
• Contents •

Foreword <i>by Eckhart Tolle</i>	xi
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: <i>You're Living with Your Best Teacher</i>	9
Chapter 2: <i>Growing Up While Raising Kids</i>	25
Chapter 3: <i>Throw Away the Snapshot</i>	53
Chapter 4: <i>We Aren't Raising Children, We're Raising Adults</i>	77
Chapter 5: <i>Modeling Self-Love and Awareness</i>	89
Chapter 6: <i>Healthy Communication Strengthens Connection</i>	119
Chapter 7: <i>Walking the Talk</i>	133
Chapter 8: <i>Cultivating Empathy, Vulnerability, and Compassion</i>	149
Chapter 9: <i>Helping Our Kids Cope with Stress</i>	165
Chapter 10: <i>Happiness Is an Inside Job</i>	185
Chapter 11: <i>Tools, Tips, and Strategies</i>	203
Epilogue	247
Author's Note	251
Acknowledgments	253
Notes	255
Additional Resources	259
Index	263
About the Author	271

• **Foreword** •

To be allowed to drive a car, you need to pass both theoretical and practical tests so that you don't become a danger to yourself and others. For all except the most rudimentary jobs, certain qualifications are required, and for the more complex jobs, years of training. Yet for one of the most challenging and vitally important occupations — parenting — no training or qualifications are required.

“Parenthood remains the greatest single preserve of the amateur,” wrote author Alvin Toffler. This lack of knowledge or education is one of the reasons (although not the main one, as we shall see) why so many parents struggle. Those parents don't necessarily fail to meet the child's physical and material needs. They may in fact love their child and want what is best for them. Yet they are clueless as to how to deal with the challenges their child presents them with on an almost daily basis, nor do they know how to respond appropriately to the growing child's emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs.

Whereas in past ages parenting was excessively authoritarian, in our contemporary society many parents fail to provide the clear guidance the child desperately needs and longs for. There is often a complete lack of structure in the home environment, which resembles a rudderless ship that has been abandoned by the captain, adrift in the ocean. The parents don't realize that the child needs them to be, as Susan Stiffelman so aptly calls it, "the Captain of the ship," a term that by no means implies reverting back to the authoritarian mode of education of past ages. Rather, it is about finding a balance, a middle way, between having an excess of structure and no structure at all.

Ultimately, though, the deeper cause of family dysfunction is not the parents' lack of knowledge or education but their lack of awareness. Without a conscious parent there can be no conscious parenting! A conscious parent is able to maintain a certain level of awareness in their daily life, even though for most people lapses are bound to happen from time to time. When there is no awareness (other names for it are *mindfulness* or *presence*), you relate to your child, as well as to everybody else, through the conditioning of your mind. You are in the grip of mental/emotional reactive patterns, beliefs, and unconscious assumptions that you absorbed from your parents and the surrounding culture you grew up in.

Many of these patterns go back countless generations into the distant past. However, when there is awareness — or presence, as I prefer to call it — you become aware of your own mental, emotional, and behavioral patterns. You begin to have a choice about how to respond to your children, rather than acting blindly out of old patterns. Also, most important, you no longer pass those patterns on to your children.

Without presence, you are only able to connect with the child through the thinking mind and emotions, rather than on the deeper level of Being. Even if you *do* all the right things, the most

important ingredient in your relationship with your child will be missing: the Being dimension, which is the spiritual realm. This means the deeper connection just isn't there.

Intuitively, the child will sense that something vitally important in his or her relationship with you is missing, that you are never fully present, never fully there, always in your mind. Unconsciously, the child will then assume or rather feel that you are withholding something important. This frequently gives rise to unconscious anger or resentment in the child, which may manifest in various ways or remain latent until adolescence.

Although this alienation between parent and child is still the norm, a change is happening. An increasing number of parents are becoming conscious, able to transcend the conditioned patterns of their mind and connect with their child on the deeper level of Being.

So the reasons for dysfunctional or unconscious parenting are twofold. On the one hand, there is the lack of knowledge or education concerning child rearing that strikes a sane balance between the old, excessively authoritarian approach and the contemporary, equally unbalanced one. On the other hand, and at a more fundamental level, there is the lack of presence or conscious awareness on the part of the parents.

Whereas numerous books provide helpful “know-how” for those parents who read books, not many books as yet address the lack of awareness of the parents or offer guidance on how to use the everyday challenges of parenting as a way of growing in consciousness. Susan Stiffelman’s book helps the reader on both levels, which we could call Doing and Being. She imparts insightful knowledge and practical advice on Doing (or Right Action, as the Buddhists call it), without neglecting the more fundamental level of Being.

