

# Simplicity's Gifts for the Learner:

## *An Interview with Dee Joy Coulter*

Traci McGrath, Simplicity Parenting

I am speaking with Dee Joy Coulter, who has just published a fascinating book entitled *Original Mind: Uncovering Your Natural Brilliance*. I have found this book to be very useful in my own parenting, with brain-based support for the principles of simplicity as the means for healthy brain growth and learning. I hope you will be enriched by Dee's insights shared here. We will be making her book available at the Simplicity Parenting bookstore as well.

***SP: Dee, you have said that simplicity is an important key for preparing children for success as learners. How early should our efforts to support learning begin?***

**Dee:** It's hard to imagine that preparing your child to be a learner when they go to school begins at birth, but it actually does.

Essentially, children are born without "switches", and many first-time parents wonder where is the "off" switch is so they can calm. They wonder how can they turn off the sensory world so their child is not overwhelmed.

The answer is that there is no switch -- **we have to actually coach children into being able to calm them selves.**

**We do that by really simplifying their environment and being really predictable and calm and coaching them as to what comforts them so they can begin to do self-comforting.**

Some children learn that easily and some seem to be what we might call a "fussy baby." They may have been born with a little more stress in their nervous system so they need even more patient and skillful parenting.

**In general, it's all about simplicity.** It's all about quieting the environment and paying attention to the stimulation in their environment so we don't overdo it.



Pretty soon, they will want to take in the world and be dazzled by the wonder of where they are - so it is important that they know how to calm. Otherwise, they will be overwhelmed so easily that we might then say they have attention deficit problems or be over stimulated. However, that really tells us that they simply haven't learned the art of calming yet. So the very first thing we want to do is to teach children how to turn off the sensory world so that when the sensory world is turned on they are doing it by choice and they can protect themselves from overload when we forget to do it for them.

Then life becomes workable and not overwhelming. That lays the groundwork for learning, for taking in new information without getting overly excited by it. **It is absolutely the first gift that we can give them as we prepare them to be learners. It allows them to take in the world without being overwhelmed.**

***SP: What if we don't accomplish this in the first three months? Can self-calming be taught after that critical window has passed?***

**Dee:** That's just the natural window if all systems are "go".

**We work on learning to calm all our lives and we can always coach for this.** It may never become automatic for some children, but they can always learn the tools to manage their stimulation levels. Some of us never did master this as children so we have our calming strategies on manual control. There is even a computer app in the workplace where the screen interrupts one's work to say 'remember to breathe'. So we work on calming techniques all our lives.

***SP: How do we reduce the activity level so it is workable and allows children to calm back down when they get a little older?***

**Dee:** Then we work on scheduling "down time" so they can learn things to self-calm in their own lives. They can learn how and when to take a break and discover things they could do to take a breather in their day. They could take a nap, have a snack, sit in nature, pet the dog and so on. They need these breaks more than we would if our day was like theirs.

If we were to travel in a foreign country, we would be exhausted at the end of the day from taking in so much novelty, and we would need to rest. **We have to remember that our children are essentially in a foreign country. While everything in their daily life is very familiar to us, much of it is quite new and fresh to them - so they need these calming tools.**

DEE JOY COULTER, EdD



UNCOVERING YOUR  
NATURAL BRILLIANCE

**SP: After learning to calm, what is the next important way we can help children prepare for learning?**

**Dee:** The next task involves another off switch – learning to activate the “motor off” switch, which we often call “impulse control.” We work on this most intensely between the ages of 3 and 5. Mastering this requires two ingredients – an ability to wait and a special kind of speech called “inner speech.” In some children, one or both of those ingredients may be missing.

**Let’s look at *learning to wait* first.**

The psychological term for waiting is “delayed gratification. “ **Children don’t**

**naturally wait unless it pays off - and it needs to be coached.** If we bake cookies, we know we have to wait. They’re too hot in the oven or while cooling, but waiting pays off because then we do get a cookie. We also know there will be more later when we need a snack.

