



REDEFINING PARENTING

**WHAT I THINK
I THOUGHT
I KNOW**

LLOYD RIPLEY-EVANS

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BY LLOYD RIPLEY-EVANS

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PROLOGUE

The following ebook is directly based on my **What I Think I Thought I Know Parent Talk**, and offers practical considerations as well as simple practical activities to help encourage reflection as well as discussion. I encourage you to share and discuss your thoughts and reflections with your parenting partner / team in an attempt to create as much alignment as possible.

If you have not attended the talk, and are interesting in attending, or are interested in hosting a talk, please [get in touch by clicking here.](#)

1. INTRODUCTION

Being a parent is hard work. You are always on the clock and have the most important job in the world; laying the foundations for your children that they continually build upon for the rest of their lives (no big deal).

The scary reality is that for most of us, the only training and experience that we are equipped with to do this job is from our own childhood experiences. To add to the challenge, there is no single set of rules, guidelines or directions that will apply to all families, and more importantly, to each individual child. So we can read all the books in the world, attend all the workshops, courses and webinars available, and still not really have a clue what to do.

The truth is that there is a lot of information out there for parents, and many informative talks and workshops, but there seems to be very little that actually focuses on the parents themselves. The bulk of information, training and talks for parents seems to focus more on specific issues, such as drinking and drugs, relationships and sex, school-related issues and developmental-related challenges and so on. This information, though potentially very helpful, rather focuses on informing parents about certain topics, and what actions could be taken to try to intervene or support children. What seems to be significantly lacking is information that speaks directly to parenting, and those who are doing it.

I feel very passionately about supporting and equipping parents with the insights, tools and understandings to be the best parents they can be. As such, I am very purposeful in my 'person-behind-the-parent' approach where I strive to put the spotlight on the individuals within the parenting roles, as well as the actual roles of parenting. To begin this process, a good, broad departure point is to begin exploring three questions that that dive straight to the foundations of parenting:

*** What is parenting?**

*(Having children vs Raising children)

*** What is the purpose of parenting?**

*(The long game)

*** What roles does a parent fulfil?**

*(The many hats of parenting)

2. WHAT IS PARENTING?

There is often a skewed assumption that having children is the same as, or at least a lot like, raising children. In fact, these are two very different aspects of parenting and can be considered along the same lines as nature vs nurture. Nature refers to the biological processes that take place, while nurture on the other hand refers to the interaction, communication and the relationship that exist between two individuals and the consequences thereof. Having children in a biological (or even a legal) sense does not necessarily mean that one is being a parent, and this highlights the contrast between what we say (calling ourselves parents) vs what we do (how we behave as parents).

So, what is parenting then? Well, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2022) parenting is defined as:

1. *the raising of a child by its parents*
2. *the act or process of becoming a parent*
3. *the taking care of someone in the manner of a parent*

And similarly, the essential meaning of “parent” is:

1. a person who is a father or mother : a person who has a child
2. an animal or plant that produces a young animal or plant
3. something out of which another thing has developed

I think it's fair to say that these definitions are not very helpful to our attempt to clarify what parenting is actually about as we do not gain any insight into what it actually means to be a parent. The act of parenting is, at least from my perspective, the most critical job in the world as it is this interaction that begins to prepare a child for the world in which they will attempt to thrive. Yet it is probably the one job that receives the least amount of necessary and positive focus and attention regarding its importance, what it actually entails and why.

So let us begin with some ideas of what you believe parenting to be about. Have a look at the word cloud to begin your thinking process, and then take some time to write your own list of what you believe parenting is about or involves.

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“Parenting is the ongoing and conscious act of taking responsibility and accountability for my own actions in laying the unique foundations for future growth and development of my children, and equipping them with the tools, skills, knowledge and experience they require to continuously grow, develop and maintain the best versions of themselves”. (LRE 2022)

[illegible]

3. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF PARENTING?

