies presented by the authors and immediately find practical strategies for guiding them with their intellectual and social-emotional needs.”

—Sylvia Rimm, PhD, author, *How to Parent So Children Will Learn*

“Kennedy-Moore and Lowenthal show us how to encourage healthy self-esteem and coping in our children. In a clear manner, they translate solid strategies into easy-to-understand advice for parents to help kids stay productive and happy. Wish my parents had this when I was growing up.”

—Jed Baker, PhD, author, *No More Meltdowns*

“This warm and wise book shows parents how to nurture the social and emotional skills that all children need to succeed. It’s filled with practical strategies parents can use to help children discover and develop their true potential.”

—Michele Borba, PhD, author, *The Big Book of Parenting Solutions*

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Parenting
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OTHER BOOKS WRITTEN OR COAUTHORED BY EILEEN KENNEDY-MOORE

For parents:

The Unwritten Rules of Friendship: Simple Strategies to Help Your Child Make Friends

Natalie Madorsky Elman and Eileen Kennedy-Moore

For mental health professionals:

Expressing Emotion: Myths, Realities and Therapeutic Strategies

Eileen Kennedy-Moore and Jeanne C. Watson

For children:

What About Me? 12 Ways to Get Your Parents' Attention (Without Hitting Your Sister)

Eileen Kennedy-Moore and Mits Katayama (illus.)

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*This book is lovingly dedicated to our spouses and partners
on our parenting journey, Tony Moore and Sandy Voremberg*

NOTE TO THE READER

The vignettes in this book are based on composites of children we have known. Names and identifying information have been changed or omitted. The dialogues are fictional. They are intended to represent typical behavior and problems, and they do not refer to specific people or real events.

This book is for general educational purposes only. It does not constitute and should not substitute for individual professional advice, psychotherapy, or the provision of psychological services.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book was both a pleasure and a challenge to write. The issues we discuss are neither simple nor quickly resolved, but we believe they are at the core of a life well lived. Writing this book caused us to examine our own values, experience, and parenting practices, and deepened our understanding in meaningful ways.

We are especially grateful to the children and parents who are or have been our psychotherapy clients. Thank you for sharing your observations, insights, struggles, and strengths with us, and for trusting us to help. You are the inspiration for this book.

We thank our wonderful agent, Betsy Amster, who understood the heart of this book from the beginning, and who has been an invaluable source of support and encouragement throughout the process of writing it. We thank our editor, Alan Rinzler, for championing this book, for using a light but very perceptive editorial hand, and for being amazingly responsive with his feedback. We also thank the dedicated staff at Jossey-Bass for turning our manuscript into a “real-live” book.

Our friends and colleagues have contributed moral support and brainstorming efforts through the ups and downs of writing this book: Sheila Kennedy Hickey (who counts as both a friend and a sister!), Julie Shadd Kennedy (who counts as both a friend and a sister-in-law!), Bob Harrell, Brian Gross, Jill Degener Smith, Julie Abrams, David Sacks, Karen Cohen, Laura Skivone Fecko, Eliot Garson, Jeffrey Segal, Bonnie Lipeles, Kathy Newman, and Jane Simon. Your support has meant a lot to us!

Most of all, we thank our families. Eileen thanks her husband, Tony Moore, who has been a wonderful source of

both practical and emotional support, listening to half-formed ideas, solving computer glitches, tackling or ignoring unfinished household chores, and making necessary late-night ice cream runs to cheer her on. She also thanks their children, Mary, Daniel, Sheila, and Brenna Kennedy-Moore, for filling her life with love, laughter, and learning. Mark thanks his wife, Sandy Voremberg, who has been there for him in every way possible over the past seventeen years and throughout the writing of this book. He also thanks their children, Ian and Haley Lowenthal. They continue to teach him about becoming a better parent as well as a more patient, sensitive, and loving person.

INTRODUCTION

Rethinking Potential

Potential is a dangerous word.

When someone tells you that your child has “real potential,” you probably feel delighted. Maybe you imagine your child soaring through life, surpassing all your accomplishments, suffering none of your setbacks, while you watch with loving admiration.

