

HELLO, CRUEL WORLD!

Research-Backed Ways to Support Kids' Development
in a Complex World

Melinda Wenner Moyer

Science journalist • author

Hello, Cruel World!

Science-Based Strategies
for Raising Terrific Kids in
Terrifying Times



Melinda Wenner Moyer

author of *How to Raise Kids Who Aren't Assholes*

I wrote this book because I was losing sleep.

I wondered about my kids: “Were they resilient enough? Was I letting them watch too much YouTube? How could I help them become critical thinkers?”

I dug into the research to discover how key skills develop and what kids need (and don’t need!) from adults to thrive in our rapidly changing world.

What I learned was surprisingly simple. Less is often more when it comes to parenting, which makes our lives easier — yet this approach goes against our natural instincts to protect, control, and fix things for our kids to manage our anxieties.

The world our kids are entering

- rapid technological change
- polarization + disinformation
- climate change
- violence + radicalization
- economic uncertainty

The reassuring discovery

Researchers from many fields offered surprisingly similar advice.

1

LISTEN

Help kids reflect + connect

2

PREPARE

Help kids learn new skills
and overcome challenges

3

COMFORT

Help kids manage hard feelings

This overlap is a feature, not a bug: the same parenting behaviors can strengthen kids' skills through multiple pathways.

Listen more than you lecture.

Be curious before you correct.
Understand before you persuade.



Photo by [Vitaly Gariev](#) on [Unsplash](#)

What is “good listening”?

ATTENTION

Give the speaker your undivided attention.

UNDERSTANDING

Show that you are trying to understand—ask follow-ups, paraphrase back.

POSITIVE INTENTION

Make it safe to express a view without immediate punishment or ridicule.

Listening ≠ agreeing

“I want to understand you, even if I have a different perspective.”

Listening builds connection and openness

Feeling heard is one of the clearest ways to feel valued.

When we really listen, we send a message before we say a word:

You matter.

Your perspective matters.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

1,001 teens ages 13–16

After seeing a parent use high-quality listening in a video, teens said they'd feel:

- **more connected** to their parent
- **better emotionally** after the conversation
- **more willing to open up** again

When kids feel heard, they feel closer to us — and more willing to listen to us, too.

Listening makes kids more open-minded and self-reflective.

ATTITUDE COMPLEXITY

Listening reduces defensiveness

People who experienced high-quality listening show less social anxiety and defensiveness, become more aware of limitations to their own views, and express less extreme opinions.

Itzchakov, Kluger & Castro, 2017 • Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 43(1):105–120 • doi:10.1177/0146167216675339

PREJUDICE + SELF-INSIGHT

Listening can open the door to change

Feeling genuinely heard can make people less defensive, more self-reflective, and more open to changing prejudiced views.

Itzchakov, Weinstein, Legate & Amar, 2020 • Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 91:104022 • doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2020.104022

If kids struggle to open up, ask questions and get curious.

“Maya is mean.”



“What did she do that felt mean?”

“My teacher hates me.”



“What happened today that made you feel that way?”

“Everyone at school has Snapchat.”



“What do you think you’d like about it?”

If they tell you something difficult and you explode, they may learn: “Don’t tell Mom or Dad next time.”

Prepare more than you protect.

Allow independence before intervening.
Let kids struggle before being rescued.



Photo by Annie Spratt on Unsplash

What makes kids better at navigating new and hard things? Practice.

The goal is not to make life miserable for kids.

The goal is to stop eliminating every manageable difficulty, and to encourage kids to do things on their own so they can learn and develop coping skills.

Healthy distress

Overwhelming stress / trauma

challenge + support + coping capacity

stress exceeds capacity to cope

“Can I help them discover that they can handle this?”

Many parents value independence — but don't allow it.

A 2023 Mott Children's Hospital Poll suggests a sizable gap between what parents endorse and what they actually allow.

Parents say they want independence:

74% of parents of 5–8-year-olds say they make it a point to have their child do things themselves.

But actual independence is much lower:

Only 47% say their 5–8-year-old regularly talks with the doctor or nurse, 24% orders at restaurants, and 20% prepares their own meal or snack.

Older kids are still tightly supervised:

84% of parents of 9–11-year-olds say children benefit from free time without adult supervision, yet only 33% let them walk or bike to a friend's house, and only 29% let them play at the park with a friend.

