

## Escaping the Social Trends Parenting System

My stress level and that of my husband is so high, and it's the same for our kids. What we really want is to find the love and healthy direction a family is supposed to be.

—CARLA JAMES, MOTHER OF THREE CHILDREN

CARLA CAME TO SEE ME WITH TEARS IN HER EYES. HER FIFTEEN-year-old daughter, Katie, would not speak to her, she said, and her twelve-year-old son, Andy, was obsessed with video games. Carla felt overwhelmed, unsure of how to be a parent, and unable to get the help from family, school, and friends that she needed. She worried that Katie would become promiscuous.

“The way she dresses, the way she acts, it’s becoming out of control,” Carla said. “And no matter what my husband or I do, our son Andy just lives in his own world, his own little box. And I know it’s not just me and my kids. It seems like a lot of my kids’ friends are having the same kind of problems. They’re good kids—deep down these are all good kids—and we’re a good family, but there’s something wrong. We’re just too stressed out!”

Another couple, Angie and Bert Stohl, brought their daughter, Susan, to see me. When I met this young woman of sixteen, I saw dark

circles under her eyes. Susan was so busy she only got five hours of sleep per night (she needed nine), and some of that was fitful. She was losing herself to the stress of everyday life, compounded by lack of sleep. For Susan it was like a badge of honor that she could survive with so little sleep. At the same time, she was acting in ways that did not fit her natural needs as a teenager: she was not healthy.

In another case, the Royce family came to me with their son, Devin, who was failing first grade. Well liked by other kids, he did not perform in the way either his parents or school wanted him to. His parents had done all the right things for producing a high-performing son: reading to him early, playing Baby Einstein tapes, putting him in the best school. They had even started him on the computer at three years old. But his teacher said, “Devin simply refuses to concentrate and learn.” At the age of six, Devin was wetting the bed again and beginning to withdraw from school.

These are all good families, good people, trying their best. But they are struggling, and they are not alone. I constantly receive e-mails and letters from parents and other caregivers who notice significant stress and anxiety in their families and the families around them. Some of the stress they notice shows up as disorders in the young children, some as listlessness in the young adults, who just aren’t finding success or a place in the world. Everywhere I travel in my community work, I’m seeing families struggling with stressed-out children. These parents love their kids, and these kids want to grow and develop successfully. But something is wrong.

In this chapter, let’s all take a collective pause for breath. Let’s figure out what’s wrong. In the busyness of contemporary life, let’s ask the right questions in our own homes and schools. If you feel as though everything has sped up and is going too fast and there isn’t enough time in the day to do it all, pause a moment and ask yourself some questions:

- Is my child’s life overscheduled? Am I spending all day taking children from one class, rehearsal, workout, team practice, and social event to another? If so, why?

- Is the frantic struggle to keep up with other kids and their parents doing my child damage? If so, do I sense it but feel powerless against it?
- Do I have a child who just “doesn’t fit” the conventional expectations of well-intentioned teachers, doctors, and other experts who complain about him or her? Is my child just plain “different”?
- Is my five-, six-, or seven-year-old on behavioral medication, unable to calm down or function properly without a chemical stimulant? Or has this medication been recently suggested for my young child, though I don’t believe deep down that he needs it?
- Has my teenage daughter gotten into trouble recently in ways that seem “not who she is”?
- Has my teenage son begun turning away from my home and authority in dangerous ways?
- Do I worry constantly about my child getting into the best college—and does that stress push me to create an overwhelming daily life for my kid?
- Is my child obsessed with the computer, video games, television, cell phones, text messaging, blogging, or other “electronic addictions”?
- Does my child have a materialistic sense of entitlement that cripples his or her ability to fully mature and find purpose and meaning?
- Do I live in a constant anxiety that I as a parent am failing one or more of my children?

Many families and children today are not necessarily sick, ill, or destroyed, but nevertheless suffer from one or more of these issues. Some children play three sports, have team and personal coaches, and are rushing from one grueling athletic practice to another. Some are constantly taking test-prep workshops, dance classes, and music classes, and are rehearsing daily for one academic or artistic performance after another. Others develop social or emotional skills but little character.

Still others act out in uncivil, angry ways, while at the same time struggling to keep up with the latest competitive trends.

