

# Parenting as a Vocation

Being Good Enough is Pretty Good

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Revised and edited from the notes of talks  
given to parents in various settings,  
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# Parenting as a Vocation

~ *being good enough is pretty good* ~

In a recent BBC television documentary, 'Bringing Up Baby', the guiding principles of three of the twentieth century's most influential childcare manuals — Dr Truby King's book *Feeding and Care of Baby*, Dr Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care* and Jean Liedloff's *The Continuum Concept* — were explored. Watching, and at times aghast at some of the attitudes and practices depicted, I reflected that parenting was really only discovered during the past 100 years — essentially, before that, we did what previous generations had done.

The years leading up to the appearance of Truby King's book just prior to WWI coincided with other breaks in traditional values, leading to what we call the Modernist conception of the world. These changes occurred in the arts, humanities and sciences simultaneously. And this period also coincided with a popularisation of psychological thought, through the tour of the United States of America undertaken by Freud and Jung.

Without digressing too far, I want to suggest that human consciousness changed around this time. Fifty years later this change was in full swing, and we find two men — Spock in the US, and Dr Donald Winnicott in England — saying quite radical things about parenting. Yet another fifty years later many of their ideas now seem rather sensible.

I especially find Dr Winnicott refreshing still. He had a unique, often provocative but — upon reflection — very perceptive way of putting things:

Each baby is a *going concern*... The baby was conceived in you and from that moment became a lodger in your body. After birth the baby became a lodger in your arms. This is a temporary affair. It will not last for ever, in fact it will not last for long. The baby will only too soon be at school. Just at the moment this lodger is tiny and weak in body, and needing the special care that comes from your love.

A going concern. A lodger. There are other ways of saying much the same thing. When the mother of my children and I were young parents, for instance, we felt inspired by the words of the Middle Eastern poet Kahlil Gibran, with their evocative biblical cadences:

Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, and though they are with you yet they belong not to you. You may give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday. You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth...

Ah, those were the days... We recited these words at christenings, just as we also quoted his wise words about relationships at weddings. In essence, Kahlil Gibran too is saying that the baby is a *going concern, a lodger*; however, these days I rather like the straightforward turns of phrase that Winnicott had a special talent for. And he certainly could turn them out... One of his best phrases for instance is the *good enough mother* — a term then subsequently adapted by Bruno Bettelheim to include the important participation of fathers: the *good enough parent*.

Just consider for a moment what 'good enough' means. Contrast it first with not being good enough... Then consider the guilt trip you've probably suffered from in regard to projections about being a *perfect parent* (this is a contagion which often results from contact with a Steiner School — you thought you were doing OK, and then you hear in a first meeting or interview how wrong you've been! Perhaps even that you've caused *permanent damage*...). Now decide for yourself, here and now, that between the unacceptability of not being good enough, and the impossibility of being perfect, it's pretty good to be good enough.

Let's go along a little further with Winnicott, to discover how his choice of words can make us sit up and take notice:

The good-enough mother ... starts off with an almost complete adaptation to her infant's needs. As time proceeds she adapts less and less completely, gradually, according to the infant's growing ability to deal with her failure...

Now, before you react to that word 'failure', you need to know that it is in the tendency to be everything — trying to be the whole world for your child — that 'failure' is inevitable. There is a great example in the medieval story of *Parzival*, which we study in Year 11 at the Steiner School. Herzloyde does not want her son to share the fate of his father, who died as a knight in battle; so she retreats into a forest, where she believes her son will grow up ignorant of the fascinations and tribulations of civilisation. But of course the world comes to the young boy; while out in the forest one day, some knights come by. He is entranced by their whole style and demeanour — that is, he awakens to his destiny — and hurries off home to announce to his mother that he will go to King Arthur's court 'where knights are made'. Devastated, she gives him some unworldly advice and clothes him as a fool, fully expecting him to be sent home by the first person he meets. Excited, he takes his leave, galloping off on his old nag so peremptorily that Herzloyde drops dead from grief. And Parzival does not even look back. Of course, a little later, when he has accomplished something in the world, the first thing he wants to do is to tell his Mum. But she has copped out — now *that's* a failure!

It need not be so abrupt a severance, but it does need to be allowed — even enabled. The child gradually emancipates itself from dependence upon the mother, often via a *transitional object* (a 'cuddly' for instance). In this process of severance, a gap appears, a space for the Self between the inner and outer world, of which Winnicott comments:

It is in the space between inner and outer world, which is also the space between people — the transitional space — that intimate relationships and creativity occur.