But then the worries start, because potential, after all, is a possibility, not a guarantee. What if your child doesn't live up to that potential?

THE PRESSURE TO HELP OUR KIDS ACHIEVE

Friends, neighbors, and the “child improvement” industry are quick to tell us everything we need to do to help our children reach their potential. They insist:

- Play Mozart while your baby is in the womb.
- Use the “brain boosting” baby formula.
- Sign your toddler up for gym classes to develop gross motor skills.
- Arrange for music classes to develop your child's mathematical thinking.
- Start soccer by three, or it will be too late.
- Language immersion must take place before the critical period ends.
- It's not enough to do one activity; you have to make sure your child is well rounded.

From all sides, the message is “Start early; go faster; do more.” The earnestness and intensity of this advice makes it seem as though any parent who doesn’t sign her children up for a bevy of enriching activities is neglectful.

We all know that overscheduled children (that is, kids who do more activities than ours do!) are a national problem, but the pressure and competition continue, and nothing changes. Philosophically, we might appreciate the value of downtime, but as parents, we’re afraid to do anything less than everything possible to develop our children’s potential.

In our zeal and anxiety to make sure our children fulfill their potential, we look to grades, test scores, and class placement as if they were crystal balls into the future—objective and infallible indicators of what lies ahead. We fret if a grade is low. We worry that our children might not be working hard enough. We fear that the curriculum offerings might not be challenging enough. Again, we are bombarded by advice: “Oh, isn’t your daughter doing the computer-based tutoring that will advance her test scores one whole year?” We monitor homework, help them study for tests, critique their papers, supervise their science projects, and worry we’re not doing enough. We wouldn’t want our children to waste their potential.

THE BURDEN OF POTENTIAL

It’s very easy for thoughts about potential to slip from “possibility” to “expectation.” Conscientious efforts to support and encourage our children’s achievement can drift into anxious concerns about what they *could* accomplish, if only they apply themselves diligently enough and take the right classes and get the right opportunities and score high enough . . .

Potential becomes a burden when we see it as a predestined calling to impressive accomplishments. Both

parents and children can become seduced into focusing on performance rather than growth, on being The Best rather than making progress, and on accumulating external awards and accomplishments as the primary measures of worth. Worst of all, this one-dimensional perspective on potential creates a terrible fear of failure.

A DIFFERENT IDEA OF POTENTIAL

A narrow view of potential suggests that there is some lofty gold ring of success, and our children will either jump high enough to reach it or else fall short. But life doesn't work that way. In real life, there are lots of choices, lots of chances, and lots of paths. It makes no sense to talk about kids "not living up to their potential" because the miracle of children is that we just don't know how they will change or who they will become. The path of development is a journey of discovery that is clear only in retrospect, and it's rarely a straight line.

This book is for parents who understand that potential is not an end point but a capacity to grow and learn. Nurturing children's potential, in the broadest sense, means cultivating their humanity. It involves supporting their expanding abilities to reach out to others with kindness and empathy, to feel part of something bigger than themselves, to find joy and satisfaction in creating a life that is personally meaningful . . . and so much more.

THE DOWNSIDE OF BEING SMART

Concerns about "achieving potential" tend to be especially prominent when it comes to school performance. Maybe this

is because kids spend so much time in school. Maybe it's because school is often a segue to future careers. Or maybe it's because nowadays children's academic performance is constantly rated and ranked.

What's surprising to us is that the greatest anxiety about achievement—in both parents and kids—often surrounds the children who have the most scholastic aptitude. These children spend a lot of time thinking and hearing about what they could or should achieve—because of their potential.

There are lots of ways to be smart, but in this book, when we refer to “smart” or “bright” kids, we're talking about children who are able to earn A's and B's, even if they aren't currently producing in school. Because they are so capable, they often face a lot of pressure to achieve. And sometimes that can lead to too much focus on what they do rather than on who they are.

WHY WE WROTE THIS BOOK

Kids today face unique challenges in developing a healthy perspective on achievement. We've observed this in our own children, in our friends' kids, and in the children we work with in our psychology practices. Too often, we've seen smart kids who

- Give up at the first sign of difficulty
- Become distraught over minor mistakes
- Seem unmotivated and put forth minimal effort
- Find working with classmates intolerable
- Get into needless power struggles with adults
- Feel lonely and disconnected from peers

As clinical psychologists, we've seen a lot of bright but unhappy children. In fact, some of the most miserable, angry, or stressed-out kids we've worked with were also the most academically capable.