I believe these children and their parents are suffering from *chronic stress*. After two decades of research and practice, I now believe that far too many families suffer from this dangerous condition. Let's pause for a moment to look at it carefully so that we can protect our families from it, then let's look at a major social force that might be causing it—one we can battle very well if we decide to become revolutionary and nurture the nature of our children.

## What Is Chronic Stress in the American Family?

Stress—whether the daily stress of life or a major trauma, such as a car accident or death in the family—is a constant in our lives and in the lives of our children. It's normal for our kids' brains and bodies to experience surroundings of great complexity, all the while trying to maintain stability. Much of this is what neurologists call “positive stress.” Our bodies and minds work to understand and integrate the stressor—put out the daily fire; learn a new, difficult skill; recover from an accident; or allow grief into our lives—and we notice that we've gained strength, understanding, new power, new purpose. Thus we can say that the stress has been helpful and meaningful, and our brains have not strayed into danger.

Negative stress, in contrast, is something we need to be very careful about, especially with our children. In the most general terms, as experts at the University of Maryland Medical School wrote recently, “When these symptoms persist, you are at risk for serious health problems. This kind of stress can exhaust your immune system. Recent research demonstrates that 90 percent of illness is stress-related.” When stress goes beyond the stimulating (positive stress) and becomes debilitating (negative stress), symptoms fall into three categories: physical, emotional, and relational.

- Physical symptoms include sleep disturbance; weight gain or weight loss; fatigue; asthma or shortness of breath; and

increases in viral and bacterial infections, migraines, or other tension headaches.

- Emotional and psychological symptoms include anxiety, depression, moodiness, lack of concentration or motivation, feeling out of control, substance abuse, and overreaction to daily situations. Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are all exacerbated by negative stress.
- Relational symptoms include antisocial behavior; increased arguments, nastiness, conflicts, and isolation from others; and increased aggression and violence.

When does negative stress become *chronic* stress? When the stress continues for years at a time. The question I began asking ten years ago, when I started identifying negative stress patterns in families like the Jameses, Stohls, and Royces, was this one: “Could our families and large numbers of our children be experiencing not just negative stress for a given day or week, but a socially sanctioned chronic stress?” And continuing along those lines, “Could it be that we don’t realize the extent of this condition in our own homes, schools, and communities?”

Having conducted some clinical “detective work,” I believe I can now answer these questions.

## Research on Chronic Stress

Present scientific research on chronic stress appears mainly in two fields of scientific inquiry:

- Study of children traumatized in their early relationships by inadequate or violent care at the hands of parents and caregivers (this includes abuse). Such trauma raises cortisol levels (stress hormone levels) and thus “rewires” normal brain chemistry and circuitry.
- Study of families caring for severely disabled or chronically ill individuals. Both the ill individual and the constantly vigilant

caregiver can experience raised cortisol that can lead to depression and other brain chemistry issues.

When these people are acutely stressed, they exhibit and report these experiences:

- Feeling as though they are always rushing, always late, always on the run
- Taking on too much, keeping too many irons in the fire
- Feeling overaroused
- Becoming short tempered
- Feeling constantly anxious
- Being overreactive and tense
- Worrying a great deal about a lot of little things
- Focusing on negatives, especially negative self-judgments and negative judgments of others close to them
- Thinking a lot about failure, possible disaster, lack of success
- Constantly feeling inadequate

Looking at these symptoms, as well as those listed earlier as symptoms of chronic stress, I came to realize that they applied all too well to what Carla James and so many others faced in their families. . . . In each case, parents and children had felt this panoply of symptoms for long periods of time, but without quite being able to figure out what was going on.

## Our Survey

As I tried to understand the connection between chronic stress research and the families I was seeing, I asked the Gurian Institute research team to help me reach out to parents and find out what they thought.

In 2005, the Gurian Institute staff decided to measure the level of parental stress in families. We conducted an e-mail survey in which we asked 1,859 parents and caregivers to rank

- How supported they felt as parents in this culture
- How protected their children were in their social circles
- What they most feared as parents and caregivers

The results were powerful. Two-thirds of the survey participants considered themselves “unsupported as parents in the United States,” felt “inadequate,” and felt “constantly worried that their children would be harmed.” Worry for children’s safety is natural to any generation of parents, but the greatest fear among parents in our survey came not from physical violence or even from terrorism or sexual predators. More than two-thirds of participants believed that their children were in more danger from “subtle harms” than they were from “overt harms.” As one respondent put it, “Our society has taken care of a lot of the obvious harms to children—like lack of food or shelter—but now the subtle harms are far worse.” Subtle harms for surveyed parents included media stereotypes (thin girls, buff boys) as well as media exploitation of violence and inappropriate sexuality, loss of family bonding in everyday life, and high social pressure on kids. A number of participants reported variations on this theme: “There are inordinately high social and family expectations on my kids to perform in ways that just don’t fit who my kids are. This is really stressing them out.”