Winnicott formulated the term *holding environment* for this psychical and physical space in which the baby — the lodger — can develop. This holding environment — which must also become a *facilitating environment* — is not only whatever is provided for the child. Who/what

is holding the mother? Who/what is holding the father? Who/what is holding the family? And is this holding gesture too tight? Or too loose? For a mother can be a *smother* (too close); a father can be *farther* (more distant or remote). I like to think of the holding environment as a set of *containers*, each nestled within another like those Russian dolls — then we can ask of each one, are you a good enough container? And this can be a question for a neighbourhood, for community organisations, for the State also.

For the healthy consolidation of the child's self, the mother must be there when needed. But it is even more important that she recedes when she is not needed. When the baby is newborn, the mother is entirely involved in the child. Winnicott asserts of this stage that 'there is no such thing as a baby — only a nursing couple' — meaning that the baby's independent existence is unthinkable. So in essence is the mother's existence — denial of this causes great harm. But this must change; what Winnicott called the mother's *maternal preoccupation* needs to transform in accord with the baby's needs. So the holding environment-cum-facilitating environment ideally enables the child to begin to move and to learn through experience.

I find the presence of marsupials here in Australia offers a helpful image for this process — the pouch of a kangaroo is an actual holding environment for the developing joey; a 'life-space', a container for the mother's nurturing forces. So it is for the human being — only slowly, like the joey, the child spends more and more time outside the mother's life-space, her 'pouch', until he or she pops out into the world once and for all (although in times of illness or trauma, it may still try to scramble back in — often baby-talking as it does so).

The art — and it is an art, this vocation of parenting — is to enable this unfolding of the child into the world in its interests. The baby *is* a going concern, yet it cannot go at it alone — in another context I've spoken of learning to *accompany* the child into the world, and although I did not refer there to a holding environment, this journey towards the world occurs between the gestures of shelter and challenge. These gestures are the shaping elements of the holding environment. And implicit in what I said on that occasion, and what needs to be appreciated here, is that *holding* also involves *letting go*. In this way the holding environment becomes a facilitating one. Near the end of one of his poems, another Middle Eastern poet, Rumi, says:

Your hand opens and closes and opens and closes.  
If it were always a fist or always stretched open,  
you would be paralysed.

Your deepest presence  
is in every small contracting and expanding,  
the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated  
as birdwings.

So — have these initial thoughts got you thinking about parenting as a vocation? I hope so, for it is something that needs to be thought about — instinct is not adequate, habit is unreliable, and reactivity to the challenges of contemporary life is unhelpful. We need to find a way that is a practice — this is called *action learning*. I'm frequently asked, 'What should I do about...?' And I often have to disappoint people by saying that I don't know. I really do not have solutions or 'quick fixes'. I do not offer any recipes. But I do know how you can find out what to do, and that is what the rest of this talk will be concerned with...

I am talking about a methodology of conscious action — which is a more complicated way of saying that it's all about understanding *what* we do, *how* we do it, and *why* we do it... When we confront a challenge, we usually think the answer is somewhere outside us. This is an old gesture, originating from our obeisance to external authority. We can list some of these authorities in the realm of parenting: Dr Truby King, Dr Benjamin Spock, Jean Liedloff — we started by referring to these. There's Donald Winnicott — we can cite *his* authority, Melanie Klein. And hers: Sigmund Freud. And so on. Here's one of my teachers, Dr Maria Glas, emerging from my memory and saying that by the time we have learned how to be a parent, we are incapable of becoming one! What I've gradually understood from my own journey is that parenting is generally learned through experience, and the insights gained are retrospective. My adult son said to me, not long ago, that he'd been talking with his sisters, and they agreed they'd done quite a good job of bringing me up: 'We were worried about you for a while back there, but we must say you've come through.'

This is not a joke! It's how it really is — the good enough parent is the one who learns as he or she goes, through *action learning*, through *reflective practice*. What does this require? In his book *The Art of Living Consciously*, Nathaniel Branden writes the following:

Pay attention to what works, do more of it, and try to understand the principles involved. And also: pay attention to what doesn't work, and *stop doing it*.