Children who grow up in scarcity often learn it doesn’t pay to wait. If they want cookies they better take them fast. They live in an environment that feels scarce. If there is no way to protect their snack or their possessions, they learn it doesn’t pay to wait. That’s why nature doesn’t automatically create the motor off switch. These children are living in a setting where waiting fails to serve them well. Instead they need to learn to act fast if they want something, or they will lose out.

**Parents should invent new ways to practice waiting.** “If we can wait two more minutes we can do this, or soon we will get to see this interesting thing” - always linking the waiting to a payoff later. As the children get older, they can wait longer and the delays can go from two minutes at first to several days when they are older.

**Now we can explore this strange ingredient called “inner speech.”**

Sometimes we may talk out loud to ourselves – perhaps we are stressed and need to really focus on what we’re doing. Perhaps we are in a dangerous

traffic situation or trying to remember how to do a complex task. Then our normally silent inner speech becomes out loud.

**For children before about age 7 or 8, all of their speech is out loud.** Most of the time they are using social speech and talking to others but sometimes we can hear them talking out loud to themselves, role playing, deciding what toy they want to go find, giving instructions to themselves. They are learning to use their inner speech to control their impulses. Only when their inner speech has become strong, can they combine that with their ability to wait and actually have impulse control. Typically this comes together around age 4 or 5. Until then we need to redirect their behavior and be patient. They may look like they understand a rule you've given them, but they really can't make themselves obey it yet.

**In the meantime, you can model how to use inner speech.** You can talk aloud as you decide what to do next. "Let's see, shall we go to the bank first or take the dog to the park? If we go to the bank first, the dog will have to wait in the car but..."and so on. When they listen to you do this, they begin to understand what's involved in thinking, and that will gradually lead to them being able to direct their own behaviors.

This one tool will help them to become very successful learners, because it allows them to go inside and have a conversation with themselves. Children who don't have that inner voice go directly to action. These are the children who lack impulse control.

**In time, this inner speech takes on even more exciting roles.** It guides children to anticipate consequences before they act, to take their own counsel and to have their own ideas. It even helps them think of things to write. Good writers actually take dictation from their inner speech after they have thought through the ideas they want to express.

***SP: Let's talk about reading. Some children are drawn to reading early and some dreamy ones wait a long time. How can we approach these differences calmly and wisely?***

**Dee:** I had a really dreamy son who didn't do any reading until after he was 9 years old. Finally he got curious about letters and how words were spelled. A picture based comic book and later a Tin Tin comic book helped him then. Within 4 months he was a 4<sup>th</sup> grade level. This is rare, but it is something a dreamy kid can do as long as they aren't dyslexic.

**If the child has a history of reading difficulties in the family, then it is wise to help them fall in love with words on paper sooner.** We want them to get curious about reading. Create treasure hunt notes, little sweet notes in their lunch boxes, grocery notes before you go shopping. These are little payoffs – where reading is fun to do or important. Spelling isn't important here – invented spelling is a fine place to start. You are basically dealing with an indigenous person and you have to help them decide that reading is even an activity worth doing.

**Other children begin to read almost on their own at a very young age.** They almost leave the real world to enter this secondary reality of books. This is nice but they can end up missing the primary reality of nature, movement, arts, and social exchanges.

***SP: You have said that reading actually changes the brain permanently. Are the early readers likely to miss something important then, and how can we help them incorporate those gifts for our early readers?***

**Dee:** We mentioned that the late readers often developed strong indigenous skills, the skills that non-literate cultures relied on heavily. We can bring these skills to our early readers too, but first we have to reawaken them in ourselves. In my book *Original Mind*, there is a long chapter called *The Road Not Taken* that helps the reader re-discover some of these important skills. We can touch on them here too.