Also interesting in the survey was this finding: three-quarters of the respondents felt that their children were in more danger than they themselves had been as children. Many of these respondents were brought up during the Cold War—a time when Americans thought they could lose their lives in a nuclear catastrophe at any time—yet they felt that their children’s exposure to subtle harms in contemporary society was worse.

### **Previous Work on Chronic Stress in Families**

These survey results inspired our Gurian Institute team to look deeply at what these parents might be hinting at—especially the sense of stress and anxiety linked to social expectations and pressures. We reviewed other literature and surveys on parental stress. Although our survey

was perhaps one of the first of its kind to try to determine an exact link between chronic stress and family life, there have been other surveys that measure general parental anxiety and child health. These others supported our survey results.

The Michigan Healthy Start survey of 2003, for instance, found that 66 percent of parents measured at “significant stress” on their Parental Stress Index. According to the Michigan researchers, this result showed a significant generational increase when they compared the baby boomers to their children. The Carnegie-Mellon corporation conducted a long-term study in the 1990s on child and family health, and discovered significant parental and family stress. They called this “a quiet crisis in child rearing.”

These surveys followed the calls and hints of other researchers to look closely at family stressors. David Elkind, professor of psychology at Tufts University and the author of *The Hurried Child*, first wrote about stressed children in his clinical observations in the 1980s. In the 1990s, a number of fields began to report on children’s deteriorating mental health due to such severe family stressors as abuse, neglect, and dangerous media stimulation. Robin Karr-Morse and Meredith S. Wiley reviewed the literature in *Ghosts from the Nursery*, showing the roots of violence in chronic stressors in early childhood. Jane Healy also reviewed the literature in *Failure to Connect*, showing correlation between excessive media exposure and children’s stress.

In the late 1990s, the field of physical therapy began to discuss the possibility of a condition therapist T. W. Myers called “kinesthetic dystonia,” a neurophysical state in which the child’s body is constantly under neural stress because it is living out of sync with its own natural needs. The exponential increase in child obesity in the last decade falls into this category.

In the last few years, our nation’s colleges have also been noticing a situation that supports the chronic stress theory. In November 2004, college health service workers from a wide variety of schools noted the severity and incidence of student mental health referrals in university health services. Steven Hyman, provost of Harvard University and former director of the National Institute of Mental Health, recently pointed

out that students' mental states are now so precarious that they "interfere with the core mission of the university."

According to Hara Estroff Marano in *Psychology Today*, by 1996, "anxiety overtook relationship concerns and has remained the major student problem" in student health services. Eating disorders of some kind or severity now afflict 40 percent of women at some time in their college career. Psychologist Paul E. Joffe, head of the suicide prevention team at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, tracks the increase of dangerous drinking among young people. He finds among our late adolescents "an inverted world in which drinking to oblivion is the way to feel connected and alive."

## Something Is Wrong

As I mentioned earlier, I began my clinical detective work because families seemed to be saying, "Something is wrong." I believe we can now see what is wrong. Families are struggling with chronic stress of children and parents. There is no question that statistics and individual stories can be manipulated, that there can be many various causes behind a particular statistic or outcome, and that claims that our children are utterly worse off than they were even a generation ago must be taken with a grain of salt. There are many ways in which our children are flourishing. Nevertheless, surveys, expert analyses, and anecdotal information do show a profound sense of anxiety in families and in social systems that are set up to care for children. Taking all this information into consideration, the Gurian Institute team decided to collect quantitative data on stress-related illness among children to see to what extent it had increased in the last two generations. Kathy Stevens, our training director, Mittie Pedraza, our parent programs coordinator, and our attachment specialist, Pat Crum, were especially helpful in compiling these rather frightening but also, I hope, revolution-inspiring statistics described in the Did You Know? box—statistics indicating not only that our children are showing the same symptomatology chronically stressed adults show but also that, in general, the basic mental health of our children is in significant decline.