Parenting with Presence shows parents how they can transform parenting into a spiritual practice. It helps turn the ways

your children challenge you into a mirror that allows you to become aware of your own hitherto unconscious patterns. And by becoming aware of them, you can begin to transcend them.

Author Peter De Vries wrote: “Who of us is mature enough for offspring before the offspring themselves arrive? The value of marriage is not that adults produce children but that children produce adults.” Whether we are married or single parents, children will certainly help us grow into more mature human beings. Yes, children produce adults, but, more important, Susan Stiffelman’s unique book shows you how children can produce *conscious* adults.

— Eckhart Tolle, author of
The Power of Now and *A New Earth*

• Introduction •

Angie was a powerhouse on the job. As the editor of a small health and wellness magazine, she got things done efficiently, thoroughly, and on time. Although her staff sometimes felt micromanaged, she went out of her way to create an appealing work environment, offering generous perks such as flexible telecommuting options and a break room stocked with organic snacks. But Angie was committed to leading a life that wasn't all about being productive. Every morning she listened to a guided meditation before getting ready for the day ahead, and before they had children, she and her husband, Eric, had made a point of going to yoga retreats whenever possible.

Eric had a small Internet marketing company based out of their home. He was known for his ability to think outside the box and enjoyed growing success based on his creativity and can-do, get-it-done-on-time reputation.

Angie and Eric were thrilled when their son, Charlie, was born. They were committed to establishing a family different from the ones in which they had been raised. In Angie's case,

that meant providing a sense of cohesiveness and connection that had been lacking in her own family of origin; her mother was an alcoholic and painfully disengaged, leaving Angie and her sisters largely to fend for themselves. Eric's parents were involved, but overly so, controlling Eric's and his sister's activities and as he put it, robbing them of their voice. Both Angie and Eric were determined to give their children the combination of freedom and attention they had missed out on during their own childhoods.

As Charlie grew, Angie and Eric delighted in his big personality. But he had a feisty temperament, making him easily frustrated and difficult to soothe; as a toddler he had full-blown tantrums when he couldn't have his way. Because they wanted to be compassionate and caring, his parents tried to explain to little Charlie why he couldn't have what he wanted, but it only made things worse. And despite being excited about going to "big boy school," he did not do well with the restrictions imposed on him when he started preschool. It was nearly impossible to sit still at story time, and his poor impulse control meant that whenever a child had a toy he wanted, Charlie simply took it — grabbing or shoving as needed.

Soon after he was enrolled, Angie and Eric were called in to speak with the preschool director about an incident in which Charlie had forcefully pushed another child. This meeting turned out to be the first of many related to Charlie's difficulties in managing his behavior. The arrival of a baby sister when he was four only escalated his meltdowns. His parents tried to be understanding, but they were clueless about how to handle their temperamental son — pleading, bargaining, threatening, and mostly caving in to his demands. Charlie ran the household with his tirades, and his parents could hardly remember their peaceful preparenting days. They were embarrassed to be the mother and father of one of

“those” kids and on edge each morning about what might happen that day with their mercurial son.

Angie and Eric had believed that their commitment to personal growth would somehow translate into having a sweet and easy time raising kids. After all, weren't children influenced by their surroundings? Surely having a calm, loving home with attentive parents would ensure harmony within the family. But such was not the case. Angie's morning meditations became a thing of the past, and as hard as they tried not to, she and Eric often fell into blaming, saying to each other things like, “If you had only handled the incident with Charlie *this* way instead of *that*, today's crisis could have been avoided.”

This couple was like many I have worked with over the past thirty years as a teacher, parent coach, and psychotherapist. Whether parents identify themselves as traveling a path of personal development, or they simply want to raise happy children without drama or power struggles, they often have a difficult time coming to terms with the realities of raising kids, particularly when their child's needs or temperament prove challenging.

Even if we have children who are relatively easy to raise, we still have to adapt to putting another being's wants and needs ahead of our own, day in and day out. From sleepless nights to homework battles, we find ourselves having to develop new qualities as we go, such as tolerance, persistence, and the capacity to read the same picture book over and over . . . and over again. Those who consider themselves spiritually inclined sometimes confess to being mortified by how *unspiritual* they sometimes feel around their children.

