

PARENTUALITY

How to Have an
Amazing Relationship
with Your Child

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you for picking up this book. I wish I could have read this book, or one like it, before meeting my first child, to give me then some of the insights I have now. There was so much I didn't know. So much I wish I had known.

That was my motivation to create the concept of The Why Parent, and to write this book.

Over the last few years, as an educational psychologist, and, more importantly, as a parent, I have analysed the mountains of material on parenting. Much of the information out there focuses on the "what" and the "how" of parenting. I wanted to delve deeper into the "why" of parenting.

This book is the result of that enquiry into the why; it is my gift to you as a parent on your heartfelt parenting journey.

This book is for you if you are reflecting on your parenting and want an amazing long-term relationship

with your children; it is for you if you need to find your purpose and “why” as a parent.

This book is not about me as an educational psychologist and a parent coach giving you a quick “behaviour fix” of what to do with your child – it is to help you explore and find your own “why” of parenting. When I use parents in this book I am using an inclusive term to mean anyone who has a main caring relationship with their children. single parents, foster or adoptive parents, carers and guardians.

“Parentuality,” is a word to describe the awakening we have as parents when we become caregivers. The experience of connecting on a conscious level with ourselves, our children, and life. Parentuality is a higher level of consciousness in our parenting, which helps us have an amazing relationship with our children.

If you are ready to embark on that journey, then let’s get started ...

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CHAPTER ONE

FIND YOUR “WHY” AS A PARENT

“Nothing has a stronger influence psychologically on their environment and especially on their children than the unlived life of the parent.”

Carl Jung

It feels like a dream when you hold your child for the first time and whisper, “hello.” What follows is a journey of accelerated enlightenment, a warp speed *Star Trek* voyage into the unknown where you can “boldly go” or, as I did, “fumble awkwardly.”

Holding my first child, I felt I was entering alien territory and I asked myself, “Am I going to mess this up?”

After nine years of parenting, of finding my way through the ecology of parent and child, this book is a journey of reflection.

In the hectic schedule of a busy day I am encouraging you to give yourself permission and time to stop and reflect on you, your parenting and your relationship with your child.

Explore the possibility of enjoying every single moment with your child, of following your own inner guidance; to "boldly go" with confidence in your own judgement.

Trust yourself

The main thing I would like to say if I bumped into my past, new-parent self would be: "Be present, enjoy the moment and really understand why you are doing what you are doing."

As parents we are bombarded with endless information from books, magazines, websites and TV programmes that make us feel guilty that we are not doing what we "could" be doing. We feel that we "should" be implementing the latest "evidence-based" behaviour technique with our children.

When we use those words of “could” and “should”, that implies guilt or shame.

I would have loved to have discovered my “why” as a parent, back when I was heavily pregnant, watching the Athens Olympics and knitting a cot blanket. It is fascinating that I thought being pregnant meant that I “should” be knitting!

Having now arrived at a “pit stop” moment in my parenting journey (my children now are nine and eight), what I would like to say to parents is this:

Every single moment can be cherished and enjoyed.

Even those moments that are frustrating and overwhelming are amazing learning opportunities for us and our children.

Allowing ourselves space to learn

Our children are our greatest teachers if we allow them to be. Even the tantrums in supermarkets and those moments when they refuse to eat the food we

have spent hours lovingly preparing can be enjoyed if we let ourselves.

If we truly listen to our children they can show us who we really are and who they need to be.

When things go wrong, that feeling of being totally overwhelmed, thinking, "What can I do to make this situation better?" can be a learning opportunity. We can ask ourselves, "What is it about this situation that is making me react like this?" "Why is it that I am feeling frustrated?" "Why am I sounding like my mum?" and give ourselves the opportunity to change.

Usually it is not our children causing this reaction, it is our past experiences and our subconscious coming into play, triggering off these overwhelming feelings. It is okay to have these moments that are difficult and challenging. Ultimately our children are teaching us something about our reactions; they can give us so much in terms of learning about ourselves and learning how to connect with them so that we can give them what they need.

