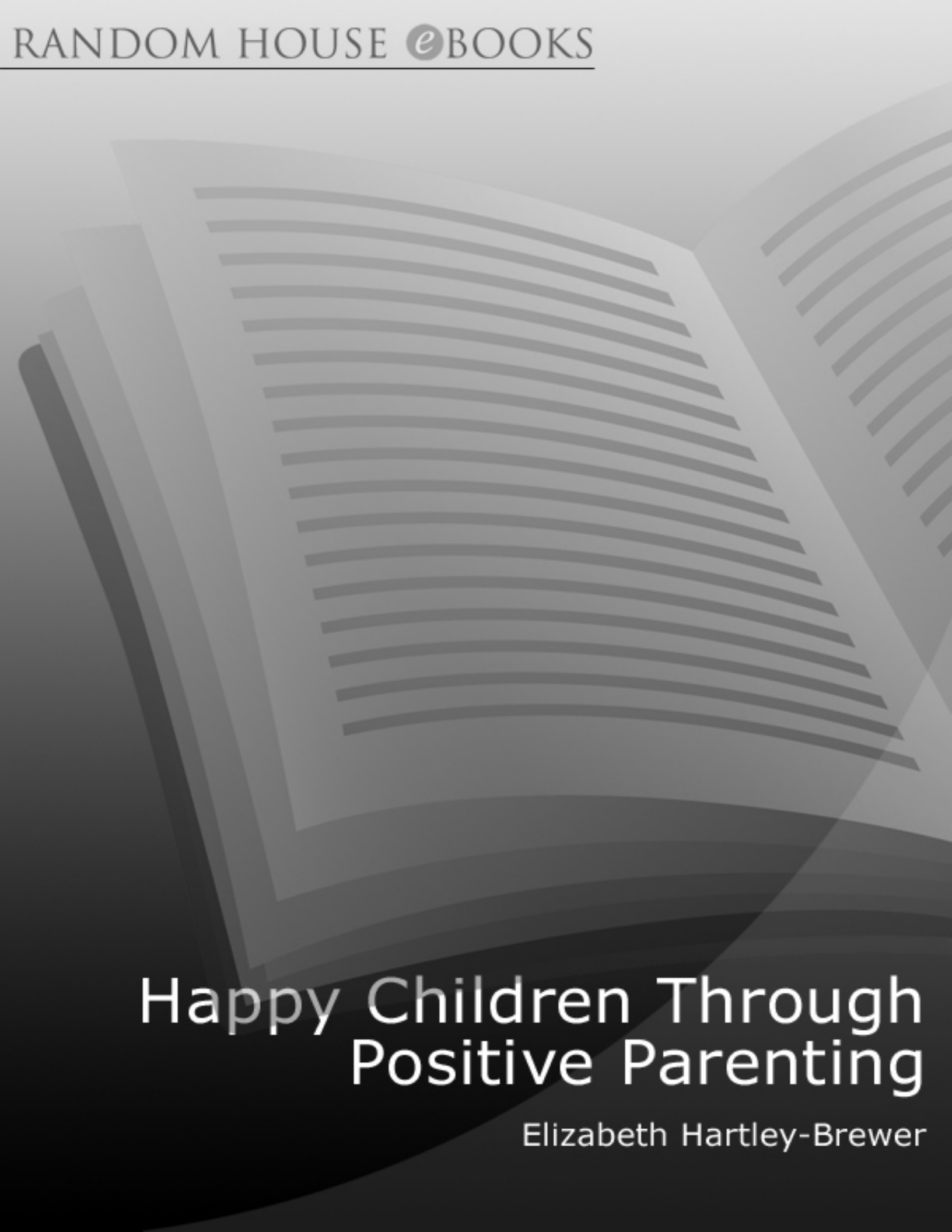


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Happy Children Through Positive Parenting

Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer

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About the Book

Happy Children through Positive Parenting is a parenting book with a difference. It does not tell you how to potty-train or when to move your toddler into a bed. Instead, it concentrates on the relationship rather than the mechanics of childrearing; highlighting that what really matters is helping children to grow up feeling secure and good about themselves, enabling them to gain positive self-esteem, self-confidence and self-reliance.