A purpose is the reason for doing something. When we thoughtfully create a purpose, it helps to keep us focused on what we are trying to achieve. This helps to provide us with the foundations of our actions too. Now a purpose is different from defining something in that by defining something, as we did with the term 'parenting', we in a sense provide context to the term. We consider it from a broad perspective, which remains more distant from the actual 'doing' that it requires. A purpose on the other hand, helps to give more clarity to the tangible aspects of what we have defined; it helps to provide us with the relatable and understandable foundations that can, and hopefully will impact the actions and decisions that we make.

A parenting purpose is necessary to help provide us a sense of grounding, and to be the guiding light for us, especially when life does what it does best and gets busy, chaotic and messy.

A purpose does not need to be deep, comprehensive and wordy, in fact, often the simpler the better. The simpler a purpose is, the easier it will be to recall and relate to it in those challenging times. The simpler the purpose is, the easier it becomes to maintain a good sense of direction,

motivation and momentum, meaning the more effective it is, the more effective you can be.

What I love about the idea of a purpose is that it helps to create a sense of presentness, consciousness and accountability, as a purpose more often than not requires a sense of justification and reasoning by (and for) the individual. We can maybe better understand this by calling on one of the most popular words of children of all ages, from around the world..."**Why?**".

This magical three letter word, although it can often be the reason for that pulsating vein on your forehead, can also be a great means for us to gauge our own understanding, justification and rationalising of our behaviour. If we cannot simply and effectively justify our actions or decisions (and "because I said so" does not count) then we probably need to spend some time reflecting on our parental purpose.

According to the American Psychological Association, parenting practices around the world share three major goals:

- Ensuring children's health and safety,
- Preparing children for life as productive adults,
- Transmitting cultural values.

They go on to state that a high quality parent-child relationship is critical for healthy development, but we will talk about that later.

Take a moment to jot down some words, thoughts and ideas to come to mind when you consider YOUR parenting purpose. Keep it simple.

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Purpose-focused considerations:

Now that you have some ideas in mind about your parenting purpose, take a look at the three considerations below, and have a look at whether your initial thoughts take these into account. If so, great stuff. If not, how can you integrate them into your thinking?

Purpose is unique to the individual

What this means is that purpose exists because of the personal meaning that an individual associates with it. Although this can be shared to some degree (especially between two parents in the same home), each individual will relate to the purpose in their own way. As such, creating and acting on your parental purpose cannot be done in a passive way. We cannot just be told by our spouse what we are doing and why, because at some point this is likely to be a point of conflict. The uniqueness of your parental purpose requires that you actively, consciously and intentionally engage with yourself and those who parent with you, or support your parenting to help ensure alignment and understanding.

The long game

We often hear the phrase, "Parenting is not for the faint-hearted" and I am sure we can all agree with this for many reasons. For example, parenting is hard work, it is relentless, repetitive, dirty, exhausting, stressful, draining (on many many levels), and did I mention repetitive? But most importantly, it is never-ending. Once we become a parent, we are always a parent. When we begin to think about the long road ahead of us as parents (breathe, manage your anxiety, it's not that bad), we can help ourselves to maintain a sense

of perspective, that we have time, and that we need to regularly shift our focus off of the drama, incident or developmental milestone that are consuming us at that point, in order to see that moment, or that situation in context. Because we are playing the long game, we do not need to try to win every battle (if you have not released yet, your kids have far more energy and persistence than you do, so save your energy for when it really matters). When we have a greater sense of perspective, we are more empowered to make more informed decisions.

Strategic

With the idea of the long game fresh in your mind, and the greater sense of perspective that we can gain from shifting focus from the immediate situation to the future ahead, we can begin to comprehend that in order to "win the war" we may need to lose a few battles along the way. This, for the most part, will be strategic, calculated and intentional as you continue to work towards fulfilling your parenting purpose. Strategy requires foresight, understanding, purpose, motivation and the necessary skills. Strategy also requires patience, tolerance and grit, but more importantly, strategy means nothing, if we don't know what it is that we are working towards.

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Metaphorically speaking...

Considering concepts such as purpose, parenting purpose and even trying to define parenting can be quite challenging when this is considered from a concrete point of view. I find that taking a metaphorical approach to most things helps improve our understanding significantly as the metaphors help to provide a richer experience of the concepts through the visuals, emotions and thoughts that they provoke. As such, we can consider parenting from a metaphorical perspective if we consider it as being very similar to climbing a mountain with your child.

