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Happy families



If you're of a certain age, you might remember the TV series Little House on the Prairie and its equally wholesome cousin, The Waltons, with their classic clean-cut wholesome family units. Every episode was basically the same. The central tenet was that the family was happy, something rocked their boat, the family held together and through mutual love they pulled through in the end. They were poor but, my goodness, they were happy and dependable units of close-knit kinship.

Imagine if you supplanted The Waltons from 1920s Walton Mountain to 2020s UK? Grandma would be in a home, Ma Walton would be holding down two jobs and the kids would be glued to their iPhone.

It helps if we can drop the mantle of parental perfection. There is no such thing. Our advice is to stop trying to be perfect and start being remarkable.

The general rule of parenting is that your children won't do what you say, but they will do what you do. It's called 'social learning'. Beware! Your children are watching, and learning. They'll pick up your good habits **AND YOUR BAD ONES!**

Parenting contains a big element of trial and error. Yes, we're all making it up as we go along! Even the parents who seem to have it all together will make mistakes.

You stand a better chance of creating a stellar relationship with your children if you understand the phases of brain development that we all go through.

From zero to two we are 'self-centred'. Everything revolves around you and you never really have to consider anyone else's needs. This is the unconditional you, the blank slate or what Buddhists would call your 'original face'. From zero to two you are just being you. Think back to when your own children were very small - there was no pretence, no shame, no trying to impress. They experienced the world, eating it, smelling it, sticking their fingers in places they weren't meant to be, exploring and curious.

The first two years are characterized by a crazy amount of brain growth. Learning to talk, walk and socialise - these are massive social skills that (fingers crossed) you and yours will have mastered by now. Two million new connections are formed every second in an infant's brain. By age two, a child has over one hundred *trillion* synapses – double the number an adult has. In fact, up to seven years old the brain is a massive ever-expanding jello of connectivity at which point it has peaked and has far too many connections. It will never be able to use them all so, at this point of full bloom, the brain stops creating more connections and sets about pruning the ones it has. As you mature, 50 per cent of your synapses will be pruned back.

From 3 to 12 you become what psychologists call 'adult-centred'. Mum, dad, gran, they are like Gods. Your children might still hold your hand and allow you to walk them to school. But there are changes afoot. Any connections in the brain that aren't being used

are pruned back. Up until the age of about seven, you are a universe of possibilities. And, gradually, depending on your early years' experiences, these possibilities get narrowed down.

Although the rate of development slows, your brain never stops changing. The process of neuroplasticity means your brain is a relentless shape-shifter, constantly rewriting its own circuitry.

During adolescence, it all changes again. The 'learned self' starts to creep in. Children become 'peer-group centred'. It's common across all primates. There comes a point where the human brain is sufficiently advanced to start thinking and reasoning for yourself. You start to question authority. Family rules might seem trivial and petty. You kick back, push the boundaries and develop your own views and ideas about how the world works. Often, the teenager starts to develop stronger links outside of the family. In monkey terms, you join a troop. In human terms, it's likely to be a handful of besties, maybe even a gang. Fitting into this peer group becomes all important so you dress the same, talk the same, behave the same. You experience an overwhelming desire to fit in. As a result, family can become very uncool so your dad, whom you worshipped last year, is now a bit of an embarrassment. In fact, your desire to fit into a peer group is so strong that it causes a whole lot of anguish if you're excluded. Some research suggests this distress at not fitting in causes more discomfort than physical pain.

Brace yourself, if it hasn't happened already, you are about to become really uncool! When teenager years arrive there is likely to be less hand holding and your children might be embarrassed if you walk them to school!

There's evidence that teenagers experience more intense emotions than adults, reporting three times more feelings of anxiety and embarrassment than parents. Teenagers also report feeling bored, tired and drowsy. In spite of their youthful body and less harried life, teenagers also experience massive lapses in energy. They have higher highs and lower lows.

Developments between your ears are changing how you experience the world. Teenagers develop critical reasoning skills that heighten their sensitivity to life. These advanced reasoning skills allow them, for the first time, to see beneath the surface of situations and imagine hidden threats to their wellbeing. In simple English, young people begin to imagine what others think about them. Self-consciousness kicks in.

For the record, most young people pass through this phase just fine and dandy. A few can become desperate in dealing with feelings they cannot control (or are too young to know how to control). These feelings can affect families. Some young people can become acutely embarrassed and withdrawn.

Good news. From late-teens onwards, things generally settle down. The metamorphosis to adulthood smooths them out and, with a bit of luck and some supportive parenting, they turn out superbly.