Copy this down, put it under your fridge magnet, or wherever you put the essential things. Then do it. Of course, it's not quite as easy as that! You find you do need to attend talks like this, or those offered by the Gabriel Centre, and you need to read... For instance, you could decide to purchase *You are your Child's First Teacher* by Rahima Baldwin Dancy. Or perhaps *Homemaking as a Social Art* by Veronika van Duin. Or *The Incarnating Child* by Joan Salter (being mindful that its style may now seem dated). You could even try reading my free email journal { *parent-theses* }... But the point is, *think* about what you are hearing, what you are reading, what you are doing.

So you begin to gather information from authorities without letting them be authoritarian. Even that television documentary, 'Bringing Up Baby', provided food for thought. As you listen, as you read, as you watch, try to look beyond the efforts at persuasion, and beyond your reactions, to ask what you can learn. To accomplish this, you need a filter — and the best filter is what you have formulated for yourself as your vision of life, your core values, and your direction. You might think you haven't ever done this, but in reality you have, though maybe rather unconsciously. It's worth spending time however getting some clarity on this — you could do it as a journaling exercise, simply writing spontaneously about what you believe in, and what motivates you. Sometimes this is best done as a guided exercise — here's one particular sequence of questions...

What thoughts connect me with my highest ideal in life?

In what event or deed has this ideal been most fully embodied in my life?

How did I feel when this connectedness between vision and action occurred?  
What does it feel like when this connectedness is absent?

Whenever I encounter adversity, what core values and attitudes ultimately lead me through? How do I engage with these core values?

How can I open this gesture out towards every circumstance? What simple steps might this involve? What will I do tomorrow? In the coming weeks?

Reflecting on the above, am I now able to rest for a few moments in the mood evoked by my process? What image or motto best encapsulates this mood?

And suddenly you have an orientation towards an emerging future! You've ascertained your compass-bearings. Now, you could do this exercise by writing in a journal or on a notepad. Or you could do it by going for walk while pondering the questions. This is what I mean by reflective practice. This is the filter for your learning. Then, it seems to me that it is essential that you really live according to this vision, these values, those aims...

I once met with John De Bono, Director of Mission for Catholic Schools in Victoria. When I asked him about his work, he said that mission is about *alignment*. For instance, if a school's mission statement says that it is a place of learning, then everything — from the curriculum and methodology, to administration, to behaviour and professional conduct, even to cake stalls — must be aligned with this mission of learning. And so it is also for our parenting — when we have established *why* we are living, *how* we wish to conduct ourselves, *what* we intend to do, then we have to align everything.

It's all about being true to yourself. Doing an exercise like the above can be called *preparation*. It's a good place to return to from time to time, to review oneself. It's a kind of homecoming — here, I am. If you find it works, 'do more of it'. Practiced regularly, it becomes a point of orientation, a still-point of peace, a source of initiative. This is the workplace of your *True Self* (yet another of Winnicott's terms). From this place you have a viewpoint.

Viewed from there, what you hear, what you read, what you watch, seems to go through a transformation. Some things remain resonant, and others just fall away. Forgotten. You find you can begin 'to understand the principles involved'. No one else can persuade you of the validity of their point of view until it has been passed through this filter of your True Self.

**W**hat I have just given you is a filter for your inner environment. We can now consider a useful filter for the outer parenting environment, the structural holding environment — that is, the home, the gathering-place of the family. First, what is the difference between a house and a home? I'll pause for a moment while you talk with your neighbour about this...

Well, let's hear your reflections — you say 'a house is dead, but a home is living' ... 'a home has a soul' ... 'a feeling of something living and breathing' ... 'heart warmth' ... 'hearth warmth!' ... 'a place where you feel nurtured' ... These are great observations! Take the idea that a home is living — and let's explore that. A living organism is characterised by *life processes*; with these in mind we could begin to understand how a house is a thing and a home is an organism. The seven life processes are: *breathing, warming, nourishing, secreting, maintaining, growing, and generating*. They are prerequisites for life: for instance, even in plants a kind of breathing occurs; and warming, whether inwardly present as in mammals

and birds, or as in the case of plants and insects — and also reptiles, amphibians, fish — directly due to the sun's warmth, is a life necessity.