As we set out, it can be really exciting if we had been preparing for it. If we were not really prepared, or expecting to embark on a "hike" up a mountain, it can be quite stressful (among other words). But either way, we get started because we have to. The beginning can be quite challenging as climbing a mountain can be quite different to reading about climbing a mountain. Similarly, the initial sections of the climb can be very testing for us as there is a lot of climbing. There is a lot of learning that takes place. It is exhausting and stressful, but luckily every now and then we are able to appreciate the view.

As the climb continues we make our way over some pretty treacherous rocks and climbs and for most of us, we finally arrive at a section of the mountain that begins to plateau to some degree. This allows us to 'cruise' a little more than before. We have a far greater sense of what's ahead and generally this section can require a little less (physical) effort than before. Now that we are in a position that we can lift our

heads up far more, we can also begin to enjoy the view more frequently, and we can take some measures to plan and prepare for what lies ahead, should we feel so inclined. It is also at this point that we begin to carry our children less as we allow them to begin walking for themselves. We need to start slowly as this is all very new to our children, so we allow them to walk and practice, and we carry them when they are tired or may struggle through a rocky patch. We hold their hands as we support, guide and encourage them. As they continue to develop their ability to hike, they require us to help them less and less. It is important that they practice to hike alone, but we need to still be close by to help catch them if they fall. We don't always need to prevent the fall as they do need to scratch their knees a few times to learn. This can be quite a difficult period for parents when we can feel we are needed less. What is very important is that it is not that we are needed less, we are just needed differently and as such we need to adapt to the needs of our children. As we adapt and adjust to the evolving needs of our children, we are now in a position to begin to demonstrate to our children that not only can we hike up the mountain, but we can also fly. It is around this time that we teach our children that we each possess a unique set of wings that enable us to reach incredible heights. Slowly we demonstrate how we use our wings, and we then begin to teach them how to spread their wings and begin to use them. Before we know it, we are airborne with our children, which is similar to how it felt when they started hiking by themselves, we may feel quite stressed and overwhelmed. But we stay close. We guide, support and encourage them and they learn about their unique wings abilities.

It's important that we help our children learn about their wings, as that is what they fly with. If we teach them about our wings and how to fly with our wings, they may really struggle. As their confidence and abilities develop, they start flying off further and further, but we want them to want to come back to us. Our children are going to enjoy the fact that they can fly. They are going to enjoy the freedom it affords them and they are likely to experiment what's possible. They are not always going to do this right. In fact they are going to get this wrong a lot of the time. They are going to fall and they will get hurt, but that is all necessary for them to learn, and to learn through their own experiences as experiential learning is the most effective way to learn (especially for boys).

Before you know it, you and your child's are standing at the edge of a cliff, which is normally the end of matric. It is at this point that you became painfully aware of the purpose of the hike as a whole, we needed to prepare our child so that they are equipped with the awareness, experience and ability to jump and fly by themselves. Sadly there is no alternative. There is no other way off of the mountain other than jumping from the cliff. Keep in mind that for each child we have, we embark on a new and exciting adventure up a unique mountain, towards similar, but unique cliffs.

It's at this point that three possible outcomes unfold.

Scenario 1 applies if our child is not adequately prepared, and we are no longer willing to carry them beyond the cliff (because we are tired, frustrated etc), they will jump and will likely fall. Some children in this situation are able to learn very quickly and prevent themselves from hitting the ground. For the rest of the children that this scenario is applicable to, they

do fall and they hit the ground which hurts. Very often it is this experience that teaches the hard lessons that encourage them to learn to fly by themselves. Sometimes this works out, other times, not so much, and we may find ourselves in a repetitive cycle of picking them up and then dropping them again in an attempt to encourage the learning.