## Did You Know?

- Child depression rates in the United States have jumped exponentially in the last decade. Between 1995 and 2002, the number of hospital visits for depression among seven- to seventeen-year-olds jumped from 1.44 million to 3.22 million. The majority of these children are girls. The number of girls under six who are taking antidepressants and similar drugs has jumped to over a million.
- Over four million U.S. boys are on Ritalin or other mind- and mood-altering drugs. They are being medicated at ever younger ages, even though the FDA has not approved these drugs for these age groups. In general, the use of antipsychotic drugs for both girls and boys has jumped fivefold in the seven years between 1995 and 2002.
- Increasingly, the minds of our children are growing up to be antisocial. Children diagnosed with Antisocial Personality Disorder now number in the millions. As the Carnegie-Mellon survey notes, our primary social response to the new antisocial nature of children has not been to rethink how we raise them, but rather to expand punishment and incarceration systems. A Department of Justice study reports that at our present rates of incarceration, one in twenty babies born in the United States today will spend some part of life incarcerated. As of 2004, 1 in every 138 U.S. residents was in prison.
- More than seven million U.S. girls struggle now with eating disorders—quite often their brains' serotonin levels are so askew in their high-pressure lives that they must excessively diet, vomit food, and impede their own physical maturation just to rebalance themselves.

- Just under two million girls each year cut themselves with knives and other sharp objects in response to desperation and need for emotional contact.
- Millions of adolescent children abuse substances and binge drink. (Boys especially fit in the latter category.) These children seek emotional relief and escape from pressure through means other than healthy human contact and healthy personal growth.
- Boys and girls are sleeping one to two hours less per night than their brains need for healthy growth. This lack of sleep is an underreported epidemic with profound consequences, including antisocial behavior, substance abuse, and school failure.
- In the last twenty years, our children's physical weight rates have risen to nearly one in two children overweight and one in five obese. Obesity is the number one health problem among American children and is tied to many other problems: alcohol abuse, drugs, self-cutting, depression, media addiction, and listlessness. Dr. Philip Thomas, a pediatric obesity specialist, fears "This is going to be the first generation that's going to have a lower life expectancy than its parents."

In total, even after accounting for overlap in a number of these statistics, about one-third of our children are now diagnosed with some significant mental or physical disorder.

Present-day children's health statistics must give us pause. And we need to listen to the voices of parents. Between scientists studying children's health and parents trying to protect it, we have some of the smartest people around. When notes of discomfort in children's lives are reported from all quarters, we need to listen—one family at a time—

so that we can best protect our children. Regardless of the age of your child, his or her chances of experiencing chronic stress are increasing constantly. Where is this stress coming from? What is a first step in protecting our children from it?

The first step is to become aware—not only of the chronic stress itself but also of its source. Aside from the obvious stressors like abuse or neglect, there are very powerful forces of social conditioning that we must confront in order to become revolutionary on our children’s behalf.

## The Social Trends Parenting System

A grandmother in Texas wrote, “The ten-year-old son of one of my fellow volunteers at church is whisked from home to school, then school to basketball practice, then to a snack at a Taco Bell drive-through, then our 90-minute church program. This doesn’t include homework and tutoring. What this kid needs is time to chill out in the backyard. Just because all these school and other programs exist, doesn’t mean the family needs to sign up for all of them!”

Another mother wrote, “When my children were young (they are now in college), I realized they were overstressed. So we decided to make a big transition as a family. We saw that for years we had pushed them into a lot of activities we thought would help them in future society, but the kids didn’t seem to enjoy them as much as we did. We decided to give them support for a few activities they wanted to engage in, and we supported them when they decided not to participate in an activity that became too demanding on their schedule.”

These moms, and many other parents I hear from, are wise. Parents, other family members, and professionals are “taking back” their kids—removing them from a social trends parenting system that has subtly told these parents they are bad if their kids are not stressed. These parents recognize that our society has developed an unnatural and artificial approach to the needs of the child.

## Social Trends Parenting

What do I mean by the *social trends parenting system*? It is an entrenched social system that conditions us to basically obey unscientific and untested ideas about how to help our kids succeed—ideas based on assumptions that all kids should be a certain way and be tested to prove it. This emphasis on social trends and pressures often leads us to raise children in ways *contradictory to their nature*. That is a pivot point of the chronic stress our kids (and we) get into. Living within this system, our families move farther away from feeling safe, whole, protective, and successful on a daily basis.