These first processes of *breathing* and *warming* appear to be preconditions for all other life activities. But each one is fundamental, and each depends upon the right functioning of the others. Thus, through the *nourishing* process, substances are drawn into the organism, and *secreting* then becomes a necessity — a sifting and sorting must take place, retaining what is essential, rejecting the inessential. Then the existence of any entity must be regulated and moderated, through the process of constant *maintaining* — think for a moment how each cell in your body is constantly bathed and cleansed, and now imagine if this were not so... This activity would only keep things as they are, however, were it not for the process of *growing* that underlies all development. Organisms develop, from their juvenile forms to maturity; this is a process which fills us with wonder and awe when we perceive it in any living thing. And finally, there is a process through which reproductive capacities appear in the organism, *generating* its own kind, creating something new.

In a baby, these processes are all evident, though not yet evenly regulated. For instance, if we observe a baby's breathing, we notice how irregular it is, how easily affected it is by sudden events — any unexpected change is a shock, and it registers in the breathing. This irregular breathing — laboured at times, and almost suspended at others — can be a source of anxiety in a parent, and that is exactly what is not needed. Breathing is easily polluted, and not only from physical causes. The baby breathes most easily in a calm environment, one which is free of any extreme nervous or emotional intensity and flurries of abrupt activity.

Similarly, we know the baby does not have a conscious relationship to its own warmth, so we have to ensure that the physical surroundings are right, that the baby's head is covered against heat and cold, for instance, especially in those first years when the fontanelles are still open. We could consider each of the life processes in turn, observing their normal and their abnormal conditions. I am not a doctor, however, and where any problems are evident, that becomes a medical matter you need to act upon — otherwise, it is not your task as a parent to interfere directly with these processes, but rather to ask yourselves, what is to be done to support the healthy functioning of the baby's life processes? If, as Winnicott puts it, the baby *is* a going concern, how do you establish the right holding and facilitating environment for its development?

Let's use the life processes as metaphors for conditions in the home. So how does your home *breathe*? A home can seem full of fresh air and light, or it can seem dark and claustrophobic. Have you noticed that, after a spring-clean, your home seems more open and spacious, as if there is more room to breathe? Just reflect on that phrase, *more room to breathe*... And now think about it in terms of *warmth*... Is your home welcoming? Do you experience any other particular homes as welcoming? What is this quality? Notice how it seems to accept you, it takes you in, envelops you in warmth... We experience warmth as something that permeates the space, and is absorbed by things. A home can feel like a temperate zone, or else tropical, or arctic. Have you noticed how, in springtime, the sun seems to warm you right through into your bones? In some homes you can feel the same fresh, sunny warmth. Then again, you will have noticed that warmth, when it is shut up and enclosed, becomes 'fuggy'. *Breathing opens a space, and warming fills it*. Taken together, these elements — breathing and warming

— constitute the atmosphere of the home, its physical and social climate. Considering the home as a container, as a holding environment, what *climate conditions* support a baby?

Within this container of the home, weather occurs as an emotional constituent of the climate. Is the prevailing soul-weather of your family stormy and tempestuous, or calm and mild? Does it vary? Are there more extreme events? It can be really heavy weather. Special weather conditions prevail when a teenager is in the home — you might have experienced what a slowing-moving cold front can feel like as an emotional event, or a tropical cyclone, or acid rain... If the home is a facilitating environment, what is in the best interests of your baby?

Then there is all we can understand as *nourishing*. You know what food is, of course, and maybe you've considered it in terms of quality, not just quantity. You know the quality of everything is important, because it all goes into a baby's mouth! On another level, everything in the baby's environment is an immediate question of *taste*. There is food-as-fuel, and there is food-as-experience. It is food for the senses, which in a child are like open doors. Whatever a baby takes in is nourishment or malnourishment. Now, are you 'force-feeding' or 'starving' your baby? Walk through your home, 'tasting' it... What is the flavour of your home? Ask yourself, is it nourishing? Is this just about liking or disliking? Or is it what is meant by 'wholesome'? The senses nourish the child. You know, even touch is a form of nourishment for a baby — there is research that shows that premature babies in an incubator gain weight much more quickly if they are stroked gently and regularly. They *devour* your love.

