

Introduction for parents and concerned adults

Nothing can prepare you for being a parent. It tests your stamina, your nerves, your emotions and at times even your sanity. You start out fretting over how to change a diaper or bathe the baby without drowning it, and before long you discover that that's the least of your challenges. And just when you think you've got one phase of childhood cracked, they grow a bit older and it's a whole new scenario. Toddling, school, boyfriends or girlfriends, driving lessons—it never stops. Luckily the rewards are huge—the fun, the hugs, and the closeness. Even the thanks eventually, if you're very lucky. And of course the pleasure of seeing them grow into the kind of person you can be proud of. Along the way there's sure to be plenty of frustration, angst, bewilderment, and soul searching as you look for the right things to say and do that will set your child on the road to growing up into a happy, well-balanced adult. And that's what this book is about.

The path you're now treading is well worn—millions of people have been parents before you, and by trial and error some of them have worked a few things out that might just be useful to you now. I've been through the parenting cycle twice. I've had two families spread over a total of nearly 30 years. That means I've had the chance to make most of the classic mistakes several times. But it also means that, through my friends and my children's friends, I've had the chance to watch and observe other families in action and see how other parents behave. It's an endlessly fascinating study.

Some parents seem to know instinctively how to handle every situation. Others get some parts wrong, but have brilliant ways of dealing with certain issues. If you study other parents long enough, as I have, you begin to spot patterns—tactics, techniques and principles of behavior that get the best out of children, and that can be adapted whatever the personality of the child. It's those attitudes and principles that have been distilled into the Rules of Parenting, to guide you through the tough times, help you bring your child up to be all they can be, and improve the relationship between you for life.

The Rules of Parenting aren't intended to be a revelation – they are a reminder. Many are common sense, but it's easy to lose sight of them when you are dealing with a 2-year-old having a tantrum or a teenager who thinks the world and everything in it exists solely for her benefit. So even the seemingly obvious ones are worth putting in front of you again. After all, it's an important job to get right.

Over 100 Rules might seem like a lot at first glance. But then, 18 years is a pretty long contract for a job. More than 18 if you have more than one child.* You've got to get your kids through weaning, diapers, toddling, learning to talk, the three Rs, school, friends, sex and drugs, and rock-'n'-roll. Actually, 109 Rules isn't much at all.

It seems pretty clear to me how you can tell a good parent. You just have to look at their children. Some kids go through bad patches for a while for all sorts of reasons, many of which you really can't pin on the parents, but I've found that once they leave home, you can see what kind of a job their parents did. And I figure the parents whose kids are able to look after themselves, to enjoy life and to make those around them happy, to be caring and kind, and to stand up for what they believe in—those parents are the ones

who are getting it right. And over the years I've seen what kind of parenting produces those kinds of adults 18 years on.

When you think about the huge responsibility you have as a parent, it can stop you in your tracks and take your breath away. What you do and say over the years will have a huge influence on whether your child grows up to be screwed up or well balanced. The good news is that by thinking about it all now, as you will if you read through this book, you'll automatically begin to correct many of your little foibles or bad habits as well as introducing new more helpful ones (helpful for you and your offspring).

There's more good news. There are lots of wrong ways to raise your kids, but there are lots of right ones too. What you'll find in this book are principles to follow, which you can adapt to suit you and your children. There's no list of instructions you have to follow to the letter if you don't want your child to end up a loser. I've seen parents find all kinds of original, creative, and unusual ways of interpreting these Rules successfully. It's about following the spirit, not the letter. For example, I've known great parents who home schooled their kids, excellent parents whose children went to the local public school, and equally successful parents whose kids attended a private school. If you've got the right attitude, the rest will follow on.

I can personally vouch for the fact that it's impossible to get all the Rules just right every day for 18 years. But then, I also know that all the best parents I've watched have messed up here and there. Just not too badly, and not too often, and they've always known when they've gone wrong. That seems to be very important: recognize where you've gone wrong and try harder to remember next time. That's as much as anyone can ask. And, from the kids I've watched grow up, that's good enough.

I can also tell you (and you may be relieved to hear this) that none of the Rules requires you to brush your child's hair religiously, or make sure they have clean socks every day. I'm sure that's all very nice, but I've also seen parents raise their kids brilliantly with messy hair and no socks at all.

These Rules are about the important stuff. Things to do with your child's attitudes and values and self-image, not to do with their socks. They are Rules which will help you and your child to enjoy each other, enjoy life, and treat other people with respect. They are broad principles which apply equally in traditional nuclear families and in more modern formats such as single-parent or step-families.

I'm not claiming that there are exactly 109 Rules you have to follow and there will never be any more. Far from it. These are the Rules that I have observed as being the most important, but I'm always interested to hear from you and would love to collect more Rules of parenting if you have any up your sleeve.

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