Children - like adults - perform best when they feel good about themselves. Knowing and liking yourself is so often the key to success in life - affecting personal relationships, general motivation and success in work. Using key words like 'praise', 'play', 'time', 'touch' and 'talk', Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer speaks to new and experienced parents alike about what helps children develop and what blocks progress. No matter how difficult parenting may have seemed in the past, *Happy Children through Positive Parenting* offers a clear and simple way forward in the most influential relationship of all - that between parent and child.

ELIZABETH HARTLEY-BREWER has a national profile as a writer, speaker and expert commentator on parenting and child development. She is the author of five successful parenting books, writes widely for the press, including the *Times*, the *Independent* and the *Observer* and appears regularly on television and radio.

Happy Children

THROUGH POSITIVE PARENTING



Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer

Vermilion
LONDON

For Stephen, Georgia, Julia and Greg

Preface to the 2005 Edition

This book was first published just over ten years ago, under the title *Positive Parenting: Raising children with self-esteem*. Revisiting it to prepare this revised edition offered no surprises, as I have referred to it constantly throughout that time. Most of my subsequent books have developed particular themes first raised here, and for each one I began the project by rereading the relevant section or chapter. I have also considered it vital that I 'walk the talk' – that I behave to my own children as I recommend to others – so there have been times when I have referred to it for my own benefit. What I have to say in this book is a personal statement of my beliefs about what really matters in relationships with children. It represents the distillation of twenty-five years of trial and error, observation and contemplation – growing alongside first my two stepchildren and then my own two children; of working with gifted children and their families; and of sharing experiences with a large number of other mothers, fathers and friends – sometimes singly and sometimes in groups. I still consider that it identifies and summarises in a very useful way the fundamentals of children's needs and the common patterns of relationship that develop between parent and child; there is nothing central that I have wanted to change.

However, time alters the context. Ideas that were once new become accepted so need less justification or explanation, and issues seen initially as less significant

become more pressing so require a stronger emphasis. For example, when this book was first written the importance of nurturing self-esteem in growing children as opposed to adults was hardly acknowledged; now it is widely accepted and has become the focus for many recent educational and social initiatives concerning children's achievement, inclusion and well-being. And ten years ago 'parenting' had no political profile, hence the references in the original conclusion to government responsibilities. Another big change is that divorce and separation now affects more children at a younger age, whether it be the ending of their own parents' relationship or that of a parent and subsequent live-in partner or legal stepparent. In addition, more mothers are returning to work when children are younger. I have therefore extended the final chapter to give greater emphasis to children's need to believe they have a continuing commitment from both parents despite any changed living arrangements or competing responsibilities at work. I have also drawn from up-to-date research and my own developing understanding to add one or two further thoughts to the sections on play, praise and physical punishment.

This book has already stood the test of time. I hope that its new format and emphases will engage a new generation of parents and help them to work through the inevitable pressures so they may enjoy a happy, positive and well-balanced relationship with their child.

Introduction

Children - like adults - perform best when they feel good about themselves. And they feel good about themselves when someone tells them they have done well, are likeable and are good to be with. Only when a child is convinced that her parents love, like and cherish her, and are on her side, can she develop true self-esteem and go on to become a self-confident, self-reliant and happy person.

This is a child-rearing book with a difference. It does not specify how and when to potty-train, when to move your toddler into a bed, or when to introduce solid food. There are many excellent books on such detailed and practical matters. It concentrates instead on understanding the ups and downs of the parent-child relationship and how to maintain a positive dynamic. It contains two simple core messages: first, trust yourself and your own instincts; and second, it is not so much *what you do* as *how you do it* that is important. Getting the approach right is much easier than most parents would believe. Once you realise that doing the best for your child and helping him to be relaxed, happy and outgoing comes down to creating in him self-esteem, self-confidence and self-reliance, the options become far clearer. And it is surprisingly easy to help your child have these 'self' qualities. The key things to remember can be related to the word *expertise*, using it as a memory jogger. This is explained in [Chapter Five](#).