*Secreting* is a secret process, a mysterious activity through which the organism sifts and sorts the essential from the non-essential. Nothing remains as it was; it is transformed, and either secreted or excreted. Stored or thrown out. How does this manifest itself in the life-organism of the home? Because it *is* secret and mysterious, this isn't so easily observed — but think for a moment what *presence* is — you have this awareness that something inhabits the space which is a home and which isn't present in a house. I'm talking of that mysterious element we call humanity. It's a special quality which we certainly know when we experience it — and we readily know when it's absent. It's that intangible quality which we might experience in the atmosphere of a Steiner school, for instance. I sometimes refer to it using a Maori word — *turangawaewae* — which I interpret as the place where you can stand, feeling empowered and connected. This human 'secretion' — we could call it a genuine *spirit of place* — forms a focal point for the baby's experience, encouraging purposeful, meaningful development.

You all know about the task of *maintaining* a home. It isn't just a physical demand — your life and soul have to go into it, or it will be just a house. My feeling is that women especially are sensitive to this requirement — they have an innate sense of the ongoing processes that maintain existence. In fact, you can observe that women — more often than not — are aware of all the life processes, and tend them like a gardener tends a garden. Do you know women like this — who have that ability to shape and tend and nurture the environment? Are you one of them? Who can remain constant in attentiveness to it? (Some men have this capacity, and it's a marvellous experience to be in their vicinity).

This process is very much about looking after the container — that holding environment. It ensures the healthy activity of all the other processes. In our kindergartens, we know that neglect of the space leads to accidents and incidents — in a spot not fully inhabited by our conscious activity, other unwanted things might happen. Health and safety consciousness is

one aspect of maintenance in the life environment of a baby, a vigilance that attends to all possibilities. Seeing that each day is sufficient — that your activity of nurture suffices — is another aspect. Maintaining implies a steadfastness that is difficult amidst the forces of contemporary life. To just keeping on going... This is a vital element in a child's life — to provide a constancy and dependability that can be relied on.

Maintaining keeps things as they are — *growing* is another process, and you will have gone into homes where renovations have brought about a genuine growth. When you move into a new house or apartment, you initially set it up as best as you can, making do, fitting things in. For some people, that's as far as habitation goes, and the space remains undeveloped. So some places never seem to change, while in others a restless, forceful energy brings constant upheaval... However, most homemakers will begin to make changes, seeing and developing the possibilities... Alterations and renovations can be an organic process of transformation, through which the substance of the house is shaped into a new tissue of homeliness. The house becomes an entity — you visit such a place from time to time and discover refreshing developments. It is as though it is becoming more completely itself. A child feels supported in a home that grows and develops as they grow.

When it comes to the life process of *generating*, I have to admit to being at a bit of a loss to express exactly how that happens in the home environment. But homemaking *is* generative, and you can see the effects, you can feel the effects, immediately recognising a creative space in which beauty and goodness are generated as a spiritual-soul activity. I am fortunate to live with someone who is an artist of the home. So I witness these life processes being cultivated, and recall what Winnicott spoke of as the facilitating environment:

It is in the space between inner and outer world, which is also the space between people ... that intimate relationships and creativity occur.

In a very real way, this space is defined by the *home* you make.

**N**ow, that's all very well, you might be thinking at this point, if only I could take some time out I might try that exercise and it could come to something, and maybe I'd even feel good about it at the time... And I could think about homemaking and life processes... But life actually isn't like that! What about those situations which just happen, when all my idealism goes out the door and I'm yelling at my child or feeling helpless, or what's worse, ashamed because I'm just not *good enough*, let alone *perfect*? What then?

First, learn about the *pause button*. It's the most basic tool to develop in response to Branden's injunction to 'pay attention to what doesn't work, and *stop doing it*'. Sometimes you simply have to *stop*. 'Count to ten', my mother said to me, and it isn't bad advice, as it can let the voice of conscience get a word in. However, it seems that a little more than counting is often necessary. *So pause, and reflect — how will my next words or actions help things to go forward?*

This is a great tool! It can even become a family asset. As your children enter adolescence, you could suggest that in those rather heated moments, anyone can press the pause button... Or maybe say, 'We all have to stop, right now, and think about our next words, and decide

what will be helpful for everyone...’ Sometimes it can be useful to call for time-out. ‘I just need to go out and hang up the washing, while you tidy up a bit, and then we’ll continue...’ The following is a personal process tool for self-checking at such times. Pause, just for a few moments even, and reflect:

What is happening *right now*? In relation to the immediate situation, what do I want right now? What am I trying to achieve?

What am I doing right now to prevent myself from achieving this? What can I choose to do that will change this?

