

Simplicity Parenting

*Using the Extraordinary Power of Less
to Raise Calmer, Happier and
More Secure Kids*

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With

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Introduction

Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. As you simplify life the laws of the universe will be simpler.

-HENRY DAVID THOREAU

As parents, we're the architects of our family's daily lives. We build a structure for those we love by what we choose to do together, and how we do it. We determine the rhythms of our days; set a pace. There are certainly limits to our control. ...Ask any parent of a teenager. And it often feels that our lives are controlling us, caught as we are in a mad rush from one responsibility to another. Yet the unique way that we perform this dance of daily activities says a lot about who we are as a family.

You can see what a family holds dear from the pattern of their everyday lives. I've been trained to do so as a counselor and educator, but children need no such fancy training. They pick up the clues naturally. They see the golden overlay on all of our comings and goings, all of our tasks and busyness. This is what they see: With our time and presence we give love. Simple.

And they're quite right; as parents our motivations and intentions are few, our dreams nearly universal. No matter where, no matter how modestly or grandly we live, most of us want what is best for our loved ones. From these few common motivations—love, and the desire to protect and provide for our children—we build families. Every day.

As parents we carry the blueprints, the dreams of what our family could be. The plans change, the whole thing goes way over budget, there are unexpected additions, and the work never ends. Still, through the messiness of construction we see one another with such depth and hope. Our five-year-old boy is still so clearly the baby he once was and sometimes—can you see it?—the young man he will one day be. We draw energy and inspiration from our dreams; our simple, common motivations.

In their development, we can see the extent to which our children feel protected. Surrounded by those they love, they make extraordinary leaps, fantastic moments of revelation and mastery. At our urging or prodding? Never. In flashes they show us who they are ...revealing their golden, essential selves. And as parents we live for such moments. But we can't schedule them. We can't ask for, or hurry them.

We want our family to be a container of security and peace, where we can be our true selves. We want this most urgently for our children, who are engaged in the slow and tricky business of becoming them-selves. Will our love and guidance give them the grace they need to grow? Children are so clearly happiest when they have the time and space to explore their worlds, at play. We may be bouncing between the future and the past, yet our children—the little Zen masters—long to stay suspended, fully engaged, in the moment. Our very best hope is that they'll develop their own voices, their own instincts and resiliency, at their own pace. And despite how many times we forget—sometimes in a single day—we absolutely know that this will take time.

The rest and rejuvenation we want from our homes is getting harder to find. Our work lives have moved in, taking residency in our comput-ers,

finding us wherever a phone or pager signal can reach. Children are overbooked as well. While parents may need software programs to keep track of their kids' activities and schedules, developmental psychologist David Elkind notes that children have lost more than twelve hours of free time a week in the past two decades.¹ When “multitasking” is valued as a survival skill, should we be surprised when increasing numbers of our children are being “diagnosed” with “attention difficulties”?

In every aspect of our lives, no matter how trivial, we are confronted with a dizzying array of things (stuff) and choices. The weighing of dozens of brands, features, claims, sizes, and prices, together with the memory scan we do for any warnings or concerns we may have heard; all of this enters into scores of daily decisions. Too much stuff and too many choices. If we're overwhelmed as adults, imagine how our chil-dren feel! Whichever came first—too many choices or too much stuff—the end result of both is not happiness. Contrary to everything advertising tells us (but obvious to anyone who has chosen a cellular calling plan), too many choices can be overwhelming. Another form of stress. Not only can it eat away at our time, studies show that having lots of choices can erode our motivation and well- being.

Also finding its way into our homes, lives, and our children's awareness is an avalanche of information, unfiltered and often unbidden. Home used to be a parochial outpost, and the outside world "the big unknown." Parents had trouble conveying all of the information that their children might need to face life "in the real world," beyond the confines of home and neighborhood. Today, "the real world," in all of its graphic reality, is available for view anytime, any place, via the Internet. Our responsibility as gatekeepers is becoming exponentially more difficult even as it's becoming more critical.

You've heard about how a frog dropped into a pot of boiling water will struggle to get out? Nothing surprising there, but it turns out that if you put a frog in a pot of cold water, and slowly heat it to the boiling point, the frog will remain still, without any signs of struggle. Based on the families I've been privileged to work with, the hundreds of parents who've shared with me their concerns, and my own experience as a parent, I believe that the pot we're in today as families is increasingly inhospitable for us all...but especially for our children.

Are we building our families on the four pillars of "too much": too much stuff, too many choices, too much information, and too fast? I believe that we are. But I also believe that we don't mean to be. I

know for a fact, and I've seen it many times, that parents can bring fresh inspiration and attention to the flow of family life. Without a doubt, as the family's architects we can add a little more space and grace, a little less speed and clutter to our children's daily lives.