It is that reciprocity between our children teaching us and us being able to help them through difficult and challenging emotions and situations that makes parenting the amazing voyage of discovery it is. The biggest challenge of parenting is to embrace those moments of joy and frustration in equal measure, and to discover our “why” of parenting.

Connecting with ourselves; teaching our children

The parenting journey, as described in this book and following The Why Parent approach, takes us first inside ourselves, to discover and connect with us as individuals; and then out again, equipped with these insights and that deeper connection into our relationship with our children, to connect deeply with them, and to guide them to be the people they were born to be.

Being authentic with ourselves and our children

Once we start thinking of every single situation with our children as a learning opportunity, this helps us

become more conscious about what we focus on, particularly our thoughts, feelings and emotions.

Our children display very big emotions that they are sometimes not quite sure how to express, for example the tantrum in the supermarket, the refusal to tidy up, not putting on a coat when it is cold. They have overwhelming emotions and feelings, which they are trying to process. It's our job to help them process those emotions – to feel that frustration, confusion or indeed happiness – and express them appropriately out into the world; and doing so helps us, too.

Once we stand back and remember not to take those moments personally, or as indicating failure in ourselves; we become more conscious about what we are thinking and saying to our children, we begin to develop a more authentic relationship with ourselves.

Sometimes we, too, can get overwhelmed by our feelings of anger or frustration and can feel guilty about what we are thinking as parents.

Parenting for me has become a process of becoming more conscious about my emotions and therefore

being more honest and authentic with what I am thinking and feeling.

Our children as role models

Our children are brilliant role models, showing us how to be honest and open with our thoughts and feelings. We can acknowledge our feelings and let them grow. We can step into those emotions and become a role model for our children in turn, showing them how to experience emotions and really feel them. It is a practice we become better at the more we undertake it, just like meditation, yoga or focusing on a muscle group by lifting weights in the gym.

That process helps us to build an authentic relationship with ourselves, and ultimately an amazing relationship with our children.

Really feeling our emotions

When we give a name to our emotions and also really feel them, we become more comfortable with

those feelings of frustration; we know ourselves better as parents. Some people think it is selfish focusing on our feelings, and that we should focus on our children's emotions; but in order to really empathise with our children and truly understand them, to really connect with our children when they feel frustrated or angry, we need to understand our own emotions, too.

My experience working with parents, myself included, is that we feel guilty or overwhelmed when we are angry or frustrated. We move quickly on to the next situation with the subconscious message to our children that there is no time to have emotions.

Once we start being more authentic with ourselves, then our children are free to be who they need to be. It is that reciprocal relationship and connection that is so important and makes us human. It is such a joy to have that space and time to connect.

I think sometimes we run around being so busy that we lose those moments of authentic connections. We are so distracted by our TV, computer screens

and telephones. It is not always the amount of time that counts in a connection with our children. Sometimes five minutes of really listening can be more enlightening than an hour of being in the same room with all the family members being distracted.

Joy as well as frustration

As parents we also need to acknowledge those moments of joy and complete elation when our children demonstrate something amazing. Whether it is a drawing, learning to ride a bike for the first time or beginning to swim – what my eldest son Fred calls a “treasure of skills” – it is those moments that make us feel total joy as parents. We can learn from the way children celebrate the simple moments of life.

As parents we are often worried about what happened yesterday, anxious about what will be happening tomorrow, rather than just being present, enjoying the moment and really feeling the now with our children.

Calm, connected and conscious - three levels of mind

To go a little deeper into understanding how we make decisions as parents, I'll start with a very simplistic explanation of how the brain works. The brain is essentially made up of three main parts: the brain stem, limbic system and prefrontal cortex.

The brain stem controls our fight and flight responses, which activate when we come up against something threatening, such as being mugged or being shouted at randomly by someone in the street. The natural instinct for survival kicks in.

The middle section of our brain, the limbic system, is the emotional-response part of the brain. This area is where our personal narratives, memories and stories come into play. We link our emotions to previous situations such as a bad experience we had at school. A teacher may have shouted at us for something we did, and a subsequent incident, such as someone raising their voice, may remind us of that moment and instantaneously transport us back to that time.