Decide it *will* be different; in your mind, complete the sentence: ‘I choose to...’ Take a deep breath — and *let go*, in order to *let come*.

This is action learning. With a little practice it really works. Just try it sometime. Then, there is the *replay button*. I recall one evening sitting by the bed of a dying friend; she asked what was troubling me, and I told her of an event from earlier that day — a significant moment of life crisis. She looked deeply, kindly at me and murmured, ‘Ah, John... Imagine how it will seem in a year’s time. I know it seems sad now, but perhaps you can begin to see it from there, just a little bit...’

How wise a person can be near death! So, in the evening, imagine yourself climbing to the top of a familiar hill. From there you see the wide landscape of your life, and particularly the features of the day. Imagine just sitting there for a while, and now suddenly some time has passed. From this detached vantage-point, you can ask yourself:

What now seems important about the day and its happenings? And what now seems unimportant, and was really a waste of time and effort?

In what situations did I struggle to deal with the tensions between the different elements of my personality?

When and how did I give myself a chance either to intervene or do it differently? And when did I simply give way to instinctive or reactive urges?

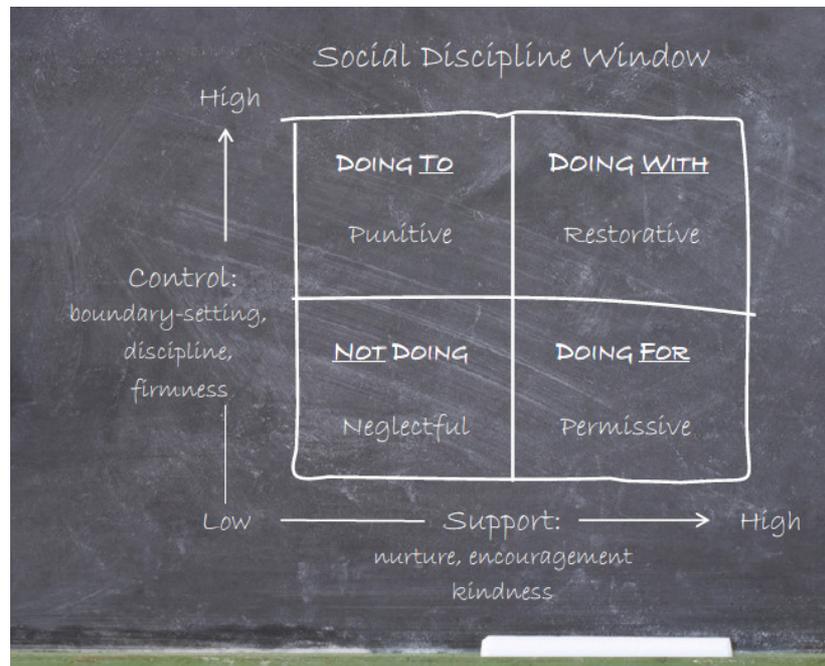
What led me to pay more attention to my reactive self than to my aspiring self? And what helped me to pay attention to my aspiring self?

What unintended consequences did my behaviour have? Is there anything I need to say or do as a follow-up?

This reflective practice is a kind of dialogue conducted by the True Self, together with the good enough human being, and that other person in you who is simply not good enough. You might notice that it’s a personal *secreting* process. Now, don’t try to interpret the events in the light of this review — just see them. Don’t try to suppress or justify anything, and don’t try to explain anyone else’s behaviour. For the True Self strengthens its presence in your life just through being enabled to *witness* what’s happening.

Remarkably, things will change when you do this...

Then there *are* those moments when you wonder, regardless of everything said by all the experts (and well-meaning amateurs), whether you really have got it wrong. Especially when those behavioural problems arise... So now I want to show you some views through a window — called by its ‘architect’ Ted Wachtel the *social discipline window* — which can let you see the best way to be with your child. This window has four panes, and due to the unique nature of the glass in each pane, a different aspect of the social landscape appears:



First, looking through the top left hand quadrant of the window, consider that attitude of high-level *control* through which everything is done *to* the child. At its most extreme, it is a *punitive* form of management — either the child conforms or it is blamed and needs to be punished. This was typical of parenting in the fifties, when my generation experienced an authoritarian, moralistic upbringing, getting a sharp clip on the ear if we lacked manners. Obedience and duty were thus inculcated through fear — it was called ‘respect’ but in fact it was fear — through which no real sense of personal responsibility was fostered. The light through this pane of the window shines clear, but it is a cold light.