Readers should be buoyed and encouraged by what they read. This is because, no matter how many mistakes you

have made in the past over how long a period, it offers a clear way forward. You can put the past behind you, forget guilt and apply this programme. It is, essentially, a valuable *tool kit*. But it can also act as a *repair kit* for anyone who feels they have lost all sense of direction and belief in their parental talents and even in themselves because their child's seemingly outrageous behaviour has pushed them to their limits. This can happen all too easily.

They should also feel empowered rather than intimidated and guilty. The book hands the initiative back to you, the parent. It says that everyone makes mistakes, that you can do it and that you don't need a continuous supply of experts or books. The expertise lies within you. You should rediscover and use the natural authority that you have as a parent. You should trust your own ability to decide what is the right thing to do, provided you have paid attention to the three targets - self-esteem, self-confidence and self-reliance. Immediately, your own self-esteem should improve and a virtuous circle can begin.

WHAT IS THE BOOK'S MESSAGE?

This book focuses on that essential ingredient of deeper happiness, self-esteem: what it is; why it is important to have it; what can go wrong if you don't have it; and, most important, how you can help your children to develop it. Unfortunately, people still seem to find it easier to do others down - to criticise, belittle and reject - rather than to approve, praise and enjoy.

After thirty years of being an active mother and a stepmother and learning from the inevitable mistakes; of reflecting on the behaviour of adults and the likely source of their difficulties; and, more recently, of working with groups of professionals and parents to develop a better understanding of child-rearing issues and parenting styles,

I firmly believe that these three attributes - self-esteem, self-confidence and self-reliance - are the starting points for emotional health, happy relationships and a sense of satisfaction and the ability to commit to others in later life.

Self-esteem and the personal qualities that tend to accompany it are now widely accepted as important attributes for both adults and children. Positive self-esteem helps people be sensitive to the needs of others - sometimes described as emotional intelligence. It avoids the need to pretend because you are content to face the world as you are; it is also known to protect against depression and other forms of mental difficulty. Sound self-belief and self-esteem also help children to be resilient in the face of difficulties - to emerge from these a stronger, more reflective person. Lack of self-esteem is increasingly accepted as the reason why some young people fail to do themselves justice at school, succumb to anxiety and eating disorders and get into early trouble with the law; and why some undeniably successful children and adults none the less self-destruct. Although some people try to blame self-esteem for causing, as they see it, the increased selfishness, indulgence and lawlessness among children, they misunderstand its true nature - nurturing self-esteem and happiness does not mean giving in to every whim and letting children do whatever they want; quite the opposite. Few deny, though, that the roots of an enduring happy and positive outlook lie in childhood, and so it makes a great deal of sense to explore in detail what makes the difference and how we as parents can help our children to thrive.

A confident and happy disposition based on positive self-esteem is the best gift any parent can give their child.

Your own self-esteem is important too. It is vital to look after yourself alongside your child, to enable you to 'grow' and maintain your own feelings of competence and self-esteem rather than put yourself into cold storage for the duration. If you feel low and inadequate, you are far less

likely to help your child to flourish. Using the guidance on how to help your child feel good about herself, and inviting you to apply some of it to yourself as well as to your child, the book asks you to believe in yourself: to trust your instincts; trust your ability to do the job successfully; reclaim your authority; and rediscover and trust your common sense.

Of course, the context of parenting matters a great deal as well. It is only natural that stress should hinder a parent's best efforts to keep calm and cool, and the long-hours working culture and family change and reformation can combine to make it hard to meet everyone's demands. It is all too easy to be sharp and hurtful rather than measured when under pressure and it may therefore be tempting to rely on strict routines to keep everyone and everything manageable. Although we know that children find life easier and feel more secure when they recognise predictable patterns that structure their day, there are dangers in returning to rigid, inflexible practices that ignore children's moods and sensitivities and prevent even babies from being listened to and respected. The latest research on how babies' and young children's brains develop shows the essential value of warmth, affection, intimate and responsive communication and the avoidance of distress from the very beginning. This is essential if children are to grow up with the part of their brain that controls and reads emotions fully developed and attuned. The research provides further evidence that emotional experiences in infancy and early childhood have a measurable effect on how we develop as human beings: in other words, child-sensitive, positive, authoritative and responsive but 'patterned' parenting is far more beneficial to children's all-round development than strictly ordered, highly rigid and disciplined practices.