Whether parents identify themselves as traveling a path of personal development, or they simply want to raise happy children without drama or power struggles, they often have a difficult time coming to terms with the realities of raising kids, particularly when their child's needs or temperament prove challenging.

Words they never thought they would utter seem to fly out of their mouths — loudly — words that sound anything *but* enlightened!

But like Angie and Eric, we often discover that the child we have is the one who can teach us the most. And that is what *Parenting with Presence* is all about.

We often discover that the child we have is the one who can teach us the most.

We'll come back to Angie and Eric in a later chapter to discover how their challenges with Charlie paved the way for a much healthier parenting

experience and how it provided opportunities for both of them to heal unfinished childhood business. For now, allow me to share a little of my own story.

My Parenting Journey

When I was fifteen years old and living in Kansas, my older brother headed off to college, leaving behind a note recommending that I read a book he'd put in my room called *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda. It sat on my shelf for two years until the day I found myself diving into it, moved by the tale of an Indian man's journey to know the divine.

This unusual book awakened something in me so profound that upon reading the final page, I pedaled my bike to the Prairie Village shopping center, deposited a handful of coins into the pay phone, dialed the headquarters of Yogananda's California foundation, and said, "I want to know God."

For a year or so I meditated in Yogananda's tradition, based on instructions sent weekly in the mail from the Self-Realization Fellowship. I started doing yoga and explored other types of meditation, eventually settling on one that resonated with me, while weaving in other practices that nourished my heart and soul. I relied so much on the peace I experienced in my daily meditation that if I wasn't able to sit in the morning, I would feel out of sorts all day until I could grab some time to go within.

Eighteen years later, I had a baby. My once regular morning routine fell by the wayside as I struggled to balance inner-focused activities with the pragmatics of family life. Whenever I was rigid about my “spiritually uplifting” pursuits, I ended up feeling resentful and uptight. I had to figure out how not to *tolerate* but to *savor* the moments of ordinary life — changing a diaper, reading a story, or cleaning up after a hurricane of boy-play.

I had to figure out how not to tolerate but to savor the moments of ordinary life — changing a diaper, reading a story, or cleaning up after a hurricane of boy-play.

One day I was in the kitchen, making my son a grilled-cheese sandwich. As I stood beside the stove waiting for the cheese to melt, I fell into an expanded awareness of what was going on in that moment. There, across the room, was a miracle in the form of someone I loved more than the beating of my heart, and I was getting the chance to express my love in the form of a sandwich. I felt intoxicated with gratitude, realizing that what I was feeling did not have to be an isolated experience; I could live more intimately with this kind of openheartedness as I went about the ordinary activities of my day, if I so chose.

Raising a child turned out to be the greatest transformational experience of my life. I sat for meditation as often as I could — rarely, at first, but more often as my son got older. It is an enormous pleasure to drink from my inner well of stillness and joy, and meditation no doubt influences the “me” that shows up for the world. But I also came to understand that living spiritually means leading the life in front of me as fully present to spirit as possible, regardless of what ritual I might have practiced that morning.

In *Parenting with Presence*, I invite you to embark on your own journey of bringing greater peace, joy, and personal transformation to your day-to-day parenting. You will discover strategies to help you navigate the ups and downs of real-life child rearing with more consciousness, and learn how to subdue the triggers

that make you lose (or temporarily misplace!) your equanimity. And you'll be invited to explore ways to bring spirituality into your home — even if you are not religiously inclined or have kids who think anything remotely spiritual is “uncool.”

Throughout the book I will share some of the qualities I have come to believe are helpful in transforming a child into an adult who is conscious, confident, and caring. Finally, you will learn practical tools to help you parent *with presence*, responding with flexibility and choice instead of reacting out of frustration, anger, or fear.

When our relationship with our children is permeated with our whole-hearted engagement and presence, they are more inclined to turn to us, rather than to their friends, for guidance and support. In addition, children who feel liked, seen, and cherished — just as they are — are naturally more motivated to do what their parents ask; it is human nature to cooperate with those we feel solidly connected to.

Whether you are an avid spiritual practitioner or you simply want to parent more consciously, raising children with greater presence will open you to more of the love, learning, and joy that the adventure of parenting can bring.

I welcome you on this journey! Let's begin.

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

For this section and the others like it throughout the book, please visit www.SusanStiffelman.com/PWPextras to hear me guiding you through the exercise.