Worry is the biggest barrier:

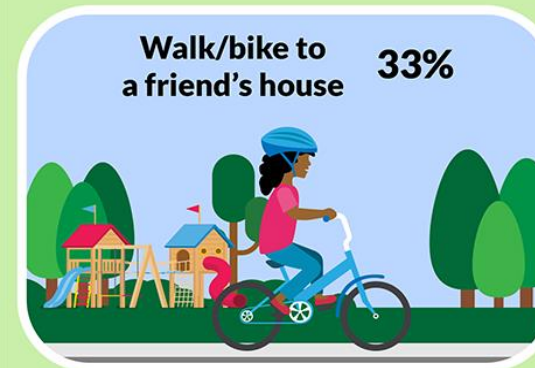
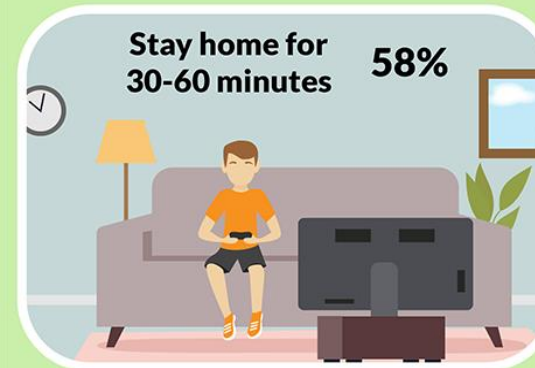
54% fear someone might scare or follow their child, although only 17% say their neighborhood is unsafe for children to be alone.

Social pressure matters too:

25% of parents say they have criticized another parent for not adequately supervising their child.

Do children have enough independence?

% of parents who let their kids age 9-11 do the following without adult supervision



Source: C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health, 2023

Stepping in too much can affect self-esteem and motivation.

PARENTAL CONTROL

“They love me, but...”

Children—especially older elementary-school students—interpret frequent parental helping and decision-making as evidence that their parents saw them as less competent. Those interpretations mattered for self-esteem.

Pomerantz & Eaton, 2000 • Merrill-Palmer Quarterly 46(1):140–167

HELICOPTER PARENTING

Overinvolvement tracks with less academic motivation

In a survey of 192 college students and 121 mothers, students who reported more helicopter parenting tended to be more motivated by outside rewards, more distressed when they fell short of perfection, and more likely to avoid academic challenges.

Schiffrin & Liss, 2017 • Journal of Child and Family Studies 26:1472–1480 • doi:10.1007/s10826-017-0658-z

Independence is a skill. Consider allowing your kids to...

PRESCHOOL

- Dress themselves and carry their own backpack
- Pour water or get a simple snack
- Ask another adult for help

ELEMENTARY

- Order at a restaurant
- Pay for something at a store
- Pack their bag; talk to a teacher or doctor

TWEENS + TEENS

- Email a teacher
- Handle a missed assignment or deadline
- Try to resolve a friend conflict before you step in

**A LOT OF THIS IS ABOUT
TOLERATING YOUR OWN ANXIETY.**

Pause before
rescuing

Scaffold rather than
solve

Notice whose discomfort
you're fixing

What will help my child become the adult I want them to be—not just make this afternoon go smoothly?

Fostering Assertiveness

Help kids see themselves as brave — and give them practice speaking up.

1 Notice brave choices

- Point out everyday moments when kids speak up or do something uncomfortable.
- Praise these actions as being brave.
- Specific praise helps kids connect courage with everyday choices.

2 Re-define bravery

- Remind them they don't have to feel brave to act bravely.
- Help them understand that being assertive is not the same thing as being rude.
- Explain that bravery can also be quiet – walking into school, asking for help.

3 Practice with role-play

- Rehearse tricky situations at home.
- Help kids practice simple phrases they can “pull from their toolbox” in the moment.
- Saying the words out loud ahead of time makes it easier to speak up later — and feel proud afterward.



Give them prompts:

“Excuse me...”

“Can you help me?”

“I don't like that. Please stop.”

Pretend play helps kids build courage and resilience, too.

When kids invent and sustain play, they practice autonomy, flexibility, and self-regulation.

What pretend play asks kids to do

- Invent rules — and renegotiate them when the game changes
- Communicate clearly so everyone understands
- Cooperate with others
- Collectively solve problems: Who goes first? What counts? What happens if someone cheats?
- Tolerate frustration, disappointment, and conflict to keep playing
- Practice self-control by staying in role, following the game structure, and adapting on the fly

What the research suggests

Children who engage more often in social pretend play show greater gains in executive function — attention, inhibition, planning, and flexible problem-solving — across the school year.

