

Excerpt

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Introduction

"It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men." Frederick Douglass

WHY WE HAVE LOST TOUCH WITH OUR PARENTING INTUITION AND HOW WE CAN REGAIN IT

In this time of numerous parenting experts offering vastly differing views on every imaginable aspect of child-rearing, the consequences amongst busy, over-worked and often over-extended parents is self-conscious, Google-driven, fretful-to-the-point-of-being-calculated parenting. Children experience their parents' overanxious, preoccupied concern, and themselves develop anxiety and an insecure sense of self. Parenting intuition, both as a concept and an innate ability, has for the past few decades become undermined if not usurped by the thousands of parenting books, blogs and so-called parenting experts flooding the market. But raising a child 'by the book' or according to the directives of a shedload of 'experts' (including me) is like trying to live a healthy life by following every diet trend; Paleo, Atkins, Macrobiotic, and the raw-food-diet (to name just a few) have all intermittently been hailed as the greatest diet ever and then after a while, their limitations become apparent. The intention may be good, but ultimately making any significant choices in our lives by following trends can have inadvertent and unhappy consequences.

Loving, caring parents who are sincerely committed to doing the best for their children are self-consciously, and often anxiously, trying to follow advice that is regularly contradictory and frequently also encourages them to be alert for symptoms of a pathology or disorder. Diagnostics has, of course, helped countless children and families handle great challenges and traumas. Increasing numbers of psychologists and mental health professionals, however, are becoming concerned about the over-diagnosis of too many children, as well as the mounting angst in parents contributing to over-anxiety in their children and the disturbing rise in mental health problems amongst ever younger children.

For the average child, increased diagnosis is not the answer. Nor is blaming or turning to schools or necessarily even 'experts'. The ever-speeding roller-coaster ride we are on of

excessive cognitive analysis and hyper advice-giving is not working – instead it is leading to analysis paralysis: we are losing touch with our innate human needs and abilities, our need to connect *in person* and our ability to tune-in to each other and to ourselves and our own intuition. In my view this applies as much if not more to parents and children than any other group.

Throughout decades of working with families, teachers, parents and children, I have seen over and over again that meeting this innate need and ability to connect and tune-in requires not more advice but less; it requires simplification and letting go of the over-emphasis on expert advice, labelling and analysis; and it requires us ‘professionals’ to step back, impose less and listen more. It requires that we turn towards the parents and empower them to access and draw on their own wisdom; to give them information instead of advice and knowledge rather than analysis. Giving parents an understanding of *why* real connection and tuning in to yourselves and your children is critical (and showing how) is, in my view, the only way to regain parental self-confidence.

Multiple decades of experience have taught me that, whether you are a parent, grandparent, or child-caregiver, multiple decades of experience have taught me that you are highly likely to have an intuitive wisdom that can help you raise the children in your care with much less anxiety and stress about ‘doing it right’ than has become the norm. I have witnessed countless parents become empowered and confident after gaining basic knowledge about how the brain-body-behaviour connection works, and how to use that knowledge to reconnect with their own parenting insights and intuition.

I have written this book with that fact in mind, and also with the acute awareness that most parents have no time to read a thick book with protracted information where they have to spend time searching for the information that’s relevant to them. The book is deliberately short and, I hope, to the point, with practical tools you can apply immediately, all expressing the idea that if you are coherent and tuned in to yourself, your child, and your intuition you will access the wisest expert you both will find. Being tuned-in to your intuition will give you insights and perspectives that are specific to you and that show you how to apply the knowledge you glean to your parenting, without anxiety or feeling overwhelmed.

As you read the book you will become increasingly familiar with how to tune in to your intuition and intuitive wisdom at will and, I hope, recognise their elements (and power) as something you have really known all along! But in order to build your confidence in this innate state, you must first address the reasons why you are not already there, or what is getting in the way of you sustaining it.