To see if this system is operating in your life and the life of your child, please take a moment to ask yourself a few questions. I constantly revisit these in my own life and family.

- Do I neglect my natural instincts as a parent, believing that everyone else—experts writing in books and magazines, family, friends, or neighbors—knows more than I do?
- Am I looking for answers to my parenting questions from ever-changing theories about how a mother, father, grandparent, teacher, or child should treat my children—rather than seeing both the question and the answer within my own child?
- Do I tend to apply negative, deficit-based approaches to my children’s development? For instance, do I find myself saying or thinking things like “You won’t make it in the world unless you get up to speed right now!”
- Do I try to compensate for not having enough time with my children by constantly trying to keep them stimulated and appeased with material goods, competitive activities, and technological “friends”?
- Do I focus on the latest fad in “emotion talk” and “feelings talk”—often neglecting the equal importance of universal moral and ethical values in family life?

- Do I put a lot of pressure on teachers, coaches, schools, physicians, other professionals, and children to produce only the highest levels of competition and perfect success, when realistic expectations of excellence—tailored to my child—would be more of a blessing to his or her development?
- Am I isolated and alienated, feeling immense pressure to solve all parenting problems on my own?

I confess to having experienced each of these with my own daughters at one time or another. We're all part of this vast social system, and we're all beholden to a social trends-oriented parenting and family system. We all look outward, listen to trends, hope to hear "the perfect plan" for child raising. We all want to get ahead, have children who get to the top, and experience for ourselves the social perfection "everyone is talking about." We are loaded up with constant information about children, and that information can come to run our lives.

Social trends parenting is a systemic response, I think, to the complexities of ever-changing family systems largely rooted in the increased mobility and major social changes instigated by the Industrial Revolution—which is one of the reasons I am calling for a "revolution" now, to take our children back. The Industrial Revolution created a cookie-cutter kind of existence, at least in many aspects of life. Our whole society tried to meet the new demands of factories. Our families became economically tuned, highly mobile, out of touch with natural roots. As a society, we grew a system of caring for children that focused on the so-called social and technological perfection of the human child.

As our society moved gradually into the information age, we carried the industrial values forward into an outward-looking, information-based social trends parenting system. This system creates serious stress in our children's lives.

### The Anxiety of External Success Goals

We're conditioned to create families whose standard of success is how *a child will function as a competitor at the highest level of the competitive hier-*

*archy*. In the shadow of this stressor, we hyperprepare children from prebirth for entrance into “the best” college or highest-paying job even though we know that (1) most children will not achieve this top-end acquisition, nor need to in order to be successful and happy; and (2) that we and all other adults end up most successful and happy by living and growing in sync with who we really are, not by making huge amounts of money or fitting a rigid mold.

The disconnect between our individual natures as growing human beings and the monolithic expectations of society causes both children and parents to become anxious. Parents become anxious not only to make sure their kids are recognized as super-smart achievers who conform to “perfect” standards of financial success, interpersonal relationships, and self-esteem but also to define the “perfect” child by whatever latest definition has come down the pike.

When we feel we have failed as parents in our society, it is often because our children don’t do well on a kindergarten entrance exam, or get what they think is enough ice time on the Pee Wee youth hockey team. These “small slights” come to hurt immeasurably; further, the information that creates the sense of failure is impossible to keep up with.

A prime example is the issue of breast-feeding. It was “out” for over a decade. Now it’s back. Another example: sleeping with your child is out now, but once was encouraged. Lately the huge growth of the Baby Einstein-type tapes has swept the country, creating new anxiety among parents who want to buy more and more of them to make sure their kid grows up smart. But stay tuned, because recent studies show that some of the claims for these tapes are unrealistic; perhaps next year this fad will become obsolete also. High-stress consumerism has also infiltrated every aspect of our society. The constant push to buy, buy, buy the next best thing for your baby/toddler/child fuels and feeds on the social trends parenting system.