This is a practical handbook - not a detailed route map that provides the answer to every issue on the sometimes

rocky road of parenthood. It is, instead, more a guide to map-reading, letting you choose a route that suits you, having suggested some appropriate destinations and clear ground rules as to what makes a child feel secure, valued, wanted and happy. Everybody is different: you as a parent or carer have your individual personality, strengths and weaknesses, as does your child, so there can be no uniform answer to any situation. You have to discover what works for you, making the inevitable and necessary mistakes along the way. Provided that you keep in mind the key targets and strive to avoid putting your child down, a key message from this book is: it's OK to do it *your* way. The focus on promoting self-esteem and happiness is no longer new, and many parents will already be 'on board', either intuitively or through choice. What is not so common is having a coherent framework available against which to assess sensible responses to most of the issues that arise throughout childhood, and one which can also highlight the unintended consequences of some of our clumsy words and actions.

Thinking about all these issues will help us to:

- identify our own values
- accept responsibility for guiding and leading our children into adulthood according to those values
- provide us and our children with an authoritative sense of direction
- avoid the extremes of child-rearing fashion and identify a more sustainable middle way

HOW TO USE THE BOOK

Simple ideas are usually best presented in a simple way, and this is what I have attempted to do.

[Chapter One](#) looks at how, despite the special difficulties facing parents today, there is a way through which can rebuild our confidence and trust in ourselves.

[Chapters Two](#) and [Three](#), 'The Tool Kit' and 'The Repair Kit', present an outline of the approach in a way which I hope is easy to understand. From then on, the book is 'layered'. In other words, the further you read into it, the deeper you can delve, moving beyond the core points and into some of the more complex dynamics of the parent-child relationship.

[Chapter Four](#) looks at where we, as parents, fit in. You could stop reading here and, I hope, still come out with some useful ideas.

[Chapter Five](#) introduces the key words, which not only reinforce and distil the main message but also act as memory-joggers. The words on their own say quite a lot, and each is followed by a short section which expands on the concept being presented, starting with the main points and going on to consider them in more detail. Each key word applies equally to the parent and to the child. Each section is therefore split into two, looking first at how the word relates to the child's needs, and then how it relates to those of the parent(s). You can read as much or as little as you want to here too.

[Chapter Six](#), 'Words Matter', is for those who want to read and consider further still. It shows in more detail how and why we use words to put children down, and suggests other ways of saying things that are less hurtful.

[Chapters Seven](#) and [Eight](#) explore alternative discipline styles, the complexities of power and the importance of consistency and commitment in parenting, and how these can combine to influence self-esteem.

[Chapter Nine](#) summarises what is meant by 'positive parenting' in the positive and negative behaviour circles, which illustrate the cumulative effect of parental attitudes and actions on the child.

Some repetition is inevitable. Writing the book in this way, I try to allow different people to take what they want from it; and also to reinforce, progressively, the ideas and their importance.

A simple truth can also be profound, as I hope I shall show.

One final word: don't be deterred by the number of suggestions for action. They are not all meant to be tried, and certainly not all of them at one go. The examples are offered more for illustration than direction. As is suggested in [Chapter Three](#), when you ask yourself at the end of the day what you have done to make your child feel secure, successful, important to you and thereby good about herself and you answer with more positives than negatives, that is good enough.

Trust Yourself:

IT'S OK TO DO IT *YOUR* WAY



BEING A PARENT today is much harder than it was even ten years ago. There are several reasons why this is so.

Society is changing fast. Many people feel they have no coherent or relevant model for bringing up children in the twenty-first century. Today's parents will have come mostly from the smaller families more typical of recent times. While small families often provide greater material comforts and emotional benefits, the older children are usually so close in age to the younger ones that they either cannot, or are not needed to, help bring up or mind their much younger brothers or sisters. They therefore gain no early experience of child care which can be applied later with their own children - an experience which most world cultures offer. At the same time, and partly as a result of the same trend, the extended family is not there to play the guiding or supporting role that it used to.

Many more people today are parenting alone, for a wide variety of reasons. The decisions and lifestyle changes this entails are so significant that they will inevitably cause some measure of stress and anxiety. Children make big demands, either directly, or indirectly through poor behaviour. Unsettling changes will increase those demands as they seek reassurance. If there is only one parent to

meet these sometimes intense demands, the pressure will be that much more concentrated.

