

# PARENTING TODAY: *THE BONSAI CHILD* BY DR JUDITH LOCKE

## Exclusive Extract



In an exclusive for *In Alliance*, Dr Judith Locke has adapted an extract from her recently published book for parents, *The Bonsai Child*, which discusses modern parenting trends and the impact of extreme levels of parental care and protection on children, adolescents and young adults. In the book, she also gives clear, practical parenting strategies which will enable parents to genuinely encourage their child's resilience, confidence and self-regulation, as well as slowly step back to enable their children to mature and become independent.

Many members of the Alliance will have had the opportunity to see Dr Locke's presentation on overparenting or may have read some journal articles or media reports on her research. These reflect her PhD and ongoing research into parenting and schooling, her clinical experience treating hundreds of families, her presentations to thousands of parents at parenting sessions held at schools around the country, and her collaborations with many schools to assist their staff in the modern parenting environment.

If you would like to read more you can find links to purchase Judith Locke's book at [Bonsaichild.com](http://Bonsaichild.com).

**P**arenting has changed enormously in the past 10 or 20 years. I'd guess most of you would consider your parenting approach to be very different from that taken by your own parents. Why has this change occurred?

Parenting has always been strongly influenced by the era in which it is delivered and the beliefs associated with the times. The 21st century has seen major changes in technology, communication, patterns of work and socialising, which have vastly altered family lifestyles. Our approach to life and our goals for raising the next generation have also changed. Indeed, many parents deliberately adopt a different parenting approach from that of their own parents.

### Changes influencing parenting

Let's look at a few of the changes I see as having the most significant influences on modern parenting.

#### More prosperity

Many of you will consider yourselves slightly or totally better off than your parents. Oh sure, you may be in debt up to your eyeballs – but often that debt is for a pretty nice home in a pretty nice suburb.

Your children are probably experiencing what appears to be a very pleasant life. They have a nice bedroom and quite a few toys, including some amazing technologies. They can watch outstanding television, play awesome games, or listen to music with remarkable sound quality. They are probably attending a school where the educational opportunities are good and the teachers care for them. After school, it's likely they are able to participate in activities that are varied and interesting. Indeed, I'm guessing your child is experiencing a childhood that is pretty sweet.

While you have no doubt worked incredibly hard to be in your present situation, for many of you life will be sometimes stressful, but broadly rather good.

#### Prosperity brings new priorities

I'm assuming many of you are not involved in a famine or a war. (Having a hungry and argumentative child or teen might seem like it, but doesn't technically count.) So I suspect you are not having difficulty putting a basic roof over your child's head, or food on the table.

Because of this, you are likely to be pretty high up on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. For those of you hazy on what you studied in Psych 101, or feeling too lazy to google it, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a psychological theory which proposes that humans are motivated to achieve certain things. According to the theory, when you have the basic physiological needs taken care of, such as air, food and water, you seek higher levels of needs, such as security and safety. Once those are taken care of, you look to higher needs again, such as a feeling of belonging, being loved and loving others. Then, once achieved, you look to be satisfied in the next level.

While there has been some controversy about the levels when they are applied across cultures, it makes sense that if you were stranded on a desert island, you would be more concerned about obtaining water and your next meal than you would be worried about enhancing your self-esteem.

#### Maslow's hierarchy of needs and psychological health:



In prosperous times, when basic needs such as food and shelter are taken care of, we tend to focus on higher levels of needs. I am guessing many of you reading this book are primarily focused on the esteem and confidence needs of your child. Even parents who are mainly worried about their child's issues with making friends are likely to be primarily concerned about the impact of friendship difficulties on their child's self-esteem and confidence. This is because most of these children are likely to have an already high level of care and love within their family.

This may partly explain why many parents place so much emphasis on self-esteem in children these days. It is not necessarily because of significant issues in children's confidence; it is because of a lack of issues in the lower levels of needs. When you can provide food, water and safety for your children, you become much more preoccupied with the things that may offer opportunities for improvement. Unfortunately we seem to be a little stuck on the self-esteem level . . .