Aren’t we constantly deluged with the latest trends in parenting and relational development? One day we read that parents don’t matter—it’s only friends who influence our impressionistic young kids; the next day we hear that constant emotion talk or giving kids their space or tough-love intervention is the only and best way to parent, or that if we don’t

play Mozart in the nursery, our kids will fall behind. We see the morning TV shows, and every year dozens of new books are published, adding to the burden and stress, piling on more pressure and anxiety. Many of these books contain wonderful insights, but they add up to a kind of “nervous wreck” atmosphere and to off-center parenting. We are constantly being told how to be perfect parents and have perfect winner kids, and meanwhile we are exhausted.

How do we parents keep up? We can’t. So we constantly fail. And in raising kids through the following of social trends, we tend to listen less to wise ancestors or our own instincts and instead take our cues from test makers, psychological theorists, personality-based gurus, morning show sound bites, and magazine advice columns regarding *all children in general*. Our children thus get pulled in many directions, often far away from their own core nature.

One clear example of the symptoms of social trends anxiety has been the school system. Filled as it is with wonderful teachers and many other excellent resources, our educational system—primary and secondary—is so swamped with children (even in crowded preschools) that it must socialize boys and girls with differing learning styles as though they were all of one single type in terms of their social capabilities, socioeconomic status, and psychological makeup. Many of the children educated through this approach are often unable to achieve basic levels of reading, writing, math, and science learning; even worse, many with naturally diverse learning styles are pathologized, labeled, medicated, and ultimately lost. They are captives of a monolithic system that many of them simply come to hate.

### Losing the Nature of the Child

By participating in the social trends parenting system, we are taking our eyes off of what our children, our family, our schools *really* need. The outside-in model of society-as-guide for parenting cannot do otherwise than take our eyes off the deep and complex nature of *our* child. Although setting high goals for our kids is crucial for their thriving, what is problematic is the lack of attention to understanding and nur-

turing who our specific children really are—so that we can help them set the *right* high goals for themselves!

Certainly, many social trends are wonderfully helpful. Many parenting experts are immensely helpful. Some surveys are very helpful, as I found in providing surveys and results in this chapter: we need to listen when parents talk. But in overrelying on social trends to help us raise kids—and in neglecting the individual and inborn nature of each child—we are overstressing millions of children toward anxiety and other disorders, toward painful labels and misdiagnosis, toward antisocial behavior and unhappiness. It’s time for parents to act on behalf of the human child in revolutionary ways.

## Nurturing Your Child’s Nature

Perhaps in the last week, month, or year you’ve heard a whisper from your child: “Look, here is the person I am. Look into my eyes! Pay attention to *me*. All the other stuff you are throwing at me? I’m trying to do it, but what I really need, what is essential to me, is for you who love me to help me become who I am already trying to be.”

My experience, research, and theoretical analysis tells me that this whisper is not some fantasy—it is the voice of nature in the child. This chapter has asked you to look at some profound issues you might be facing as a parent in this society. I hope you’ll take awareness and vigilance of the issues—of chronic stress and social trends—into the rest of this book. I hope you’ll join me now in discovering the fruition of your needs, hopes, and dreams in a parenting revolution: a refocus of parenting away from ephemeral social trends and on to the *core nature of the individual child*.

Focusing on that *unique* temperament, personality, and genetic disposition leads to your trusting your instincts about what is *essential* for your child and family. Focusing on that core nature will help you raise your child to adapt to anything. A child whose parents nurture the nature grows strong and learns how to flourish in any future circumstance, wherever the child may find himself or herself as an adult.

The remainder of this book proposes a new model of parenting that includes not only old wisdom but new science—science that focuses specifically on the nature of children. The psychologist Kurt Lewin taught that there is nothing so radical as a good theory. I hope you'll find in the remaining eight chapters of this book a nature-based theory that you can apply in your home. By the time you end this book, I hope you will have in hand an essential parenting blueprint.

What is an essential parenting blueprint? *Nurture the Nature* provides not only theory and insight but also practical tools by which you will develop a clear sense of your child's nature and, in that context, a *blueprint* of what is essential if you are to nurture the nature of your child. This blueprint is a plan of action that will grow from your understanding of your child's innate talents and skills, temperament and personality. It will allow you to understand the strengths of *your* child and to waste no more time on focusing on social, educational, or media trends that aren't right for his or her unique nature. This blueprint will develop organically in your relationship with your child and also in the many wisdom-of-practice strategies of other parents, shared with you in this book.