Scenario 2 applies to situations where, similar to scenario 1, our child is not prepared to fly by themselves but we are not ready to let go and so we carry them off the edge and fly for them. Unfortunately carrying them is exhausting and this cannot be sustained for a long time, which more often than not leads to us letting go and letting them fall. Again similar to scenarios 1 the hope or intention is to help them learn to fly. Sometimes they learn before hitting the ground, other times hard lessons are learned. There is another possibility within this scenario, and that is for the parent to not let go, and to continue to try to carry both themselves and their child, when this becomes too much, instead of letting go they continue to hold onto their child and this can lead to both of them falling to the ground. Certainly not ideal.

Scenario 3, which is the ideal scenario, involves situations where we have done what we can to help our child prepare for the jump. We have trained them, supported them and encouraged them to the point that they feel confident that they will be successful in flight. And so they jump, and they fly. We can fly alongside, but with the freedom to move away and come back, as they can too as they soar to new heights and through new experiences.

I hope that firstly you're aware that this is just a metaphor, and we don't jump off a cliff with our children, but more importantly, I hope that this imagery resonates with you and that you can relate this back to the idea of parental purpose.

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4. WHAT ARE THE ROLES OF PARENTING?

One of the greatest misperceptions about parenting is that it is a single role that we need to fulfil. I am here to tell you as simply as I can that this is not the case! Let's quickly recall the imagery that we just associated with the parental role for a moment. If you are hiking a mountain with your child, let's consider some of the roles that you would need to fulfil:

Guide

'Weather expert'

'Accommodation manager'

Chef

Supporter / Motivator

Teacher / expert

'Random question answerer'

Hydrater

Protector

First Aider

'Expectation manager'

'Disaster averter'

Washer / Cleaner

And the list can go on and on I am sure. The reality is that we should not, and can not consider parenting as a single role. Rather it is an ever-changing collection of roles. If you have not experienced this, then I am pretty sure you are doing it wrong. The reality is that we have to 'be' so many different things for our children. We are their reference point for life, the world, relationships and themselves, and as such we have to multitask on a daily basis. Let's try to create a sense of

clarity on what this actually means for us as parents on a daily basis by considering some of hats that you will wear in a day:

Alarm clock

Hairdresser

Personal assistant

Personal organizer

Nutritionist

Stylist

Agent (for bookings and requests)

Oral hygienist

Shoe shiner

Laundry service

Personal driver

Financier

Accountant

Hugger

Love reinforcer

Supporter / biggest fan

Mom / Dad

Rule enforcer

Are there more roles that you can think of that you fulfil for your children? Mark the ones above that are relevant, and write down any others that aren't included in the list above.

For the most part we see these roles as separate, as we should not for the most part. But what is important is that we create an awareness of the fact that our roles as parents are complicated and multifaceted. Some of these roles may come easily and naturally to us (great!). Some of these roles may be very challenging to us (not so great). We may have a tendency to avoid engaging in the roles that we don't feel very confident in, for example enforcing boundaries, and we try to spend more time in the roles that we enjoy or just feel more comfortable in. Sadly, as much as we have a choice how we behave, we don't really have a choice as our children require us to be all these things for them. They need us to be able to wear all the hats so that they get as much practice, insight and understanding so when they need to jump and fly, they have the skills and confidence to do this. The simple truth is that if there are hats that you are not comfortable wearing, we need to suck it up and learn to become comfortable wearing them. Your future self and future child will thank you!

The great parental distinction

I am sure that by this point you have an understanding of the uniqueness that is entwined with each parenting gig. Each parental-child dynamic is unique based on the individual components of that specific dynamic. For example, how you are as a parent with your eldest child may be slightly different to how you are with your youngest, which may be different to how you are as a parent with both of them together. The need to wear certain hats also constantly changes as our children move through their various developmental periods

(that's why we more often than not need to wear different hats with our different children).

However, with the above in mind, there are two critical roles that are persistent throughout our experience of parenting, for each and everyone of us. These two roles, though they constantly change and evolve depending on the age and maturity of our children, the ultimate focus and purpose of these roles remains unchanged. The following distinction between these two parental roles is probably one of the most important distinctions we can make as a parent, and I have repeatedly seen the positive impact that this can have on the parent-child dynamic. We need to distinguish between being a parent versus being a mom or a dad.