**The indigenous mind has a relationship to what I am calling “deep familiarity.” It’s based on incredible repetitions that become rhythmic practices.** It is very important to support this because today’s repetitions can lead to tomorrow’s practices. The child may begin spending more and more time practicing movements, artistic skills, musical compositions or detailed nature observations and this progresses from practicing to “having a practice.” It becomes a deeply satisfying relationship to a form of attention that will nourish them their whole lives. My own son gave this kind of deep attention to music, and is now extremely happy as a professional jazz pianist and music teacher.

**Memory is another key quality.** Indigenous cultures have incredible verbatim memories because their cultures depend on it. Young children have the same literal memories, sometimes when we wish they didn't. They remember every promise we ever made, and they will tell us exactly what happened in a story they love. They may give a summary and if we interrupt them they have to

start back at the beginning again. The memory is almost mapped on their body and needs to unfold as a whole fabric.

**Having a relationship to sacred objects and spaces is another important quality.** We know they can turn their special stuffed animals or toys into very important objects because when they get lost, we can't get away with saying 'That's OK, we'll just buy another one.' That simply won't work, so we redouble our efforts to find those lost objects! We can deepen our connections to special places with them too – perhaps a favorite tree that we visit or a bench in the garden where we bring a picnic lunch to share. In time that spot becomes almost sacred as the child comes to know it through the seasons.

**This skill also relates to the ability to sense the energy of a space or a person.** Before children can rely on common sense or reasoning to protect themselves, they use this vibe-sensing skill to sense safe or unsafe spaces or people. When they balk at being around someone or entering a particular space, it makes sense for us to rekindle our own ability to sense the quality of those elements. We may think they are being stubborn until we sense the vibes and realize what is bothering them. If it feels a bit unsettled, maybe it makes sense to carry them as we enter those situations. We want to respect their indigenous sensitivities.

***SP: Do you have any special advice for supporting learning with older children and early adolescents?***

**Dee:** The brain and the body take turns with development. It's fascinating to watch. Occasionally they are balanced as they are between 8 and 10. But at 11 and 12 it is clearly the brain's turn. Adolescence is supposed to happen later than that.

**A few decades ago, the onset of adolescence typically occurred at around 15 or 16. Since then it has been happening earlier and earlier.** We are even seeing cases of puberty starting as early as 9 or 10.

**This creates a conflict as the brain and body compete for the brain's window at ages 11 and 12.** We can't change the neurology of that period. The connections between the back and front of the brain are set to insulate and strengthen their connections then. This leads to improved reasoning, the ability to plan ahead and think before acting, to handling more complex and abstract ideas, and deepening one's compassion for others.

But if adolescence moves into those years, this transformation doesn't occur. The biochemical and physical changes of adolescence co-opt that turn and the brain has to wait till about age 15-16 to have another turn.

**SP: Is there anything we can do to help postpone the early onset of adolescence?**

**Dee:** Absolutely. **Offering children rich and meaningful experiences in the arts, in athletics and in caring for others can be very helpful.**

**Protecting them from the bombardment of the media that keeps nudging them into imitating adolescent behaviors, clothing and activities is also important.**

Dating, make up, visiting the mall, and spending large amounts of time with kids who don't know how to play or enjoy the natural world all contribute to earlier adolescence and increase the risk that this vital brain turn will be lost. Even in nature, we can see that those animals with the most delayed onset of maturity have the richest thinking processes.

The most wonderful gift you can offer to children before the onset of adolescence is to protect the brain's turn at ages 11 and 12 by stretching the sweetness of childhood into those years.

**Your whole approach to simplicity parenting contributes to this delayed onset. You are giving the children back their childhood and helping them live deeply into it.**

*Dee Joy Coulter is a nationally recognized neuroscience pioneer with a master's degree in special education from the University of Michigan and a doctorate in neurological studies and holistic education from the University of Northern Colorado. For nearly half a century, Dee has followed her passion for guiding learners into deep enjoyment of their minds. Her new book, *Original Mind*, invites you to awaken aspects of your mind you had no idea existed and to discover exciting new ways of learning. Powerful exercises, delightful activities, amazing stories and fascinating brain science all help you expand your mind's brilliance.*



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