Whenever I do a coaching session with parents, I begin by asking them to imagine hanging up the phone when we've finished, feeling that our time together was well spent. I invite them to consider what would make that true. "Will you feel better because you now have a plan for dealing with a problem or perhaps because you're clearer about what is fueling a particular issue with your child? Or do you imagine you'll be relieved simply because you're more willing to take baby steps toward shifting things in your family rather than believing you have to change everything at once? Perhaps you're more forgiving of yourself or better able to understand why you get triggered by your kids and what you can do to maintain your cool even when things get difficult."

I find that doing this exercise helps my clients clarify what sort of changes they would like to manifest from our work together.

Allow me to ask you to do something similar. Pause for a moment — perhaps closing your eyes or placing your hand over your heart — and imagine yourself closing this book, feeling happy and excited because you've had a breakthrough. Where are you struggling most as a parent that perhaps will have improved as a result of reading *Parenting with Presence*? What is going well that you want to do more of? What would you like to change?

Become conscious of what you would like your ideal parenting life to look like, picturing a more loving, healthy relationship with your child, as well as with yourself. By setting a clear intention or hoped-for outcome, you may find that you will get more from working with the material in this book, particularly if you're

willing to jot down a few notes that you can refer to from time to time.

Please use your journal to reflect on what is working in your parenting life and where you would like to stretch, grow, or transform the relationship you have with your child, your co-parenting partner, and yourself.

CHAPTER 1

You're Living with Your Best Teacher

*Parenting is a mirror in which we get to see
the best of ourselves, and the worst; the richest moments
of living, and the most frightening.*

— MYLA AND JON KABAT-ZINN

In India they're called householder yogis — women and men with an unshakable commitment to their spiritual path who have decided to have a family rather than live in a cave or an ashram. They choose to grow and evolve through their experiences at home and in the workplace, embracing the challenges of everyday life as the means to their transformation.

Many of us subscribe to the belief that spiritual growth happens as a result of daily meditation, mindfulness retreats, and inspiration from wise luminaries. But one of the greatest teachers you could ever hope to learn from is living right under your roof, even if (*especially* if) he or she pushes your buttons or challenges your limitations.

*One of the greatest teachers you
could ever hope to learn from is
living right under your roof, even
if (especially if) he or she pushes
your buttons or challenges your
limitations.*

In parenting, things get very real, very fast. Figuring out how to cope when your child spills juice on the new sofa or managing your reactions when your kids tease each other nonstop on the long

ride to Grandma's is the equivalent of an advanced course in personal growth. Do you fall apart, or are you able to stay present, deepening your ability to be with "what is," responding rather than reacting?

True spirituality doesn't happen in a cave at the top of a mountain. It's down here, wiping a runny nose, playing yet another round of *Candyland*, or rocking a colicky baby at two in the morning. The Buddha is crying in the next room. How you handle that is as evolved and as spiritual as it gets.

The Buddha is crying in the next room. How you handle that is as evolved and as spiritual as it gets.

What Is a Teacher?

Many of us are charmed by the image of our sons and daughters as divinely appointed teachers who can help us transform our hearts and souls. But while the idea of seeing our child as one of our teachers has a lyrical, enlightened ring to it, there's a difference between accepting the *idea* of something and embracing the *reality* of it.

Our children may indeed catalyze a love within us that we could not have imagined possible. But they can also elicit powerful elements of our shadow selves, calling forth aspects of our nature, such as impatience and intolerance, that leave us ashamed and overwhelmed.

Maintaining equilibrium is key to living in the moment, but nothing tests our ability to stay centered like parenting. Raising kids can be anything *but* peaceful, with sibling squabbles, homework meltdowns, and arguments over video games all-too-familiar features of the landscape of family life. It's easy for soulful principles to collide with the realities of day-to-day life with children underfoot. Even the most seasoned meditator or yogini may find

herself shouting, threatening, bribing, or punishing, despite having set intentions to remain loving and calm no matter what.

There is a saying, *When the student is ready, the teacher appears*. I have long found it to be true that when I am ready to expand my horizons intellectually, psychologically, or spiritually, an opportunity presents itself that seems divinely orchestrated to allow me to stretch, grow, and learn. That said, I don't always *want* to stretch, grow, and learn! Instead, I may feel as if I've been involuntarily enrolled in a class I had no desire to take!

When it comes to parenting, it seems that although we may not have *knowingly* signed up for the "course" our children offer, we nonetheless find ourselves forced ("invited?" "given the opportunity?") to profoundly grow, and grow up. In this respect, I believe our children *can* become our greatest teachers. While we may not deliberately choose to have a baby so that we can heal wounds from our childhood or become a better version of ourselves, in fact, those opportunities — and thousands more — are birthed right along with our children.