Much like approaching a garden you may want to enhance and enrich, or a computer you want to clean and upgrade, you need to approach yourself and your own development as a natural ‘work-in-progress’ and recognise that you, like all of us, have developed parent-anxieties and stress-induced issues that –like weeds in a garden or old programs on a laptop– need replacing or upgrading. Once ‘downloaded’ and integrated the tuned in approach will become part of your way of life, and a more confident and loving connection with your child will ultimately ensue.

The Difference Between Instinct and Intuition

Finally, before we move on I want to clarify the difference, as I see it, between intuition and instinct. The two terms are often used interchangeably and this failure to differentiate them can lead us to think they are the same thing. Because both our intuition and instinct seem to appear out of nowhere and we don’t know how or why we feel what we feel, it is easy to confuse the two. However, I believe there is a distinct difference which is especially relevant to parenting, and they each serve a different purpose.

Instinct is a biologically hardwired survival mechanism. It is designed to help us sense danger or warning signs of threat and is often connected to our ‘fight or flight’ response. Because we are not equipped to be consciously alert to all dangers, risks or hazards, our instinct works with all our physical senses and our subconscious to signal us when we need to be on our guard or extra vigilant. Our conscious mind can only take in and process less than two hundred stimuli simultaneously, whereas our subconscious –greatly assisted by our limbic system and its stored experiences– can process many millions per second, and herein lies our instinctive capacity.

If we ‘have a feeling’ that a certain path our teenager is pursuing could be dodgy or even perilous, our instinct may be warning us with feelings of apprehension, unease, or

judgment. Or if we are walking alone at night and have a gut feeling that someone is following us even though we can't see or hear anything, that is usually our instinct alerting us and our accompanying fear will activate the appropriate 'fight or flight' response.

Intuition on the other hand, signals us through what is deeply important to us, through feelings of unconditional love, balanced care, and being 'in flow', and often is in alignment with our values and our desired direction of growth. It does not tend to function in stress but rather when we are completely present and 'in the now'. Intuition can be described as our North Star that doesn't necessarily show us why a particular direction is the right one; we 'just know – it feels right.'

As a parent, your intuition is that inner conviction you have that your child needs a certain experience or connection, and you have little or no way of explaining why; you 'just know'. You may even feel there is a step that needs to be taken although you don't know the step that follows it – this one first step 'feels right, in your heart'. It is a sense of knowing that most of the time we cannot explain. If we trust and follow our intuition, inevitably it turns out to be a good or right decision. The key here is trust – trusting our intuition requires recognising it first, then having the confidence to act on it.

When our instinct alerts us, it is important to pay attention to it for obvious reasons. Physically it will feel uncomfortable, like a nagging or uneasy feeling in the stomach that, if danger is present, needs to be acted on. When there is no evidence of immediate threat however, there is a chance it could be based on memories or unresolved emotions from a similar situation, so it might be prudent to also engage the intuition before acting.

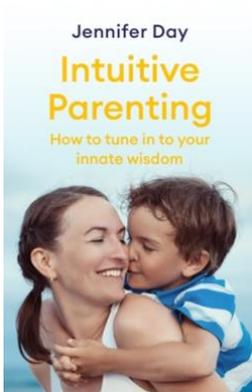
The intuition in contrast tends to feel subtler, like a nudge or an urge that you can't explain, and a sense of calm clarity that can also register as a sensation or stirring in the stomach and heart area. Developing discernment between the two is like learning two different languages, and requires first and foremost increased self-awareness, mentally, emotionally and physically.

I hope by the time you've finished reading this book you'll have gained both knowledge and tools to do just that – and that you'll have increased your connection to your intuition,

most particularly your parenting intuition, and be well on the way to building more trust in it, with more confidence in your parenting as a result.

In view of the very busy lives of parents today, each chapter in the book has been kept short, and contains some practical tips to help you integrate the information from that chapter - all tips and suggestions leading towards building and strengthening your parent intuition. Occasionally I have supplied references or recommendations for further reading as footnotes on the relevant page, should you want to explore further any of the concepts or research presented. But most importantly, I encourage you to put the concepts into practice.

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