My experience with many, many kids and families has helped me figure out ways to reduce the stresses, distractions, and choices—all forms of clutter—in children's lives. I've seen how effective these strategies can be in restoring a child's sense of ease and well-being. This book is about realigning our daily lives with the pace and promise of childhood. Realigning our real lives with the dreams we hold for our families. Its goal is to help you strip away many of the unnecessary, distracting, and overwhelming elements that are scattering our children's attention and burdening their spirits.

To have moments of calm—creative or restful—is a form of deep sustenance for human beings of all ages. Relationships are often built in these pauses, in the incidental moments, when nothing much is going on. This book should give you many ideas on how to reclaim such intervals, how to establish for your children islands of "being" in the torrent of constant doing.

If, as a society, we are embracing speed, it is partially because we are swimming in anxiety. Fed this concern and that worry, we're running as fast as we can to avoid problems and sidestep danger. We address par-enting with the same anxious gaze, rushing from this "enrichment op-portunity" to that, sensing hidden germs and new hazards, all while doing our level best to provide our children with every advantage now known or soon to be invented. This book is not about hidden dangers, quick fixes, or limited- time opportunities; it is about the long haul. The big picture: a reverence for childhood.

When we act out of reverence, instead of fear, our motivation is stronger, our inspiration boundless. The good news is that there are many things we can do as parents to protect the environment of childhood. To protect the ideal environment for the slow emergence of their identities, resilience, and well-being.

Many of the concepts in this book have their roots in the principles of Waldorf education. One of the most- used forms of independent edu-cation worldwide, Waldorf schools emphasize the imagination and the development of the whole child—the heart and hands as well as the head.

The simplification regime outlined in this book is eminently doable, by any family with the inclination and motivation. The steps I outline in this book should be considered as a menu, not a checklist, from which you can choose what is workable and sustainable for your own family. Each family will have its own issues, areas of emphasis, and levels of commitment. There is no "right" order in which to work through the different levels, and no right or wrong time to begin.

The four layers of simplification will serve as a road map as you navigate your own way; each layer will be addressed in detail in the chap-ters ahead. In Chapter One we'll look at the reasons why simplifying is so critical and effective. We'll also consider how to reclaim the dreams you hold for your family, as these will be your motivation going forward. A short meditation on parental instincts, reminding you (before we get into the practical "work" of simplifying) of what you already know, Chapter Two will help you recognize and address the "overload" in your children in much the way you might do when a little one has a physical fever.

Chapter Three begins at the doorway to your child's bedroom, as we begin to reduce the clutter of too many toys, books, and choices.

Rhythm is another form of simplification, which we'll address in Chapter Four. A more rhythmic daily life establishes beachheads, small islands of calm and predictability in the flow of time. We'll look at how meals and bedtimes can establish the major chords of a day's melody, and consider other possibilities for notes and pauses that a child can count on along the way.

From rhythm we'll look deeper into the pattern of our children's days to consider their schedules. In Chapter Five we'll see how to balance particularly active days with calmer ones, challenging the notion that "free time" means "free to be filled" with lessons, practices, play-dates, and appointments. The principle that too much stuff and too many choices is problematic for children can be applied to most aspects of daily life. In Chapter Six we'll consider ways to filter out adult information and concerns from our homes, and our children's awareness. We'll look at parental involvement, and the ties that bind us to our children, ties that must stretch without breaking, as a child circles out and back again, on toward independence. We'll consider ways to simplify our parental involvement and "back out" of hyperparenting, by building a sense of security for our children that they internalize and carry with them as they grow. We'll learn new ways to simplify our involvement, increase our trust, and allow connection rather than anxiety to characterize the relationship we build with our children.

It is never "too late" to bring inspiration and attention to the flow of family life. Parents of young children will find many seeds here to plant toward a family life that

continues to protect and nurture as children grow. But every stage in a family's evolution can benefit from a little more space and grace, a little less speed and clutter. Another point to remember, as we begin, is that simplification is often about "doing" less, and trusting more. Trusting that—if they have the time and security—children will explore their worlds in the way, and at the pace, that works best for them.

In my descriptions of how I worked with other families you'll see what might work for your own. No "expert" is required. In reading the stories I share along the way, you'll have moments of recognition and inspiration. My hope is that you will come back to this book and continue to draw ideas and encouragement from it as your children grow.

While your daily life may seem like a radio bandwidth full of static, simplification allows you, with much more regularity and clarity, to tune into your own true signal as a parent. I think you'll find it very gratifying to feel your inner authenticity develop as you bring more awareness and attention to your relationship with your children. And with this process comes more opportunities to see deeply into who your children are becoming.

I sincerely hope this book will inspire you—give you hope, comfort, insights, and ideas—now, and as your children grow.