### More emphasis on self-esteem

We live in a time when the skills needed for future success are somewhat unclear. Years ago, if you had a basic trade or an education, you were assured you would always have a job. But things have changed recently. Now we are unsure of what is going to be the skill that will ensure a steady stream of employment. Without being certain of the expertise required in future job arenas, our fallback is the one trait that appears to be most important in mastering the necessary skills of everything. That trait is self-esteem.

The reason we have started to see self-esteem as the be-all and end-all is because some research findings have been incorrectly interpreted. As Martin Seligman so eloquently puts it, there are two important aspects to being satisfied in yourself and how you deal with the rest of the world – *doing well* and *feeling good*. As you can imagine, people who do well tend to feel good about themselves, and research has shown that the two traits tend to be correlated. But a misunderstanding of this research meant that *feeling good* started to be seen as an essential element of *doing well*, which is kind of putting the cart before the horse. So self-esteem, or feeling good, started to be seen as the precursor to doing well in life.

It is difficult to create good feelings in people without them actually doing something they feel good about. However, some people (read: parents) have developed shortcuts. These people use artificial means to produce good feelings in children or adolescents. They might praise the child so the child feels momentarily good about themselves, or the parent might manipulate circumstances so the child does well (e.g. ensuring that they win, or making sure they get what they want). But producing good feelings in this 'express-post' way has problems. Firstly, these good feelings are only very temporary. They tend to dissipate quickly because they weren't really hard won and so they need to be topped up frequently. Secondly, the child becomes highly reliant on others putting in that type of effort for them on a regular basis.

There is another problem with this behind-the-scenes adult work when children face a potentially

difficult experience. It makes the child miss an excellent opportunity to do well by actually facing the situation and learning that they can cope with something challenging.

*Overcoming difficulty by learning how to either accept it, or undertake strategies to make it better for ourselves, is one of the true self-esteem building activities.*

We eventually gain a sense of strength from coping with or overcoming problems. This allows us to become confident we can face any future tricky events. If other people in our lives deny us this chance, we will enjoy a temporary good feeling of winning or achieving. However, we will remain reliant on others and not become confident to step up to the next challenge without someone in very close proximity to defend us. Children are exactly the same.

Nonsense ideas out there suggest young people have to be constantly achieving and winning and receive regular praise to feel good about themselves. Consequently adults have taken on a lot of the responsibility for making children always feel good. Do children need to come from a loving home and feel they are important people in their parents' eyes? Absolutely – but love is not necessarily shown by ensuring your child is winning or successful *all of the time*.

Significantly, all this effort to make your child successful inadvertently sends a harmful message to them. If you do everything to ensure they always succeed and win, you are suggesting that their success is very important to you. It could also imply to your child how unacceptable they might be to you if they weren't successful. Even if you tell your child you love them regardless of their achievements and they should 'just do their best', the very fact that in the past you have manipulated things to ensure their victories might have given your child the message that they need to win to gain your approval, or even your love.

### When your child is in difficulty, blame self-esteem . . .

This emphasis on self-esteem as the building block to doing good things means it is often blamed when a child isn't coping well or is not behaving appropriately. In fact, I don't think I have seen a parent in my clinic recently who doesn't believe their child's issues are in some way to do with low self-esteem, no matter what the problem.

Sidoney's parents telephone me. They are very upset. They say their 11-year-old daughter has low self-esteem and wonder if I can see her and help her. They state that for a number of years now, Sidoney has become increasingly argumentative, sometimes to the point of shouting and even screaming at them. She rarely agrees with anything they say or do; if they say 'black' she says 'white'. She appears to go from a very bad mood to one where she is easily upset and clingy with her parents. Her moods are extreme: she is often particularly awful, then particularly loving afterward. She called her mother 'fat' the other day, then later wrote a lovely note to her, apologising for making her cry. Every time something bad happens to Sidoney, she blames someone else. She also complains that nobody wants to be her friend. Sidoney's parents tell me they keep reassuring her that she is good at so many things and of course everyone likes her. They say the family stretched

their budget to buy her horse-riding lessons last month to give her something special she can be really good at. But she still calls herself 'hopeless at everything'. She regularly accuses the family of not being nice enough to her, particularly when they ask her to do household chores or be nice to her brother. They say she is becoming 'really hard work', always arguing and refusing to do what they tell her to do. They believe if only she just had better self-esteem, she would be happier and have more friends.