We can revisit an experience as a result of smells or sights and certain associations we might have with that memory. In that moment we are connected with the limbic system or emotional part of the brain.

The prefrontal cortex is the front area of the brain. This is where reasoning occurs, and our higher executive functions and thinking skills are located. Ideally when we are talking to our children it is useful to activate this strategic part of the brain in ourselves, and our children so that we empower them to think of a solution, and also to solve similar problems they might encounter in the future.

I have found that when working with children and parents, or indeed trying to understand my responses to my own children, it is useful to have a three-level approach to reflect on where thoughts, emotions and beliefs are coming from.

I call this: "The Why Parent process". It focuses on a calm, connected, and conscious approach and relates to the three main areas of the brain.

Calm

Let us go back to thinking about a fight or flight response to a situation such as being shouted at. The first stage of the process is to focus on regaining a calm state.

How can we be totally calm about a feeling of threat? For example, how can we go from that self talk of, "My child is having a tantrum in the supermarket. I am frightened of being judged by other parents," to reframe it to, "My child is really frustrated about something. I need to find out why they are frustrated. How can I be calm so I can respond in a conscious way?"

If we mirror the tantrum and anxiety by worrying about other people's judgements we become fearful; the child will pick up that energy of fear and the tantrum will naturally escalate. When we stay calm and focus on our child's needs, not on judging the tantrum, anxious behaviour is more likely to de-escalate.

Connected

The second stage of The Why Parent process is to demonstrate a connected response. This corresponds to the middle section of the brain, finding an association, memory or story to link the limbic system part of the brain. A positive emotional response would be to ask ourselves is, “How can I really connect with my child?”

We might be more conscious of using eye contact, really getting down to their level; we might try to understand what they are experiencing, seeing, thinking and feeling in the moment. Our children are making a link and an associated story with that moment; that is part of developing memories.

How we connect to our children makes a huge contribution to how that memory is stored and what lessons are taken from it. Getting down to their level, giving them a hug and physical contact or reassuring words can help that connection – some children like physical contact; some children like verbal contact and need to be comforted verbally.

Asking the question, "What does my child need right now?" supports the connection with our children at a very challenging time for them emotionally.

Conscious

The third part of the process is being able to understand our reactions in relation to the prefrontal cortex, the reasoning and decision-making part of the brain. We need to ask ourselves, "What is the most appropriate response I could give to my child and the situation at this moment?"

For example, a child might be fearful of going to a party because they are not so sure about what they are going to experience, who they are going to meet, or where it is taking place. This is a completely natural human response for some children, and indeed adults. Telling them not to worry undermines their thoughts and feelings. Asking them, "What do you need right now to help?" may be a more gentle and conscious approach to a situation, which is anxiety-provoking for them.

When our children are frightened, frustrated and finding it hard to make sense of a situation it is important to acknowledge their thoughts and feelings. Asking ourselves, "What is the most conscious way that I can respond to how they are feeling?" helps us relate to them in such a way that our children feel listened to, valued and understood.

Greater understanding

The calm, connected and conscious "Why Parent" process has helped bring me to a greater understanding of my instinct, heart and brain. It has ultimately helped me have a better relationship with my children.

Reflecting on why we do what we do through being calm, connected and conscious helps us as parents in all situations, whether we are feeling overwhelmed or happy.

We need to connect in a way that suits our child in that moment

Just as there are many different ways of learning there are many different ways of developing our relationships with our children. Many of us have lost confidence as parents because we feel we need to look for answers from experts such as Super Nanny, Dr Spock, Dr Sears and Gina Ford.

Parents' confidence and self-esteem seem to be inversely proportional to the amount written about parenting. There is so much conflicting information and advice, so many techniques, such as putting children on a "naughty step" or giving rewards and stickers to our children. These are a behaviourist tick-box approach to parenting; a nurturing approach is to trust our emotions and ask our children what they need.

Many children feel very threatened with fear-based behaviourist approaches such as "time out"; it is counterintuitive and counterproductive to threaten a child who is trying to make sense of their emotions and feelings.