We live in a narcissistic age that emphasizes being impressive and seeking admiration. Sadly, smart kids are often the ones who are hurt most by this focus on externals. Because they *can* perform, and that performance seems so important to everyone around them, they may start to believe that they *are* the performance.

A real danger facing bright children is that they will come to define themselves solely in terms of their accomplishments—to believe, “I’m smart, but that’s all I am.” This makes them terribly vulnerable. If they don’t perform perfectly, if someone else is “smarter,” if they have to struggle to learn something, or if they encounter any setback, they feel inadequate or even worthless. A minor criticism leaves them feeling wounded or enraged. Even their victories can feel empty because admiration is a cold substitute for closeness. When kids measure their worth solely in terms of achievement, their self-image becomes distorted and their ability to connect with others is crippled.

The antidote is to help children cultivate a broad self-definition that encompasses not only their abilities but also their humanity. This does *not* mean either settling for mediocrity or creating “superkids”; it means helping children develop the foundation they need to discover their passions, build relationships, sustain effort, and create a life with authentic happiness.

We wrote this book because we wanted to be a voice of clarity and comfort for parents who care about developing their children’s inner strength. Compassion, perspective, grit . . . these qualities aren’t necessarily impressive—your kids won’t win a certificate for developing them—but they are essential to a well-lived life.

SEVEN FUNDAMENTAL CHALLENGES

All children face challenges growing up, but for bright children, concerns about achievement can eclipse and complicate “normal” developmental tasks. The chapters in this book highlight seven fundamental challenges:

1. Tempering perfectionism
2. Building connection
3. Managing sensitivity
4. Handling cooperation and competition
5. Dealing with authority
6. Developing motivation
7. Finding joy

These are the core issues that kids struggle with and parents worry about. Each of these issues involves children figuring out who they are, how they relate to others, and what achievement means to them. These are complex issues that call for deeply personal responses, but there are things you can do to help your child navigate them.

This book is solution-focused and filled with practical strategies that you can use today and continue to use as your child grows and develops. The strategies that we describe are doable in the course of everyday life. A lot of them involve conversations, explanations, or ways of responding to your child’s behavior.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL YEARS

The examples and strategies described in the book focus on children approximately six to twelve years old. This age range covers the period when academic pressure starts, but the stakes aren’t yet so high. Children’s coping abilities can increase dramatically during these years. It’s a period of intense intellectual growth, during which children gain the

ability to reason logically, understand cause and effect, and solve problems.

In elementary school, children begin to develop a stable sense of identity, and they tend to be less self-centered than younger children because they can understand that other people have different thoughts, feelings, and wants. They also begin to compare themselves to peers and to make judgments about their own relative competence. All of this means that this is a time when kids are ready and able to expand their social and emotional coping skills, and they are still young enough to be open to parental guidance. Taking steps to bolster coping skills during these early school years can equip children to deal with the stresses that lie ahead in high school and beyond.

REFLECTING ON YOUR OWN THOUGHTS, FEELINGS, AND EXPERIENCES

Chances are, if you have a bright kid, you're pretty bright yourself, which means you'll probably remember grappling with some of the issues we describe. Maybe you still struggle with them. Although this book is about supporting your child, it also offers an opportunity to reflect on your own experiences. What messages did you get about achievement from parents and teachers when you were a child? What have you found to be effective in managing multiple demands on your time? How do you relate to people who are less capable than you? How about those who are more capable than you? How do you cope when you make mistakes or things don't go your way? What brings you a sense of satisfaction and contentment?