We may be confronted with our impatience, taught to slow down as our toddler requires us to stop and smell *every* flower along the sidewalk. Or we may learn fortitude as we survive our child's nightmares, discovering that we actually can be reasonably kind and loving after a series of sleepless nights.

Of equal importance are the ways our children help us work through unfinished business. We may recognize less desirable aspects of ourselves in our child's procrastination around homework, becoming aware — if we're willing — that we are equally guilty of putting off some of our more unpleasant tasks. Or we might feel that we're looking in a mirror when our easily frustrated child launches into meltdowns whenever things don't go his way. There we are in living color, reliving moments from

our past (perhaps as recent as this morning!) when we fell apart because we couldn't have our way.

Sometimes the lessons we learn from our children are gentle and sweet; our little ones expand our capacity to give and receive more love and happiness than we ever imagined possible. But often, aspects of our child's temperament challenge us to the core. We may project our own needs onto our children, feeling that we're in battle mode from morning to night when we cannot force them to behave in ways that quell our fear and anxiety. We fall into bed exhausted at the end of each day, dreading the next morning when we have to wake up and do it all over again.

One of the ways I choose to see challenging people as essential to my evolution is to imagine the two of us in a preincarnated state — disembodied souls feeling only pure, limitless love for each other. (This is just an idea; you don't need to believe in reincarnation to benefit from it. Just play along with me for a moment, and see if the image is useful.)

I picture the two of us having a conversation (in whatever way two disembodied beings might converse!) in which we each share what we want to learn in our upcoming life. "I want to learn patience," one of us says. "Well, I would like to deepen my ability to receive love and care," says our soul friend. "How about this? I will come back as your disabled child. I'll learn to accept

love more fully, and you will have the chance to learn patience." "It's a deal!" And thus begins what Caroline Myss, lecturer and intuitive, refers to as a *sacred contract*, an agreement we have with the significant people in our lives orchestrating the precise circumstances that will allow us to become more fully who we are meant to be.

Each of our children offers us opportunities to confront the dark and dusty corners of our minds and hearts, creating just the right conditions to call forth the kind of learning that can liberate us from old paradigms, allowing us to lead more expansive and fulfilling lives.

Each of our children offers us opportunities to confront the dark and dusty corners of our minds and hearts, creating just the right conditions to call forth the kind of learning that can liberate us from old paradigms, allowing us to lead more expansive and fulfilling lives. What follows is the story of one such dynamic between a parent and her daughter.

Just Make the Request

Catherine had two daughters, fourteen-year-old Ella and sixteen-year-old Shay. “I get along well with both of my girls — we’re very close. But to put it frankly, Shay is a bit of a slob. She drops her towels on the bathroom floor, leaves clothes scattered all over her room, and never washes her dishes without being reminded. This behavior *really* pushes my buttons. We’ve talked about it, but unless I nag her, she doesn’t clean up after herself.”

Catherine continued, “Yesterday I asked Shay very nicely if she would tidy up her room before guests came for dinner. She barely looked at me while I was talking and then rolled her eyes and said, ‘Mom — they aren’t even going to come in my room! Loosen up! You’re so uptight when we have people over.’ I blew my stack; I do so much for her! Why couldn’t she do this one little thing for me?”

I listened for a while and then asked Catherine, “How did your parents respond to you when you expressed a wish or a need? Did they listen and validate your requests, or did they disregard them?”

Immediately, she had an answer. With a hint of sarcasm she replied, “When I had a need? I wasn’t *allowed* to have needs. That didn’t happen in our family. If I bothered to tell my mother or father that I didn’t want to do what they were telling me to do, they pretty much looked at me like I was crazy, telling me how selfish I was. I learned early on to not ask for what I wanted and

have stayed in the passenger seat in all my important relationships, including my marriage.”

I told Catherine that I wanted to offer an analogy. “You know what bumper cars are, the ones at amusement parks, right? Well, what I’ve noticed is that some kids get into their little car and freeze. They’ve never been behind the wheel of an automobile, and they don’t understand the concept of making it move by stepping on the accelerator, so they just sit in the middle of the track and get slammed into by all the other wild drivers.

“Then there are the kids at the other extreme. These are the ones who put the pedal to the floor and never let up. Whichever direction they turn that steering wheel, they’ll be crashing into something within seconds. In both cases, these young drivers don’t know how to *appropriately* press on the gas. Either they don’t move at all, or they recklessly fling themselves full speed ahead.”