What children really crave is to be valued, understood and listened to; what is the long-term value in punishment and love-withdrawal? I am sure as adults we might react in a defensive way to a boss suddenly putting “reward charts” on the staffroom fridge door and having a “time out” chair in the office.

Consider the perspective of the child

The bottom line is to consider the perspective of the child. Ask yourself, “How would I feel if I was on the receiving end of what I just said or did? What would I believe about myself if that were said or done to me? What would my response be?”

As parents, our focus is to develop our relationships with our children and connect with them rather than micro-manage their behaviour.

For many parents there is a lack of confidence and disconnection with ourselves, which our children are picking up. Our job is to repair that disconnection somehow, learn to trust our instincts. Parenting materials become our security blanket when we

feel we are not good enough, or when we try to be perfect parents.

The best way we can help our children is to model our connection with ourselves, and then to step up, be authentic and allow them to be who they need to be.

Letting go of our own parents' parenting style

Sometimes it is tempting to blame the way we were parented for the way we are parenting our own children. This can be quite disabling and can be a block in our relationship with our children.

Blaming our past experiences, thinking, "I am not good enough as a parent because of what my father did or what my mum said" prevents us from being the best parents we can be. Instead, we need to choose more empowering thoughts and beliefs about our parenting.

We can choose to liberate ourselves from our past and think about who we need to be now. We

can choose what we say and do with our children right now. It doesn't have to be a psychoanalytical approach; it is a simple choice. We can be dragged down by our past or become hijacked into worrying about what is going to happen in the future, or we can choose something new, now.

It is possible to change the way we think and act

Expert thinking about our ability to impact on our thoughts and beliefs has radically changed in the last few years. Neuro-scientific research has shown that the brain's neuroplasticity and ability to form new connections means that we can instantaneously change our thoughts and belief systems if we allow ourselves to do so.

Feelings of guilt, shame and confusion can stop us from being the parents we want to be. In my role as a teacher and psychologist I have had the privilege of meeting hundreds of parents, and I have met many parents who blame themselves for the way their children are and want to "fix" the child or the situation.

What I do in my role is help acknowledge the experiences from the past that make us who we are.

Creating positive parenting stories gives us the strength and inner resources to face challenging situations in the now and in the future.

Past experiences – whether they are perceived as good or bad – can help us as parents and can be gifts to our children.

If as parents we are experiencing feelings of guilt, shame and confusion, these are action points to do something about. We need to allow ourselves to feel them and then move past them in order to be who we need to be for our children.

Letting go of anxiety about the future

I also meet parents (and have been one myself) whose thoughts are paralysed by focusing on the future. They are anxious about the future and much of what they do is based on what they think will help their children get on in life. This seems to dominate modern parenting.

Parents might think they need to take their child to music lessons when actually the child has shown no interest in music, because parents feel it is a good thing for kids to learn.

It is much healthier to just enjoy what they show us they love doing right now. Our children's strengths and interests evolve much more authentically if they are given a chance to grow organically rather than being "genetically modified" by artificially accelerating them.

As parents we sometimes get anxious about what we "should" be doing for our children and put them into swimming lessons just because we think it is a good thing to do. Of course, being safe in the water is a useful life skill to have! Our children need to learn how to be safe in water but there are other ways of helping them learn how to swim rather than formal lessons.

Ultimately our children are not checklists to be ticked off. When they show us that they are ready for certain experiences, that is the moment to enjoy

learning-milestone experiences together. We can get so entrenched in the past and in thinking about the future that we lose the best part of parenting, which is our children right here, right now, in front of us.

The school system

The same could be said of the school system, which is obsessed with preparing our children for the “next stage” of education, whatever that may be. I like the definition of education as being “drawing out what is from within.”

My feeling is that education is being perceived by our children as “filling them with skills to get to the next level.”

When I asked Fred what he thought the purpose of school was, he said, “Getting you ready for secondary school.” I was saddened to think that our children are picking up belief systems that school is about getting ready for the next stage of schooling rather than enjoying a lifelong-learning journey in the moment.