The issues that we discuss are lifelong challenges, not problems that people can deal with at age seven and be

done. In each chapter, we have a section called “Show the Way” that describes how these issues play out in adulthood and what parents can do to address them in their own lives or to model effective coping for their children.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

There’s a wrong way and a right way to use this book. The wrong way is to view it as over two hundred pages of stuff you need to “fix” or “improve” about your child or a long list of even more things you ought to be doing, on top of everything else you’re doing, to be a good parent. The right way to use this book is as a resource to support your current efforts to raise a happy, healthy, productive, and kind child. Our goal is to provide you with a deeper understanding of how and why your child might struggle and to give you options for helping your child move forward. You may want to scan this book for the chapters or vignettes that are most relevant for your child. Read these sections and give yourself time to reflect on how they relate to your beliefs, values, and parenting challenges. Please view the strategies we suggest as possibilities rather than prescriptions, and use only those that make sense for you. Every child is unique, and nobody knows your child and your family better than you do.

It’s also important to take a long-term view. You can’t rush cognitive and emotional development. Kids grow at their own pace, and our role as parents is to support that growth, not force it. Although the book is filled with doable strategies, there are no gimmicks or quick fixes. Instead, the book focuses on ways you can communicate with, guide, and support your child. Throughout the book, we emphasize learning and growing, rather than performing.

THE COMPONENTS OF SMART PARENTING

Parenting involves a delicate balance. On the one hand, we need to cherish who our children are at this very moment. On the other hand, we need to support our children in moving forward. Achieving this balance requires four essential components of smart parenting:

- 1.** A compassionate ability to view the world through our children's eyes
- 2.** The confidence to set judicious limits
- 3.** A commitment to turn toward our children more often than away
- 4.** Faith in our children's ability to grow and learn

These four components underlie everything in this book.

Test scores and grades are good predictors of academic performance, but whether our children will be able to develop happy, productive, and fulfilling adult lives depends on much more than school smarts. All children need wise and caring guidance so they can develop the social and emotional skills that will serve as a foundation for everything they do. Our goal with this book is to support you in helping your kids develop internal tools so that they can pursue their passions, cope with difficulties, build relationships, and make what they wish of their lives. This book is about raising children rather than creating impressive products.

CHAPTER 1

TEMPERING PERFECTIONISM

What Is “Good Enough”?



Does your child

- Fret and worry about minor mistakes?
- Focus on the one thing that’s wrong rather than everything that’s right?
- Act as his own worst critic?
- Make snap judgments and all-or-nothing pronouncements about whether she is “good at” some activity?
- Insist, “I’m so stupid” after making a mistake?
- Tend to make excuses and blame others for failings?
- Become teary or furious when some skill or activity doesn’t come easily?
- Often forgo sleep, relaxation, and time with others because there is “too much work to do”?
- Procrastinate about big projects?
- Have trouble letting go and finishing projects?

When children are very capable, it’s all too easy to fall into the trap of perfectionism. Because they *can* do extremely well, they come to believe that they *must* do everything flawlessly. Because they *have* done extremely well, they conclude that they *must always* meet or surpass the highest standards. Their self-worth depends on it.

THE FEELINGS AND BELIEFS UNDERLYING PERFECTIONISM

On the surface, perfectionism seems like a work issue, but it's really a relationship issue. Perfectionistic children (or adults) feel as though they live their lives on stage, in front of a harshly critical audience. The expectations stemming from their high abilities somehow become twisted and distorted into unyielding internal demands. When they fall short, perfectionistic children may respond with anger, tears, blame, or withdrawal, but fueling these reactions is an underlying sense of worthlessness. Perfectionists believe that their value lies not in who they are but in what they produce. In their hearts, perfectionists believe that love has to be earned and that nothing less than 100 percent will do.

Perfectionism Versus Healthy Striving

Researchers disagree about whether perfectionism is simply "too much of a good thing" or whether it's completely separate from healthy ambition and a desire to do a good job. On the one hand, having high standards is associated with better performance. On the other hand, studies show that perfectionism is linked to depression, suicidal thoughts, anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders, and various physical symptoms. The critical factor may be whether there's a mismatch between expectations and self-evaluation: when kids believe that they *must* perform extremely well but also think they *didn't* or *can't*, they're likely to feel bad about themselves and to respond with either hopeless withdrawal or desperate efforts to measure up.

We're convinced, based on our clinical experience, that there's a blurry but important line between healthy striving for excellence and unhealthy perfectionism. This distinction