These social changes are happening in a context that puts even more strain on parents. Today we live in a climate of 'professionalism'. Having lost confidence in ourselves, not only do we look increasingly to professionals to give us the answers to each and every one of our problems, but we also have ever higher personal standards and expect to be successful in all spheres. That is asking for too much. We cannot be superhuman and achieve excellence in all that we touch. When we inevitably fail, we are prone not just to guilt but also to further feelings of inadequacy and incompetence. Women especially can demand far too much of themselves.

In addition to this, many parents are trying to function in an authority void. In rejecting (rightly) the strict disciplinarian method of bringing up children, some parents have thrown away their authority and responsibility at the same time. Others have just lost their sense of direction and confidence in themselves. Someone who is confused and unsure will not command authority. Those who have consciously rejected the adult control which they themselves experienced in childhood in favour of a more child-centred approach now seem equally uncertain as to whether this alternative really works or gives children the best tools for coping and fitting in with the demands of education, work and family made on them later.

In the area of parenting, the relevant professionals are also telling us that what we do in these early years can have a big impact on the later personality of our child. This makes us increasingly anxious about making mistakes. Mothers are particularly prone to this type of anxiety. Believing it is our key job to provide our families with health and happiness, we worry not only about doing the

job well, but also about the risk of causing psychological damage to our children.

And even that is not all. The state of marriages and partnerships is another pressure on us. We are all now constantly exposed to the expectation that we should have a high-quality sexual, emotional and social relationship with our partners and be 'happy'. The growing social acceptability of divorce and single parenthood seduces us into weighing up the state of our relationships more frequently, because if we judge that we do not have an ideal relationship, we have the option to abandon ship, get out and find something better elsewhere. With that possibility always hanging over both partners in the relationship, even if it is subconscious, men and women are having to bring up their children in a potentially explosive environment of insecurity and failure in which we demand too much and see too little. We are in danger of ignoring the obvious. Not only can we undervalue ourselves - our instincts and abilities - but worse, we can fail to realise, as we try to square the circle of modern life, that our children have basic needs too that we ignore at their and our peril.

Just as adults perform best when they feel good about themselves and when others have shown they appreciate, love and care for them, so do children. A confident, trusting child, secure in her key relationships and conscious of her particular abilities and what it is that makes her unique, will play better, learn better, concentrate better and give, love and relate better. A child's sense of self develops from infancy. Therefore feelings about self-esteem, both good and bad, exist in childhood as strongly as, or indeed more strongly than, they do in adulthood. Good self-esteem helps people to develop strong self-confidence. Self-confidence helps people become self-reliant and independent. These three attributes combine in individuals regardless of age to create human beings who are happy, productive, creative,

flexible and, most important when considering the social context of our lives, giving.

These qualities lie at the heart of almost everything people say they want for themselves. Childhood is by far the best time to build self-esteem, self-confidence and self-reliance. If they are not acquired then, it is far harder to adopt them as permanent features of yourself later. Where adults have relationship problems at home or at work, it is these qualities that they have often lacked. Where adults have other kinds of problems and they are not handling them well, it is usually because their resilience and belief in themselves is low.

If you think of learning as human building blocks, these 'self' perceptions go down first and constitute a person's foundations. With strong foundations, we can weather the storms and earthquakes of life. Without them, we bend, creak, heave and crack. We can repair the cracks; but if the foundations are weak, the cracks will only reappear. What this book sets out to do is show ways of laying these foundations.