Sidoney's case is not unusual. Clinically, I often find that when a child is particularly badly behaved, the parent believes the root cause is the child's low self-esteem or poor confidence. When I come across such cases, I am sure the child has feelings that aren't helping them. But we often overlook an important aspect of this poor behaviour. If children or teens are regularly disrespectful to their parents and receive no effective consequence to stop this behaviour, it has to have a negative effect on them. If the child or adolescent is in any way a reasonable person, there is no way, after these outbursts, that they are feeling good about themselves (just as we often feel really terrible about shouting at a slow barista or a co-worker).

Moreover, these children are being rude, argumentative, and perhaps even screaming at their own parents, i.e. the adults who are the major attachment figures in their lives. Attachment figures are very important to children because they show them how close relationships work. If a child is regularly disrespectful to a major attachment figure, such as their parent, they begin to establish bad patterns for how they will treat people who love them. This is a poor start to developing good relationships in their future.

I am concerned when I see children who do not care if they are disrespectful or even aggressive toward the people who regularly show them love and kindness. If parents do not give effective consequences to deter them from this behaviour, such children might be encouraged to feel a sense of entitlement. They may form an unreasonable expectation that they are at the centre of the universe and can do as they please in relationships and in their environment.

A sense of entitlement is almost the opposite of poor self-esteem, but it often looks like low self-esteem because the child's sense of wellbeing depends on constantly being the centre of attention or always having control of the household. Such children tend to become despondent when they don't have the power or the spotlight. This is a real clinical concern if the child is of an age when their need for constant attention should be starting to recede, typically after the age of seven or eight. Even at an earlier age, this attention-seeking behaviour is still of concern.

In many cases where the child has issues and is not travelling well, I am sure they aren't feeling good about themselves. But it is likely that low self-esteem isn't the sole cause. To ascribe it as such sets off a whole bunch of parenting actions, such as overcompensating for the child, providing high levels of adult assistance, and giving extreme praise. These actions inadvertently continue the problems. Because children become even more dependent on adult assistance, they begin to doubt their capacity to face life's challenges, and continue to not feel good about themselves.

It can get worse. Providing praise and attention when children aren't behaving appropriately confirms their impossibly high expectations of what the world should do for them. It affirms their assumed right to behave like a princess or an emperor – and this is a problem.

### More information on child wellbeing and parenting

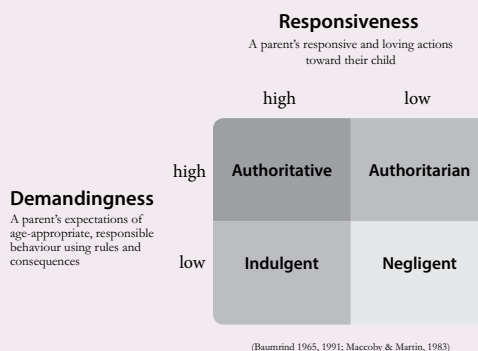
Parents' preoccupation with their child's self-esteem and constant success goes hand in hand with another modern change. There's more information out there on child wellbeing.

Since the sixties, many researchers and clinicians have focused on understanding ideal parenting approaches. Diana Baumrind initiated important research into parenting styles, which Eleanor Maccoby and John Martin further developed. They identified two key factors that determine parenting style:

*Responsiveness*: a parent's tendency to be loving and responsive to their child's needs, and

*Demandingness*: a parent's tendency to use rules and consequences to demand responsible and age-appropriate behaviour from their child.

Research has found that high or low levels of these two parenting factors result in different parenting styles, shown in the diagram below.



In this matrix, parents who are loving toward their children and also demand they behave appropriately are considered to be 'Authoritative parents'. Parents who demand that their children follow the rules (probably with a lot of shouting) and are not very loving or responsive to them are 'Authoritarian parents'. Parents who are very loving toward their children but who don't insist they follow certain rules of behaviour are 'Indulgent parents'. Parents who neither show love, nor insist on the child behaving responsibly, are termed 'Negligent parents'.