I explained that many people struggle to ask for what they want or need. “Some of us remain passively silent; we don’t ask for anything, feeling unseen, unimportant, and resentful.”

“That’s me,” she offered. “That’s the story of my life, from childhood on through my marriage and divorce. I learned early on that asking for what I wanted was only going to upset the people around me.”

“Other people demand what they want with guns blazing,” I replied. “They overpower those around them, determined to get their way, regardless of how badly they alienate others.

“So,” I said, “would you be willing to look at this situation with your daughter from a different perspective? Could you see her as a teacher who is providing you with an excellent assignment? Might you be ready to learn how to ask for what you want in a way that reflects an understanding that your wishes are as valid as those of the people around you?”

Catherine was quiet. All traces of sarcasm were gone as she

softly said, “Wow. Yes. It’s time for me to learn to ask for what I need.”

I replied, “By looking at why your child’s behavior triggers you so deeply, you have an opportunity to heal something from long ago and grow into a more healthy and whole version of yourself.”

Catherine was on board. Our work together shifted from “fixing” her daughter’s messiness to healing the sadness she felt as a little girl who had concluded that her desires and needs were not important — feelings she had buried long ago. I helped her understand that the intensity with which she had been coming at Shay to get her to cooperate was a result of projecting onto her daughter an unresolved longing to know that her own wishes and wants mattered.

I explained that it isn’t our children’s job to fix us. In fact, they often dig in their heels when we come at them with our neediness and desperation. Intuitively, they understand that it isn’t their responsibility to behave in ways that heal whatever wounds we bring from earlier relationships. So it can happen that our children’s misbehavior truly *does* become a gift, because if we are willing to look within instead of projecting our hurts onto them, we can work through unfinished emotional business.

Intuitively, our children understand that it isn’t their responsibility to behave in ways that heal whatever wounds we bring from earlier relationships. So it can happen that our children’s misbehavior truly does become a gift, because if we are willing to look within instead of projecting our hurts onto them, we can work through unfinished emotional business.

I encouraged Catherine to simply be present with whatever feelings came up for her when she was met with her daughter’s resistance. “Practice nonjudgmental awareness, allowing room for whatever emotions have gotten stirred up so they can have their say. Be sad or angry. Be confused or worried. And then,

perhaps, be sad again. Let feelings move through you without censoring or controlling them.

“Locate where in your body you are experiencing what you’re feeling. Is the sensation heavy? Sharp? Fluttery? Simply allow whatever you are experiencing to *be*, without making the emotions bigger or smaller. Name the feelings with loving-kindness. ‘There’s sadness in my chest. It’s heavy and flat and dark. And now there’s anger. So sharp and hard. All through my body!’

“Avoid your left, rational brain’s attempts to explain away your discomfort. Resist the urge to make it about your daughter or the specific situation. Simply notice what you’re experiencing. Be patient. The emotions will pass through. You *will* feel better. The only way out is through. It is a process of grieving for the voice you didn’t have, the empathy you didn’t receive, and the hurt of having felt invisible.”

This was — and is — a very deep process. It isn’t easy or quick. Old wounds need breathing room to heal. As you move through this process, I encourage you to be kind and patient with yourself, even as you begin trying new ways of dealing with your child when she activates an old hurt. With care, you can start to heal the dynamic, and yourself.

Once Catherine allowed herself to grieve for the parts of her that had been afraid to express her wishes, she was ready to try new ways of asking things of her girls. I shared with her something I once heard Diane Sawyer say when she was asked about the success of her long marriage. She replied, “I learned early on that a criticism is just a really lousy way of making a request. So... just make the request!”

The Four Modalities of Interaction

In our interactions with others, we generally fall into one of four categories. We are either passive, aggressive, passive-aggressive, or assertive.

We are in *passive* mode when we suppress what we truly feel, pretending that everything is okay. When we are passive, we say yes when we mean no, put others' needs ahead of our own, and are terrified of ruffling anyone's feathers. Passive parents are afraid of their children's upset and desperately want to be liked by them, so they give in to their demands.

When we are *aggressive*, we come *at* our children using threats and intimidation to bend them to our will. It may look effective on the outside — the misbehavior stops — but this approach comes at a high price. Our children cannot feel close to us because we are not emotionally safe.