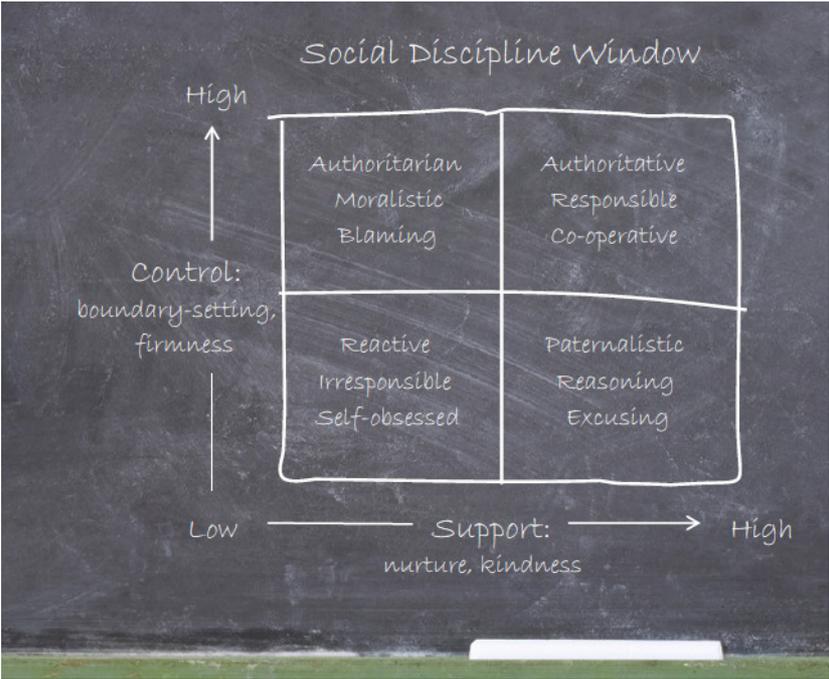
A contrasting form of child-rearing became apparent in the seventies, which we can glimpse through this warm soft light in the bottom right hand corner of the window. Childhood was idealised, and children were given a high level of *support*, but without any effort at control — they were not expected to do anything for themselves. It was done *for* them. It was believed that reason, indulgence, and good example would bring out the best in them. Philosophically this view derived from the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who believed that the innate goodness of childhood was corrupted by so-called civilisation. But the respect born of this often had no shape to it, no formal structure. The child could not be told what to do — ‘bad’ behaviour became excusable in a *permissive* society.

A third viewpoint, seen here in this smeared unclear pane at the bottom left, is that of the abdication of all responsibility — self-obsessed parents offering little in the way of control *or*

support. I recall a parent talking about her teenager and declaring, 'I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't! Well, it's up to him now — I've signed off!' The danger of such a decision is that he might have signed off too... The consequence of *not* doing anything has been a reactive, irresponsible societal attitude that is *neglectful* of the real needs of children. A lowest common denominator of survival prevailed, encouraged by belligerent personalities such as the former British Prime Minister, Maggie Thatcher, who once outrageously declared that there was no such thing as society, only individuals and groups of individuals in families who were naturally self-concerned. In such a world there were no assumed values except the survival of the fittest — which meant one's own. And thus we came into the nineties.

These are three distinct views, with the tendencies inherent in each. The fourth pane of the window however presents a view that has been developing in the past decade or so as a path of conscious action. Implicit in this view are high levels both of control and of support. Here we find cool-headed clarity, and yet also a warm light shining through. An authoritative principle of doing what is necessary *with* the full co-operation of the child is embedded in this view — that is, a humane view that society has a life and soul that needs to be cultivated, and that can be enhanced or damaged by our behaviour. In such a civil society, individual rights *and* responsibilities are strongly held — the *restorative* principles at its core ensure that this is a true *facilitating environment*.

Maybe I should say here that Ted Wachtel originally developed this window as a basis for understanding the principals of restorative justice. What I mean in this context by the word 'restorative' is that individual dignity is *restored and valued* within a strong container called the *community*. In other words, I strongly disagree with Maggie Thatcher! In this container, restorative practices are intended to help heal the harm done to the life and soul of society, so that you may feel enveloped and held by a real entity. A facilitating environment flourishes then, enabling you to feel sheltered and sufficiently healed and encouraged to begin again...