The authoritative parenting approach – high in both demandingness and responsiveness to children – has been shown by lots of research to be the ideal parenting method. It tends to be associated with improved wellbeing, resilience, sense of security, and popularity in children.

So how has this influenced current parenting views? Typically, when research is done that has a finding of some sort, it is published first in journal articles for other researchers. This information then eventually trickles down to articles in newspapers and magazines

for the rest of us, along with somewhat simplified details of the original research findings. For example, if researchers measure the health of people who don't exercise compared with people who do 30 minutes of exercise a day, and find the people who do 30 minutes more exercise have better wellbeing, you can imagine the simplified version of the findings featured in mainstream media might be 'do more exercise'. That is a really good headline for non-exercisers to pay attention to, but for people who are already doing one or two hours of exercise a day, following this advice might take a healthy amount of exercise into an unhealthy amount.

Likewise, when researchers found that children who are valued and loved by their parents do better than children who are not listened to or made to feel important by their parents, this finding was shared with the world. It resulted in headlines such as 'Make your child feel more important' accompanied by a lot of advice about listening more to your child and focusing on their needs. Now, that is a great message and does need to be shared with parents. But here comes the important caveat.

*The only parents who need to listen to and act on the advice to respond more to their child, are the ones who are negligent or authoritarian.*

The ones who are already highly responsive to their children need not listen to it, because they are already doing it.

Many parents, keen to listen to the experts, have acted on that type of headline in an effort to improve their parenting. The trouble is, following advice to make their child feel more important will sometimes take parents from ideal levels of responsiveness to extreme responsiveness. And this may not be helpful for the child.

In addition, most subsequent research has focused on the parenting approach perceived to most need help: negligent parenting. This research has confirmed the negative impact of an unloving approach. As a result, there has been an avalanche of advice pointing out opportunities for parents to be responsive to children, but not a lot on the importance of demanding certain behaviours from children and how parents can do this.

If anything, the only debate on discipline in the media has typically been about whether or not to smack your child. Clearly, the act of physically hurting your child is inappropriate. Unfortunately, the media debate is rarely fine-tuned to include alternative ways to ensure a child behaves appropriately. Consequently, a parent who scans the media for parenting advice could easily start to think any discipline is harmful to a child. Combined with the plethora of suggestions that parents should make their child feel very important, this advice has resulted in the view that ideal parenting allows the child to dictate the terms in the family, rather than the parents.

#### **Authoritative vs. authoritarian parenting**

Another issue is semantic. The harmful strict and unloving parenting style, authoritarian parenting, sounds a lot like the very helpful, firm but loving parenting style, authoritative parenting. In the ideal parenting approach, authoritative parenting, the parents are authority figures who also demonstrate love and care for the child. This is in stark contrast to authoritarian parenting, which only uses authority and minimal or no loving actions.

Unfortunately these terms are often misunderstood and used interchangeably. As a result, the idea of a parent having or wanting any authority or higher status in the home has started to get a very bad rap.

A parent exercising no authority to guide a child is not in any way what researchers or psychologists suggest as good parenting practice. As the adult, a parent is in a very good position to decide the best things a child should do, such as whether the toddler should play with the electric saw or if the 14-year-old should go to the all-night rave. However, over time, research findings have been misinterpreted to promote a highly responsive and not very demanding parenting style. This has resulted in parents paying more attention to their child's wishes than their own common sense when making decisions about child rearing. This has been detrimental to parents and children.

#### **More analysis of your own parents**

With all of the effort you put into parenting, it is very likely you are thinking about your own experience of being parented. And I am guessing in the light of the current popular approach, which caters so much to children and gives them outstandingly lovely childhoods, your own parents' efforts might be starting to pale in comparison.

The parents I see clinically sometimes tend to view their parents negatively, often as 'very strict'. Many seem to remember things like their parents saying 'no' to a particular event, not being there for school presentations, or not buying something they really wanted as a child, like a pair of white roller-skates or a pony.