Your blueprint will make it a lot easier to make good choices. For example, if the Baby Einstein approach to parenting is right for your child, you'll be able to make that decision from within the truth your child is living. If it's not right for your child, you won't need to feel guilty that he or she is no genius at science.

So it is with all potential activities, missions, ideas, media—the hard work of the essential parenting blueprint really pans out once you look back after a month or so of developing it and a month or so of applying it and are able to say, “Now I understand *this* child. Now I see how to do right by him, by her. Now I have in place the safe life, the right teachers, the successful pathway for the person I love more than myself.”

Here's an example. Karen, a mother of two in North Carolina, wrote, “When I started focusing on the actual strengths and real vulnerabilities of my two children—their core personalities, their genetics, their real abilities, strengths and weaknesses, warts and all—I discovered a deep sense of peace in my family and myself. My husband and I even changed my son's school. This had to be done. We developed rituals and rela-

tionships that make it possible to really love our kids. These wisdom-of-practice strategies, as you call them, really work.”

Allan, a father of four in San Jose, wrote, “The key for me was understanding who my daughters were. I discovered your nature-based theory when I started coaching girls’ soccer. My first three kids were boys, and I understood how to help them. With my daughter, there’s a whole other world. When I saw who she and these other young girls are from the ‘inside out,’ I started knowing how to encourage them and help them succeed. It’s a real good feeling, I can tell you.”

As you develop your essential parenting blueprint, don’t be surprised if you have times when you feel reluctant to step away from social trends parenting. There is a lot of pressure in this society to be a social trends parent! We all can feel afraid sometimes that our children will not succeed in school, relationships, future work, and life. I hope you’ll stick with this book. As its research will show you, *when we pay attention to the nature of children, the children succeed!*

The Gurian Institute has trained tens of thousands of parents, teachers, and other caregivers in nature-based theory and its wisdom-of-practice strategies. Kids do better in school, act out less at home, and feel better when we nurture their nature rather than try to superimpose trendy expectations on them. Many parents’ stories of success and innovation appear as Wisdom of Practice sections between the remaining chapters of this book. My team and I want to extend our gratitude to the parents and caregivers who have sent their stories to us so that we can show you the revolutionary steps others are taking toward real child-rearing success.

## Getting Started

Let’s move forward now into the positive, hopeful, and practical work of this book. Each chapter will provide you with essential steps you can take immediately to incorporate nature-based theory into your present parenting work. As you use this book in its entirety, I hope you will find wisdom and practice that inspires you to base your family’s life in loving

attention toward the sometimes hidden and always beautiful assets of your child whether he or she is newborn, school-age, or adolescent.

Let us now begin in Chapter Two by looking through both a loving and a scientific lens into exactly who your child is, from the inside out—this amazing asset, your child, whom you as a parent have only borrowed for the few years of childhood and adolescence from the natural and social world in which he or she will ultimately flourish.



## Wisdom of Practice

AS FAR BACK AS I CAN REMEMBER, MY SON, DAN, HAS HAD A PASSION for cars. As a toddler he went from playing with small cars to fire trucks and then to construction trucks. When he was four we would take him to the local fire station and sit and look at the different trucks, where he would entertain the firemen with all his knowledge of the equipment. In the summer, we would take him to the local fair, and he would check out the farm equipment and impress us all with his knowledge of what the machinery was called and how it was used. Every time we traveled in our car, he would find construction trucks working and identify them as well.

As Dan continued to grow, so did his passion and love of cars. Lucky for Dan, both his father and I enjoy seeing his eyes light up when he follows his passion. Many nights at the dinner table we have discussed carburetors, new models, car production. As the years went by, we helped Dan look at a career in engineering. He saw that this career would mean he had to get good grades. This helped him stay motivated in school.

One year for Christmas I purchased a car designer art kit made by a company called Career Builders. It was the best gift he received that year. He spent several hours that day drawing different designs of cars. It was amazing to see, for a child who doesn't like to sit still. Years later I found another car drawing book that came with special stencils that you can use to draft and design your own car. It is still his favorite pastime to

draw and design cars. Dan now wants to study aerodynamics and solar energy. He talks about developing alternate fuel sources to reduce our dependence on oil and help the environment.

Dan has taught me many things, but maybe one of the biggest is that if I just focus on what he wants to focus on, he'll show me what he needs in order to succeed.