

talking point



Are we over-parenting?

Does the “Nature versus Nurture” debate make us parent more eagerly, and what are the effects of this?

BY CAMILLA RANKIN

Walking into the parenting section of any bookshop can be a really dizzying experience – there are just so many books on how to be the best possible parent ever and how to never ever mess up your child. We are bombarded with parenting buzz-words such as tiger mom, helicopter parents, free-range parent and parenting philosophies such as attachment parenting, positive parenting, child-centred, collaborative... the list is seemingly endless. But are we overthinking our roles as parents?

In her article *How to land your kid in therapy*, Lori Gottlieb, therapist and mother, certainly thinks we are. Lori feels that modern parents try too hard to make sure that their children are happy all the time and we do this by protecting them from any negative feelings – that doesn't sound so bad does it? Well, through her research, Lori discovered that we are doing too much: “We can try to protect our children from nasty classmates, bad marks and all kinds of rejection and their own limitations, but eventually they will bump up against these things anyway. In fact, by trying so hard to provide the perfectly happy childhood,

we're just making it harder for our children to actually grow up.”

Jo'burg-based Clinical psychologist, Emma-Kate McCormack, agrees. “In our generation, we try to compensate with our children by trying to make it all better very quickly, rather than letting the child accept that disappointment, sadness, hurt and longing for things are part of our experience of being human”, she says. “It is better to experience and survive those difficult feelings in the safety of a home, with loving parents, than to go through life without those resources. So often parents tell me that they just want their child to be happy and have a good self-esteem. Placating (by, for example, replacing a broken toy) and giving in to children does not build self-esteem or happiness. It is much more empowering for a child to learn that he is tough enough to survive difficult feelings.”

So what does this mean? Another parenting manual in the making? I turned to parent and twin researcher, Bryan Caplan, for some relief. “Identical twins share all their genes; fraternal twins share only half. Researchers in medicine, psychology, economics, and sociology have spent decades comparing these two types of twins to disentangle the effects of nature and nurture. And the research has shown that nature is the stronger force when it comes to child rearing than nurture is, so why is it that so many parents are literally breaking themselves to nurture, discipline, mould and love their children into beings that will bring them the measure of pride and joy equal to the sacrifices they have made? The evidence is straightforward: Identical twins are more similar than fraternal twins in almost every way—even when the twins are separated at birth. But twin research has another far more amazing lesson: With a few exceptions, the effect of parenting on adult outcomes ranges from small to zero. Parents change children in many ways; the catch is that the changes fade out as children grow up.”

So, we modern parents can breathe a huge sigh of relief: our children will turn out just fine, if we would just let them. ●