Acceptance Parenting

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October 2, 2020

Before the 1970s, the word "parent" was commonly used only as a noun; since that time, American parents have roughly doubled the amount of time they spend parenting, and each generation since seems to stress more about parenting than the previous one. The fact that modern parents are beleaguered by the emotional toil of parenting is now as familiar a trope as the opinion piece advising parents to relax, be less perfectionist and be more forgiving of ourselves.

Economist Bryan Caplan supplements this advice with some science to ease the parental burden. Twin studies, he points out, suggest that genes are significantly more influential than parenting with respect to a wide variety of factors: future income, personality traits, educational attainment, religiosity and marital status. This knowledge, Caplan hopes, ought to give parents permission to take shortcuts: given how minimally you can influence your children, you might as well buy more childcare, ease up on those extracurriculars, let them watch TV and take vacations without them. Let your children roam free outside! They are safer than they have ever been. Don't let them walk all over you, use discipline to set boundaries—it's ultimately harmless—and make your own life easier!

Why have parents turned parenting into self-torture? Caplan posits a peer pressure-based desire to keep up with the Joneses, and hopes to wrench people out of this collective mistake by showing them how easy parenting could be, if they just let it: "Intellectual error explains much of the decline in family size."

"Just relax" is the gentlest species of parenting commentary; harsher critics scornfully characterize modern parents as "helicopters" for micromanaging our children's lives, and blame our "coddling"—excessive care, indulgence and overprotectiveness—for turning our children into "snowflakes." The overall implication is that if only parents could muster up the wisdom and courage to defect from this "bad parenting culture," we could be happily and healthily enjoying our children instead of hovering anxiously and fruitlessly around them.

These critics of modern parenting—gentle and harsh alike—put me in mind of a person who, upon first seeing a car, demands to know where the horses are, and upon being assured there are no horses around, offers advice about where to find some and where to attach them. They simply don't seem to understand just how fundamentally and irreversibly the parenting game has changed. The easily observable changes, from the heightened attentiveness to the increased stress levels, are but the visible signs of a deep, tectonic shift in our conception of the basic tenets of the enterprise. Traditional parents weren't better at what today's parents are doing; traditional parents were tasked with doing something different—and easier.

If one wants to grasp the profundity of the shift, one is better off turning away from those who aim to intervene in parenting culture and toward those who concern themselves with a far more challenging task: accurately representing it. There is a

wonderful scene in the British miniseries *Years and Years* in which a daughter nervously comes out as "trans" to parents who, having snooped on her Google searches, react with a prepared effusion of support: "Oh honey, it's alright, I swear. We're completely fine either way! Now look at us, we're fine! I know we might be a bit slow and a bit old and this is going to be confusing for us and we'll make a mess of it sometimes, but we love you. We absolutely love you. And we always will. ... And if it turns out we've got a lovely son instead of a lovely daughter, then we'll be happy."

She is momentarily confused, and corrects them: "No. I'm not transsexual, I'm trans*human*!" She explains that she aspires to first modify her body in various ways to integrate herself into the internet, and eventually to dispense with her body altogether by uploading herself into the cloud: "I don't want to be flesh."

The parents react with the shock, outrage and screaming rejection that follows the classic "bad parent" script heard by countless children who have, over the years, presented themselves as diverging from their parents' expectations with respect to religion, marriage, career, etc. Parents have always been faced with the challenge of handling rebellious, wayward, disobedient children; but at no prior time have they—have we—been so pre-committed to acceptance. At no point in the past was the parental inability to accept that which strikes them as antithetical to their basic understanding of what is true and what is good perceived as a potential failure by the parents' *own* standards.

The consequences of the shift extend well beyond increased parental stress levels. When it comes to the question of whose job it is to conform to whom, the sign has gotten reversed. As a teenager coming of age in the 1990s, I watched the tide turn on homosexuality. From my vantage point, a lot of the change seemed to be driven by acceptance parenting: those who couldn't stomach rejecting their children rejected their own homophobia instead. As acceptance parenting takes hold culturally, we find ourselves speaking more and more about what it takes to be a "good parent" and less and less frequently of the virtues of a "good son/daughter." The more we expect the parents' acceptance, the less concerned we are with children's obedience.

This in turn helps explain why parenting has objectively become harder. If you want to understand why parents are so much more stressed than they used to be, just consider the slip between "transsexual" and "transhuman": you cannot predict what, at the end of the day, you will be asked to accept; and you know that from day one; and that knowledge—of your own ignorance—casts a shadow over every parenting decision you make.

I was struck by a recent *New York Times* piece offering scientifically grounded instruction in praising one's child. It warns against excessive praise: don't fuel "'praise addiction,' in which a child compulsively performs behaviors to earn approval." It offers advice on how to target one's praise: "praise the process, not the person," as "praising the outcome or the person encourages the child to focus on those things. She

might feel performance anxiety. He might question the conditionality of your love." Also, be sincere: "children can sense when praise is not genuine." One might wonder who needs to read this: Why can't parents be trusted to simply praise what they think is praiseworthy and blame what is blameworthy? The answer is that praise and blame are ways of directing children, telling them which direction to go in and what outcomes to avoid. Acceptance parents know that they don't know the answer to those questions. The inclination to look to scientists for guidance in everything from baby sleep to teenager management suggests a self-awareness, on the part of parents, of our ignorance.

Parents have always justified themselves with reference to the future—you'll thank me later!—and parents have always aimed at the happiness of their child. What's radically new is not, at heart, how concerned or permissive we've become, but how fully we have given over to our children the job of defining "happiness." For acceptance parents, neither instinct nor culture is a sufficient guide to what counts as acceptable behavior in a child. Instead of being able to draw on culture and tradition to set standards relative to which children are to be assessed, those standards now come from the people they are to be applied to—more specifically, from *future, which is to say, not yet existent, versions* of those people.