As parents, if we want to find out how to be successful in our role, we need look no further than helping our children to develop confidence, self-reliance and, above all, good feelings about themselves. In terms of giving our children life-long advantages, anything else pales into insignificance. Other decisions in parenting, if they cannot be related to these objectives, are far less important. They are not worth getting fussed about. It matters far more that you:

- keep the parent-child relationship alive and on an even keel
- maintain a consistent and predictable emotional and physical environment for your children
- keep power play and damaging disputes to a minimum

- demonstrate your unswerving commitment to them and show them that you understand them and are on their side

There is no formula for being the perfect parent and it is, in any case, an unrealisable dream. We all have times when pressures mean we don't cope so well. There are no easy answers, and you will not find a convenient blueprint here. Success is much more about understanding and trusting yourself and your children, and bringing them up *your way*, consistently. You know your children better than anyone else can or does. You are able to do it, not because you are clever or good at it, not because you know the theory or the tricks, but because your children are yours. By showing that you understand them as only you can, by respecting their likes and dislikes and acknowledging their strengths and weaknesses which make them who they are, by treating them with the respect that we should all give to each other as human beings and demonstrating that you approve of them, you will help them to grow up with a strong sense of themselves and a capacity for joy and fun, making them better able to withstand life's difficulties and to exploit life's challenges.

What we have to watch out for are the two demons: doubt and guilt. These are the most destructive elements of any relationship. They are especially the enemies of a natural and fulfilled relationship with children, both because they reinforce your uncertainty and insecurity and because they tempt you into an unhelpful regime of appeasement, or giving in. If we give in too often, we blur the boundaries. We teach our children that if they play on our guilt, they get their way. A small amount of guilt is healthy, but too much is definitely counterproductive. We all do make mistakes - through our over-concern, through stress or marital and relationship problems, through having to meet other family needs which often conflict. It is all right to make mistakes. If you can accept that you can mess

things up, and the sky does not fall in when it happens, you will teach your children by example that it is also safe for them to make mistakes. If, on the other hand, you get crushed with a sense of failure, you teach them that making mistakes is something shameful and therefore to be avoided at all costs. Being able to take risks, and to accept both the possibility of and the responsibility for making mistakes, is an absolute prerequisite for learning and healthy development.

Some of our mistakes are minor and do not matter. Others can cause temporary harm or hurt. But there are two vital things to remember that should relieve the agony of guilt. One is that in the vast majority of parent-child relationships, you can make amends and undo the mistake even quite a long time afterwards - so great is a child's need to be loved, trusted and respected by you - by apologising to them and repairing their self-image, which has been damaged as a result. For years and years they can be the most forgiving creatures. They have to rely on you, so they want and need to believe in you.

The second vital thing is that if you are unpleasant to children, and have not seriously hurt them emotionally or physically, there is in place a cushion of love, a suspension of judgement, and so strong a wish, or need, to believe in you that they and their relationship with you can take several knocks without significant damage. The danger only comes when that reserve of giving you the benefit of the doubt is used up. Then, to protect themselves from the uncomfortable conclusion that they are not worth loving, they separate themselves from you emotionally and are no longer willing to play any part in a relationship that exposes them to such anguish. This is what Bruno Bettelheim, the eminent child psychologist, and D.W. Winnicott, a paediatrician and psychoanalyst, meant when they talked about being a 'good enough' mother or parent. Provided you are not near the danger point, and you have

loved your children in a way that has convinced them of it, there is room for error and repair, repeatedly.

So, trust yourself. You and your children have a unique relationship. And they adore you, love you and need you more than you can know. No one else can take your place as their mother or father. This is the fundamentally encouraging reality. Each relationship has to be not only different but also unique. You are you, with all of your strengths and weaknesses which you carry with you; and the child has her own unique personality from day one, which can be influenced but not changed without damaging her spirit. You have to work with what you have collectively got. Quite apart from that, there are partners and siblings who will alter the chemistry of what's possible to do within your family. No one can tell you precisely what will work for you two or even, at a more complex level, what will work within the whole family - taking other family members' values and boundaries or tolerances into account. Only you can know all this and put it into the equation of compromise. The answer does not lie out there in an encyclopaedia. It lies, and has to lie, within ourselves. You have to work out what works for you. And what works for you is OK. If it is working, don't listen to anyone else telling you that you should be doing it differently. If it is working without you behaving like a dictator and your child does not have significant problems of bad or anxiety-driven behaviour, it is probably working because you are getting the essentials right - giving your child love, respect and security. The finer details are less important.

But the essentials do matter. This book presents these as a tool kit, and summarises the necessary techniques through the scheme of 'The Expertise' in [Chapter Five](#). It shows you how to *get* 'The Expertise', and *forget* the guilt.