This window then offers us a view on what is needed. Elsewhere (in my lecture 'Learning to Accompany the Child', available on my website [www.johnallison.com.au](http://www.johnallison.com.au)) I have elaborated this view in terms of *shelter* and *challenge*. And in my recent lecture 'Social Discipline and Restorative Practices' (also available on my website), looking through this window I consider behaviour management in depth, primarily in the context of the classroom — though there is much there that parents could find valuable. Taken together, in these various presentations I think a comprehensive approach emerges which might interest you further...

**M**y intention has been to offer you several instruments for homemaking — a personal filter to help establish your viewpoint; a filter for seeing into the home environment; a simple self-control tool and also a reflective tool for immediate situations in the family; and a view through a window towards the behavioural and social needs of your child. With this, you can look at a parenting programme like 'Bringing Up Baby' and decide for yourself what seem relevant. The foundations of Truby King's work, for instance, are based on high levels of control — but you might ask yourself whether there is sufficient nurture and emotional support in his approach. Jean Liedloff's continuum concept, and its variants of attachment parenting, offers very high levels of support, and control is simply not an issue — until later, as many parents discover... Many of Benjamin Spock's views now seem to me to provide a framework that enables parents to determine the levels of control and support required. He can seem dated now, as can Donald Winnicott, and as can Joan Salter... But they provide real food for thought rather than a systematic method.

I do not want to criticise any of them. It seems to me that each is a person of their time, with messages that have spoken across time, but which also can become strident through their adherents. The most notable feature of that BBC documentary was that the proponents of each method could not listen to one another — they seemed irrational and rude. I looked at them through the panes of the social discipline window and had to wonder whether such fundamentalist behaviours could be beneficial at all. But in the end, you have to judge — to judge me also — and to judge well. Your baby needs you to judge well what their real needs are, and what best meets them. Your baby needs you to be a *good enough parent*.

So think about what you are doing — perhaps you have already established an authoritative, responsible, and co-operative holding and facilitating environment for your baby, for your family, and feel affirmed in this by what I've said. I certainly hope so. And for those of us who are not mothers, I'm in agreement with Winnicott's intent that we — as grandparents, partners, friends, the wider community — must be those other sets of containers that:

protect the young mother from whatever tends to get between herself and her child. For if she is without understanding of the thing she does so well, she is without means to defend her position, and only too easily she spoils the job by trying to do what she is told, or what her mother did, or what the books say.

Perhaps some of what I've presented tonight is a useful contribution to your understanding of that task, and you are feeling encouraged in your vocation of parenting. May you also have a child who one day says to you: 'I must have done a good job in bringing you up. You've really come through.'

To conclude, let me quote Winnicott once more:

If human babies are to develop into healthy, independent, and society-minded adult individuals, they absolutely depend on being given a good start, and this good start is assured in nature by the existence of the bond between the baby's mother and the baby, the thing called love. So if you love your baby he or she is getting a good start.

*Healthy, independent, and society-minded adult individuals* can only become such in the presence of adults. As adults, then, let us review a few of those significant phrases I've learned from Winnicott and repeated here: *this little lodger, a going concern, given a good start, in a holding environment, which becomes a facilitating environment, through good enough parents...* In these clear terms, and in the light of love, it all seems quite straightforward, doesn't it?

Now you might appreciate the opening also of that poem by Rumi which I quoted earlier — I say 'now', because maybe now we can understand the so-called 'failure' to meet every need of your child, that necessary failure which turns his or her drives towards the world:

Your grief for what you've lost lifts a mirror  
up to where you're bravely working.

Expecting the worst, you look, and instead  
here's the joyful face you've been wanting to see.

This is the gift that comes back to us when we are *good enough*, when we can accomplish that *letting go*. We find a breathing in, and a breathing out — a poised balance which enables us to love freely:

Your hand opens and closes and opens and closes.  
If it were always a fist or always stretched open,  
you would be paralysed.

Your deepest presence  
is in every small contracting and expanding,  
the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated  
as birdwings.

*Your deepest presence...* This essential quality, that emerges through working with the kinds of processes I've presented tonight, will enable you to be a good enough parent. Thank you for your attentiveness, and best wishes for this best of vocations...

**Note:** I am grateful to Dr Donald Winnicott for his insightful observations of the relationship between mother and child, and also to the parent communities in which these thoughts presented here have taken shape over the past year.