White RE, Thibodeau-Nielsen RB, Palermo F, Mikulski AM. Engagement in social pretend play predicts preschoolers' executive function gains across the school year. Early Childhood Research Quarterly. 2021;56:103–113. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2021.03.005

Why this matters for parents

Pretend play can look messy or frivolous, but it is often a disguised workshop in resilience, communication, and problem-solving.

Kids do not need an adult-run lesson to practice these skills — play does the teaching.

Comfort more than you chide.

Validate before offering solutions.
Connect before offering reassurance.



Photo by Kateryna Hliznitsova on Unsplash

Validate the feeling without minimizing or fixing.

The goal is not to make the emotion disappear. It is to help your child feel understood.

Instead of minimizing...

“You’re fine.”

“I’m sure he didn’t mean it.”

“Your grade isn’t that bad.”

Try validating...

“You really wanted the red cup.”

“I can see why that upset you.”

“You were really hoping your grade would be better.”

Validate the emotion — not necessarily the belief.

“I’m going to fail math and my life is over.”
→ “You sound really scared about this test.”

Resist the urge to fix.

You do not have to offer advice, cheer them up, or solve the problem unless they ask for help.
→ “Do you want me to listen or help you think it through?”

Challenge the behavior if needed.

You can validate feelings without allowing all actions.
→ “I see you are so upset, but it’s not OK to throw things at your sister.”

Feeling understood often helps an emotion settle on its own.

Naming and accepting feelings can help kids calm down and move forward.

AFFECT LABELING

Putting feelings into words

Using words to describe feelings calms emotional activity in the brain and increases activity in regions involved in regulation. Naming emotions may help create psychological distance from it.

Lieberman et al., 2007 • Psychological Science 18(5):421–428 • doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01916.x

EMOTION JUDGMENTS

Judging feelings as “bad” tracks with worse well-being

People differ in how strongly they judge negative emotions as inappropriate or bad. Harsher judgments of negative emotion are associated with more anxiety and depressive symptoms and lower life satisfaction.

Willroth, Young, Tamir & Mauss, 2023 • Emotion 23(7):1876–1890 • doi:10.1037/emo0001220

If kids have bad feelings towards themselves, teach self-compassion.

Self-compassion is “compassion directed inward.”

It involves noticing feelings and responding with support rather than harsh self-judgment.

What self-compassion is NOT

**Self-pity • letting yourself off the hook
• refusing responsibility**

In fact, self-compassion can make people more willing to learn, grow, and do better after mistakes.

Self-compassion is strongly linked with well-being, resilience, curiosity, and exploration.

When teens are taught self-compassion, they experience increases in emotional well-being and decreases in stress.

Bluth, Mullarkey & Lathren, 2018 • Journal of Child and Family Studies 27:3037–3047
Bluth & Eisenlohr-Moul, 2017 • Journal of Adolescence 57:108–118

The three steps of self-compassion

1 NOTICE

“This is hard. I’m feeling embarrassed.”

2 NORMALIZE

“Other people struggle and mess up, too.”

3 BE KIND

“What would I say to a friend right now?”

Crucially, parents need to practice self-compassion too! If kids hear us beating ourselves up all the time, they are more likely to do the same to themselves.

It's good for kids to see that we struggle too. And it's good for us to make mistakes.

1 NORMALIZE

**Kids learn that
struggles and
imperfection are part
of being human.**

2 REPAIR

**A sincere apology and
showing of
accountability
strengthens the
relationship.**

3 MODEL

**Kids see you recover,
learn, make amends—
and move forward
without drowning in
shame.**

Three tiny pauses that can change a lot.

1

Before you explain or educate...

ASK A QUESTION.

2

Before you step in to fix or solve...

GIVE THEM TIME AND SPACE TO TRY, EVEN IF THEY'RE FRUSTRATED.

3

Before you challenge their feelings...

ACKNOWLEDGE THEM AND ENCOURAGE SELF-COMPASSION.

We don't need to raise kids who feel good all the time.

The goal is to raise kids who have the tools to navigate inevitable changes and struggles.

Thank you!

Read more about my work at melindawennermoyer.com and check out my newsletter, **Now What**, at melindawmoyer.substack.com

Selected references used in this talk:

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