As parents, we, too, may be falling into the trap of preparing children for the next stage instead of seeing them for who they are now.

To be fair, later on in the conversation Fred also said school was about, "Making me a better person." I would like to think that schools are mirroring this desire of children and parents to be well-rounded, balanced people rather than national-curriculum-level junkies.

When we get lost in the past or the future, we miss the greatest moments, those that are happening now.

The most important message I have for parents is: enjoy the moment.

Why The Why Parent?

The Why Parent, my parenting journey, and my desire to help other parents, evolved from three major turning points in my life.

The first trigger was my father leaving the family home when I was seven. There was not a lot of

discussion within the family about why that happened. Indeed, there was not a lot of discussion about how that made everybody in the family feel.

Being the youngest of three girls, I saw my eldest sister cope with the situation by going out, partying and being with her friends. My middle sister would stay in her room, immersing herself in schoolwork and playing the piano.

I tended to take a back seat and observe rather than participate and felt detached from family life. I do not ever remember being asked how I felt about the situation. Maybe that is just a sign of the times, growing up in the 1970s with adults not knowing how to ask such questions of children, or possibly not wanting to hear the answers.

In the work I do as a psychologist I am very conscious that if you do not explore feelings at the time it can lead to emotions being raised later that are difficult to process. Being able to explain what you are thinking and how you feel helps you understand and make sense of any situation.

Regardless of whether it is a traumatic, anxious, or indeed a happy time, expressing emotions supports developing a deeper understanding of your life story. Having opportunities to discuss how you feel helps you make sense of yourself and your place in the world.

The motivator for me to create The Why Parent was to help children and parents make sense of their emotions and their relationship in any situation.

The second trigger for The Why Parent was my experience as a teacher. I found teaching both demanding and stimulating. Sometimes we have life experiences that provide an overwhelmingly accelerated learning curve. Teaching was a privilege and also one of those experiences.

I was given the opportunity to teach in a village school as well as an inner-London urban environment. I ultimately felt I wanted to understand the learning process at a deeper level. As a teacher in a class of thirty children, I felt I was policing, managing behaviour and organizing rather than being able to

connect with and teach the children on an individual basis.

That feeling of frustration as a teacher led me to train as an educational psychologist, to see what difference I could make with a deeper understanding of how children learn.

Honouring feelings over parental expectations

At the same time as I was training to be a teacher I met my now husband, Av. He is from a Sikh background and there was an expectation from his family that Av would have an arranged marriage to a Sikh girl.

As a white Christian from Yorkshire I did not exactly fit the bill, and this raised questions for me: "What is marriage all about? Why would a parent choose their child's partner? What is being a parent all about if you do not want your child to be happy?" It seemed to me that this was about parental expectation rather than love.

I have the greatest admiration for Av, being authentic and honouring his feelings over parental expectations. He is the strongest person I know.

After years of trying to have our own family we had our first child, Fred, through IVF. I then discovered I was pregnant with Tom who was conceived naturally when Fred was six months old. In fifteen months I had two children. This was an amazing gift but also incredibly overwhelming and the third trigger in my journey as a parent and creating The Why Parent.

I was not prepared for my emotions

Even with my experience as a teacher and psychologist, I was not prepared for the immense feelings of being a new parent: out of control, frustrated and confused. Different midwives, health visitors, doctors, family and friends bombarded me with both goodwill and advice.

I remember one day hiding behind the sofa as the doorbell rang, knowing the health visitor was due to arrive. I was hiding because I felt a failure as a

parent. I was asking very disempowering questions such as, "What am I doing wrong?" "Am I doing enough for my child?"

Several years later the feeling of disempowerment and depression still continued and I knew I needed to do something about it.

Fred's question

A defining moment for me came at the time when Fred was starting school. One sunny September morning he asked me, "Why do I have to go to school?"

*Our children ask us "why" all the time and although adults find it tiring to always answer the "why", I welcomed the question. **I wanted to take the "why" seriously.** Why do you have to go to school? Why do I have to go to work? Why do parents feel guilty, shame and confused? Why do our children begin to mirror our guilt, shame and confusion?*

I welcomed the "why" because it helped me go back to first principles.