Being Parent

The parent role is one of the many hats that we wear within the parental role, and is one of the most important roles that we play with our children. This role is focused on laying down and reinforcing boundaries, rules and expectations while ensuring consistency and fairness with the effective implementation of consequences. This role requires little to no emotion, as emotions cloud the objectivity (emotions are mostly reserved for the next role to be discussed). This parent role requires us as parents to be clear and concise. It requires us to be firm and direct, and very importantly this role should be 'activated' only for short periods of time. We want to imagine engaging in this role similar to Frodo Baggins from The Lord of The Rings putting on the ring. The longer he wears the ring, the harder it is to remove it and the more disruptive it becomes. The purpose of this role is to provide

the practice of having, meeting and missing expectations and responsibilities for our children, because real life is not going to always be as kind to your children as you are. This is so critical to a child's development, because without having these necessary (and often difficult) experiences, they often really struggle with failure, and the general concept of cause and effect. Every action has a consequence (positive or negative), and this role helps to teach our children this through experiential learning. Very importantly, within this role we want to try to use as few words as possible (I know that might sound impossible). Do not try to teach your child a lesson (also known as lecturing) while you are in this role. Do not waste your words and your breath trying to explain and teach while you are reprimanding because let's be honest, you all know that you are going to have to repeat yourself. Speak less and do more within this role as it is more action orientated. It is far more about what you do (ie follow through with an agreed consequence) than what you say. One of the greatest challenges that exist within parent-child dynamics is a lack of follow through and consistency, particularly with regard to this role. This requires practice and constant effort from you as a parent, and it also requires us (as in a parental unit, mom and dad, or any of their parental unit formation) to be aligned and to work together and support each other.

Being Mom & Dad

The Mom and Dad role on the other hand is quite different. Being Mom or Dad is not just about being a parent, it is not just the general term given to you. No, this is a fundamental role that we fulfil as a parent from the very beginning until the very end of our parenting experience. Being Mom or Dad is

about creating, maintaining and enhancing the deep, emotional roots and connection that we have with our children. This is the fun, real, raw side of parenting. Being Mom and Dad is where we talk to and connect with our kids. It's within this role that we share and be present with them. We don't lecture, we don't over-talk, we don't try to drive home a point, we don't try to make them understand our point and we don't scold, shame or belittle. We just 'be' with them. We let them connect with us. We let them feel safe, heard and protected. We let them see that we too are human by sharing our own stories and experiences. The whole point of this critical role is to help provide your children with a safe space to be vulnerable and free from judgment, where they can better connect with themselves, and better understand themselves through the comfort, support, encouragement and unconditional love from you. Don't get me wrong, we certainly talk and share and help guide our children within this role, but the point is to help lead them to where we need them to be, not to push or drag them. Within this role we attempt to use far more "I" and "we" conversations as opposed to "you" as we try to not 'point a finger at our child' with our words. By doing so, we are more likely to let them feel safe enough to not get defensive and so the connection and conversation can continue.

Being "Parent" or "Mom/Dad" are two very different, yet vitally important roles that we need to fulfil every day. Becoming more aware of when these roles are required, and what it means when you "put the hat on" is very important. We need to develop an understanding of the characteristics we need to display, and those that we need to leave behind. We need to clarify for ourselves the purpose that each of these roles

fulfils and how these contribute to your overall parental purpose. We also need to ensure that all parents involved need to wear both of these hats, as we want to avoid the unbalanced dynamics where one parent wears the one hat and the other parent wears the other hat.

In the space below, write down what you believe the purpose of each of these roles is, and then consider the necessary characteristics required within each role. Finally, consider the characteristics that you would generally associate with yourself. This will help you to identify areas that you may need to practice and develop.

ROLE PURPOSE

“Parent”

“Mom” / “Dad”

CHARACTERISTICS REQUIRED?

“Parent”

MY Personal Characteristics:

“Mom” or “Dad”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lloyd is a psychologist, coach, facilitator, author and parent. He currently is the Senior Well-being trainer for a global employee wellness company called Plumm Health, as well as operating his private practice in Bryanston. Lloyd has a particular passion for relationships and communication, and has worked extensively with these in relation to the parent-child dynamic over the past decade.