Passive-aggressive parents control their children through shame and guilt. They may not be overtly aggressive, but their subtle guilt trips and manipulations are extremely harmful to their children's developing sense of self. These kids feel inappropriately responsible for their parents' needs and happiness rather than in tune with their own. If you say, "You're the only child in this family who can't seem to figure out how to set the table right," you have just shamed your child. Telling her, "I didn't sleep a wink last night, worrying about how I'm going to pay for that class trip you insist you have to go on," she can't help but feel guilty. These are very unhealthy ways of interacting with children.

We are *assertive* when we are being what I call the Captain of the ship in our children's lives. (More on this in chapter 2.) In this mode, we maintain healthy boundaries with our children, allowing them to have their needs, wants, feelings, and preferences without making them wrong when they don't nicely overlap with our own. We don't *need* our children to like us, and we are not afraid of their unhappiness, recognizing that if we fix all their problems we are impairing their ability to develop true resilience. Our children know that they are loved for who they are, not for what they can do for us or how their achievements make us look to others.

And when we are assertive, we can acknowledge that our children may not want to do what we ask, without taking their complaints personally or escalating the disagreement into a power struggle. We empathize with their position, allowing them to feel what they feel, but we are not reluctant to set limits that might disappoint them.

When we are assertive, we can acknowledge that our children may not want to do what we ask, without taking their complaints personally or escalating the disagreement into a power struggle.

My work with Catherine first focused on helping her grieve for the sweet and loving childhood she never had. It was vulnerable work, but she was committed and moved through her old feelings bravely.

Then we started practicing assertiveness. Since she had almost no experience with assertive behavior in either her childhood or her marriage, this was uncharted territory for her. But we had a lot of fun; we role-played scenarios in which she was able to practice expressing her wishes in a way that wasn't aggressive (pressing the accelerator to the floor), passive (staying frozen and still), or passive-aggressive (using shame or put-downs). Catherine loved how she felt when she assertively voiced her needs.

As a result of working through this emotional baggage, Catherine's requests lost their edginess and desperation, making it easier for Shay to agree to what her mother was asking of her. Catherine practiced coming *alongside* her daughter (what I call Act 1 Parenting) by letting Shay know that she understood that she might not think it was a big deal if she left her clothes strewn around her room. "You might even think that since it's *your* room, you should have the right to things the way you want them." Because Shay felt understood and validated by her mom, she was less defensive and more receptive.

"Unfortunately, sweetheart," her assertive mom went on,

“since it does bother *me* to come into your room and see clothes everywhere, and I’m the one paying the rent, I’d like you to make more of an effort to keep it clean. I want you to spend five or ten minutes putting things away each night before you climb into bed. And it will be great if you would make sure that you leave the bathroom the way you found it — which means that your towels find their way into the hamper!”

Before Catherine discovered what lay buried beneath her heightened sensitivity to this issue with her daughter, either she kept her foot off the gas (passively saying nothing but teeming with repressed anger and resentment), or she slammed on the accelerator (aggressively coming at her daughter with criticism and anger).

By choosing to see her daughter as a wonderful teacher who was providing her with an assignment to reclaim her voice and to respectfully ask for what she needed, Catherine began to feel even closer to Shay. And the house was tidier, too!

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

In your journal, write your child's name. Below it, note a quality in your child that is particularly difficult for you to deal with — a characteristic or behavior that pushes your buttons and causes you to react intensely, meaning you get extremely upset when others might just feel mildly annoyed. Avoid censoring yourself; be truthful.

Here are some examples: *impatient, messy, bossy, self-centered, highly sensitive, inflexible, overly cautious, rude, negative, superficial, aggressive, shy, immature. Sneaky, picky, provocative, easily frustrated, sassy, scattered, judgmental, unaffectionate, stubborn, controlling, unappreciative, overly rational, hypochondriacal, argumentative, unmotivated, weak, timid, persistent, complaining, gives up easily, whiny, hyper, restless, won't accept no for an answer, procrastinator, doesn't follow through.*

Now answer these questions, focusing on the ones that apply to you. Take your time; sometimes it takes a little while to locate the truth beneath our knee-jerk interpretation of what's going on.