We naturally focus on the “what” we do and “how” we do it as parents, but I wanted to know my “why.” I founded The Why Parent to help other parents find their why.

Fred’s question helped me reflect on the basic fundamental assumptions that we make and collude with as adults without question. I handed over my child to the education system and I did not really know what he was experiencing. It was uncomfortable for me to rethink the fundamental concept of education – I had a degree in teaching, and still I was struggling.

At the same time as Fred was starting school I was working in my role as an educational psychologist on a traumatic case. I was working with guardians of a child who had witnessed a horrific incident as a baby. He was now twelve years old and had been under the care of various professionals and agencies. Communication between the different agencies was limited and the child and the guardians were desperate for support.

The child was displaying extremely risky, challenging behaviour and I felt the other professionals were observing what was happening and not intervening because they were unsettled by his behaviour. The guardians were left to deal with the fallout and were feeling very isolated.

I asked myself, "What is my role and how can I support this child when all the other professionals are backing off?" At the same time I was asking myself, "What is my role as a parent?"

The over-riding question was, "What am I here for?" Not only as a professional working with the child and guardians, attempting to help them through a very challenging time, but also as a parent of a child starting school.

I had an overwhelming sense of not knowing what to expect as a parent of my child in school and I was questioning what my role was. The irony was that I had visited hundreds of schools in my role as a teacher and psychologist. The new relationship with

my son's school was confusing, as I felt I "should" know what my role would be.

I came up with the concept of The Why Parent to help me through a process of understanding my own situation, and also to help other parents who were going through the same thing, and who were feeling isolated or overwhelmed, who felt they didn't have the information they needed to make choices and decisions on behalf of their children.

What do you want for your children?

When I ask parents what they want children to be they come up with words such as "happy," "healthy," "caring," "sociable," "creative," "independent," "resilient." I have not had a parent say they want their child to be a number in the National Curriculum.

For the majority of parents I meet, the focus is on having happy and healthy children. Having healthy and happy children comes from having healthy and happy parents in healthy and happy

communities. We need people and communities that are working, consciously and actively, towards health and happiness at an individual, family, school and community level.

This is how we can help society become calm, connected and conscious. We can start, as Gandhi says, to “be the change” we want to see.

Being a “Why Parent” is about understanding ourselves, our past experiences and how we have been parented. This helps us gain a deeper understanding of our beliefs, feelings and thoughts, so we can choose to be who we want to be as a parent.

When we are authentic and know who we are, we can have a greater connection with our children.

Parents are the first teachers

Parents are the first teachers of their children and I would like parents to feel empowered to work in parallel with schools to help their children be the

best that they can be; and to acknowledge that they have that role.

I support parents by coaching them individually and in groups, in the community and in schools.

Working with parents in groups within a school setting is a powerful way of working so that schools and parents are talking the same language for the same ends: healthy and happy children.

The process of having a calm, connected and conscious approach to our parenting in order to have an amazing relationship with our children is a focus of The Why Parent.

The rest of this book delves into The Why Parent approach, exploring nine essential elements to having a healthy and happy relationship with our children:

W - wellbeing

H - happiness

Y- you

- P** - positivity
- A** - attachment
- R** - resilience
- E** - enjoyment
- N** - now
- T** - thanks

Activity – exploring you as a parent

*Take a few minutes to consider the following question.
If you like, you can jot down your thoughts.*

*What were the triggers in your life that make you
the amazing parent you are today? (these events
or situations when you reflect on them create your
parenting story, your gift to your children)*

PARENTUALITY

This is '**Parentuality**,' the way we connect with our parenting story, ourselves, our children, and life.

Parentuality		
Wellbeing Happiness You	Positivity Attachment Resilience	Enjoyment Now Thanks
Connecting with Self	Connecting with Child	Connecting with Life

Thank you for taking the time
to read this sample chapter
from my book.

If you'd like to find out more
please visit

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