Often they also remember their parents as not being loving enough. They say their parents rarely told them they loved them and didn't hug them often. These memories seem to stir something in them during their early experience of being a parent. They can even bring on a Scarlett O'Hara moment. As the sun is setting behind them, they vow: 'If I have to lie, steal, cheat or kill, as God is my witness, I'll ~~never be hungry again~~ I'll never say no to my child.' Or 'I'll tell them I love them every hour of every day.' Or 'I'll give my child a pony.' And, great balls of fire! They make good on their promises to indulge their child more than they were indulged. Every. Single. Day.

While I am not suggesting these parents' memories are inaccurate, I do think it is unfair to compare your parents with parents of today. It was a different era and many parents were making the best of sometimes difficult financial situations. For many parents of past generations, putting food on the table in hard times was the most loving act they could manage. Remember, in tricky or financially challenging times, the focus is on the lower levels of Maslow's needs hierarchy. In those days, telling your child you loved them or hugging them regularly wasn't the norm. The workplace was not as understanding, and getting time off to see your child in a school performance was not prioritised by employers, or by parents themselves. In addition, schools actually weren't organising daily performances or communicating classroom activities to parents as they tend to now.

Am I suggesting your parents were not in any way flawed in their parenting choices? No, not at all. I am sure there are a few of you who had very tricky



childhoods. But I am guessing many of you are still smarting over things that were, in the scheme of things, pretty minor. So why do parents do so much analysis of their own childhoods?

### *Thinking your parents failed you*

The idea that adults are victims of their childhood is very prevalent. This belief has been amplified by popular but amateur psychology theory proposing that certain events in childhood make the adult, and that particular events or an omission of something in childhood ruins the child. This is true in serious cases, such as a child never being held or shown any sort of affection or love, but not in the majority of cases I see.

Why is this idea almost universally held? Well, it works for people. When you believe your parents somehow failed you, it does wonders for your self-esteem. It allows you to fantasise about the superstar you would have been had they just put in a little more effort and bought you Barbie's campervan, paid for your mime course in Paris, or told you that you were loved 24/7. And the thought of your parents holding you back from being a super success has the bonus of making you feel like you possessed unlimited potential, which was cruelly limited by them. These thoughts work wonders for your ego. They also put you in the victim's role, which is a very attractive thought for those times when we want to wallow gloriously in a deep, soapy bath of self-pity.

But wait – before you wax lyrically about how your parents done you wrong, strumming your twangy guitar – this way of thinking might have some ever so slight consequences. If you truly believe a few omissions in your parents' parenting choices have you suffering terribly today, then by the same token, every choice you now make as a parent is incredibly important. Get it wrong and you have completely ruined your child.

Doesn't feel so good now, does it? It's kind of biting you on the proverbial backside. Don't worry. It is completely untrue.

Children are actually pretty resilient to minor ups and downs, and even some events considered more serious. This idea that children are resilient is not very popular, but has been shown to be correct over and over in research.

*If you are a loving parent with reasonable expectations of your child's behaviour, you will typically be getting it right.*

Here's another important point I often make in parenting talks and in the clinic: even if your parents were the very worst parents, somehow you became a success. What is my definition of success? Well, you may have moved on from a problematic childhood to be educated, financially solvent, capable of love and desiring of loving relationships. That really does point to both your resilience and the fact that your parents' approach of not giving you everything gave you a hunger to succeed. Or it encouraged you to overcome barriers and develop a fighting spirit that gives you your ability to conquer future hurdles.

Who knows what would have happened to your drive if you had experienced a childhood of perfect abundance? Would you have ever left home? If you had been the absolute centre of your parents' attention, would you have been a superstar or could

you have developed a sense of entitlement, which might have made you a little unemployable and slightly incapable of retaining friends or romantic attachments?

In most cases, forgiving your parents for doing the best job they knew how to do, will allow you to feel more loved as a child and give you a sense of greater good fortune. It will also give you a break from the pressure of being a parent now. You will be able to spend more time parenting the child you actually have, rather than parenting the childhood you believe you experienced when you view it through the untrustworthy but always self-serving coulda, shoulda, woulda binoculars. So, the current era has seen many changes influence parenting, but that's not all. Our beliefs about ideal parenting have also changed. Let's look at these in the next chapter. ▲

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