- Who in your past does your child remind you of when she exhibits this behavior? A parent or teacher? Big brother or little sister? Former spouse?
- How did you cope when this person manifested this behavior or trait? Did you withdraw? Did you become aggressive? Did you argue? Throw a tantrum? Hide? Cry? Were you passive? Aggressive? Passive-aggressive?
- How did this person respond to your problems or complaints? Did he blame you for your challenges? Did he dismiss or trivialize your concerns? Tell you that you were overreacting? Did he punish you for tattling? Tell you to work out your problems on your own? Make you feel guilty for speaking up? Tell you how much harder *his*

- life was than yours? Ridicule you for being too sensitive?
- Is your child expressing an undesirable trait that reminds you of something *in yourself* you find hard to face? Do you do the very thing that you find unacceptable in your child? What feelings come up for you as you explore the ways you and your child share a tendency to express this quality?
 - How did your early caregivers interact with you when you manifested this unpleasant trait or behavior? Were they critical or shaming? Did they compare you to a more agreeable sibling? Were you isolated or sent to your room to “think about how you have been bad?” Did a parent withhold his or her love? Shout and threaten? Physically hurt you?
 - What are you grieving as a result of your child having this particular characteristic? What quality is being called forth from you to meet your child exactly as she is? What are you being invited to learn? Is your child gifting you with the chance to learn more patience? Self-acceptance? Assertiveness? Flexibility?

Peering beneath the surface of behaviors in our child that trigger unresolved feelings within our hearts and minds is deep work and not to be taken lightly. If emotions bubble to the surface that are difficult to process on your own, please seek the support of a trusted friend or a trained therapist.

If, like Catherine, you choose to see your child as your teacher and to embrace the healing and transformation that is being offered, the rewards can be limitless.

MAKING IT PRACTICAL

Parenting with Presence in Real Life

How can I keep from being bugged by my child's whining?

QUESTION: My four-year-old's whining drives me crazy. I know she's little and can't always put her wishes into words, but for some reason her whiny voice sends me through the roof!

SUGGESTION: You are not alone. There is something about a child's high-pitched wail that can set a parent's teeth on edge. But becoming reactive only makes the problem worse.

Try viewing your daughter's whining as a completely neutral event. Just as with a child who persistently taps his pencil or kicks his foot, these behaviors aren't inherently good or bad. What makes them annoying is that we *decide* that they are, which sets us up for a power struggle. If you need your child to stop doing something because you decide it's irritating, then unless your connection is very strong, you are likely to provoke her into persisting.

It may sound very Zen-like, but if you can move into a place of *noticing* rather than labeling or *judging* her whiny voice, you will be able to say, "Sweetheart, I want to hear what you need, and I'm happy to wait until you can use your regular voice." When you are less reactive, your daughter should be able to figure out how to appropriately ask for what she wants.

What is my sassy tween teaching me?

QUESTION: My eleven-year-old rolls her eyes or mimics me when I ask her to do something. I find this behavior very disrespectful. What could I be learning from having to deal with a sassy tween?

SUGGESTION: How much time do you have? The things we can learn from our sassy tweens could fill volumes! Let's start with *not taking things personally*.

There is a notable lack of positive role models for youngsters your daughter's age, who are desperately trying to figure out how to step into adolescence and start individuating from their parents. Unfortunately, many take on the snarky behavior of kids on popular TV shows, where eye rolling and talking back is rewarded with an enthusiastic laugh track.

Refuse to make your daughter's eye rolling mean more than what it is — an awkward and (hopefully) ineffective way of announcing that she doesn't feel like doing what you've asked or that she is testing your limits. If you can refrain from taking it personally, you'll be able to simply say, "Why don't you take a do-over on that one, honey" — hopefully, without a sassy tone in *your* voice!

What am I learning from being ignored?

QUESTION: I have a fifteen-year-old son who treats me as if I don't exist. He walks in the door and heads straight to his room without even saying hello. What could he possibly be teaching me?

SUGGESTION: Alas, child rearing can be brutal, especially for those who have unfinished business around having felt invisible, unimportant, or unpopular. The good news is that by approaching these experiences consciously, we are able not only to parent more effectively but also to heal some of our own childhood wounds.

Be *present* with what you're experiencing instead of focusing on how to change your son. If you have a physical reaction — tension, anger — be friendly toward the sensations without making them bigger or smaller. Name them — *there's clenching... in my belly... like a knot that's getting tighter.*

If your reaction is more emotional, stay present with what your feelings bring up. *There's sadness...reminds me of feeling invisible in middle school...I hated how kids ignored me at lunch...*

While each person will have a unique set of feelings that come up when they start being more present with what gets triggered by their kids, my recommendation is the same. Start with what's going on *within you* before taking on the issue with your child. Only then will you be able to address the problem as the Captain of the ship, without infusing it with neediness.