Traditional parents were in the business of handing to their children a settled way of life: values, habits, standards, practices, skills, sometimes a job. On this older picture, it was the role of the parent to give—"tradition" comes from *tradere*, "to hand over"—and the child to accept, obediently. If I were a traditional parent, I would be trying to give my child some version of *my* life; as an acceptance parent, I am trying to give my child something I don't have and am not familiar with—*his* life.

And yet parental resources are no greater than they have ever been. Apart from some desperate attempts at supplementation—all those after-school activities parents are mocked for enrolling children in—all that each of us has to give remains her own values and standards and practices and skills. The only thing we can change is how we "give" them, and so we've come to make our offerings with circumspection and delicacy. We hover around our children attentively, experimenting with what will or won't "take." Even though we acceptance parents are committed to tolerance, our resources are no less constrained than those of traditional parents: we are able to tolerate what we independently find tolerable. The difference is that now, when our children transgress our boundaries, we no longer feel sure whose side we should be on. Like all forms of freedom, acceptance parenting makes life more, and not less, stressful. If the parent is demoted from wise authority figure to tentative spokesperson for the child's future self, childhood and child-rearing become a nerve-wracking quest to find one's own footing.

Once you flip the switch from tradition to acceptance, it doesn't flip back. And that's why acceptance parenting is not so much a style of parenting as the backdrop against which parenting battles are fought.

Consider the case of Amy Chua, the self-proclaimed "tiger mother" whose entertaining book records the intense time and effort she expends on her young daughters' musical training. Chua claims to be engaged in "traditional Chinese parenting," but the details of her book tell a different story. She fights with her daughters constantly, and tolerates a level of insolence ("'She's insane,' I'd hear them whispering to each other, giggling") that does not accord with the respectful obedience required by "traditional Chinese parenting," as Chua herself characterizes it.

"I will not give up on you," Chua tells her rebellious younger daughter. And Chua reports: "'I *want* you to give up on me!' Lulu yelled back more than once." When push comes to shove, Lulu "wins" the battle over switching from violin to tennis. Chua views this concession as a break in her parenting philosophy—she laments her own weakness in capitulating to "Western parenting"—but in fact it is consistent with the justifications she has been giving, to herself and her daughters, all along.

Chua's musical training program was not aimed at turning her daughters into musicians; rather, music was a vehicle for "arming them with skills, work habits, and inner confidence that no one can ever take away." When tennis turns out to be a better vehicle, Chua readily adapts, "texting her [tennis coach] with questions and practice strategies... Sometimes, when Lulu's least expecting it—at breakfast or when I'm saying good night—I'll suddenly yell out, 'More rotation on the swing volley!' or 'Don't move your right foot on your kick serve!'"

Pre- and post-tennis, Chua's message is consistent. She tells her daughters, "My goal as a parent is to prepare you for the future—not to make you like me." The fact that preparing them for the future and making them like you are contrasted rather than identified is one hallmark of acceptance parenting. Another is the tendency to privilege confidence over obedience. When you don't know someone well enough to buy them a gift, you give them money; likewise, self-confidence and diligence are seen as the universal tool for the child who must "become someone"—you know not who.

The failure to acknowledge the revolutionary turn to acceptance parenting leads Chua to exaggerate the degree to which she diverges from "Western parents." And it leads many of the critics of parenting culture to misunderstand their audience. Traditional parents, ones engaged in "molding" children into the image of themselves, are the people who would have been reassured by Caplan's argument that most of the molding work has already been done by genetics. But for acceptance parents, there is no shape into which they are trying to mold their children at all. The fact that my child's DNA heavily influences many aspects of his future offers me little guidance as to what I mean—or rather, what he will mean—by "happy."

What makes parenting in a pandemic so difficult is not, first and foremost, the increased time commitment. It is not even the close-up view of your children's suffering—watching them become withdrawn, struggle to cheer themselves up, lose weight. The hardest part is the work of parenting itself, which is to say, the parts of one's engagement with one's child that concern their future. My youngest child boycotted zoomschool in the spring; he's very social, but when we tried to appeal to his desire to see his friends, his response was irrefutable: "Those are not my friends! My friends are not flat!" My husband started teaching him Euclid, mostly so as to give us the feeling that he is learning... something.

My middle son is more willing to play along, and it is one of the bright spots of zoomlife that I can snoop on his school day and learn that I have raised a Class Participator. But I can also hear the relief in his voice when he announces a fifteen-minute break between Zooms, and I see that he spends much of his day in a frustrated hunt for what folder another folder is supposed to go in. He's being occupied, but not necessarily educated.

My oldest watches multiple movies a day—they speak to him more than anything his teachers say over their screens—and when he's not watching movies, he's writing them: hundreds, probably thousands, of pages of scripts. Would a "good parent" be pushing him to be more invested in school? Spend more time outdoors? Reading? Something else? Would a good parent curtail his screen time, or would she encourage him to stay the course? Should I be blaming or praising him? Scientists who study praise don't have the answers for me.

And I don't think they could give any, even if they tried, unless they could answer questions like: Will movies even exist after this pandemic? What kind of a world am I sending him into? Which of his talents will be of most use—to himself and others—in it? How do I help him develop them?

The problem here is not my fear of employing discipline, or my inclination to micromanage. The problem is ignorance. Unlike my forebears, I don't know the things I need to know in order to be a good parent, and none of the people telling me to calm down know those things either. The only one who might know, my grown child, doesn't yet exist.

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The Point Magazine, Examined Life.
<www.thepointmag.com/examined-life/acceptance-parenting>