
Interview

An Interview with Dona Matthews: Imperfect Parenting: How to Build a Relationship with Your Child to Weather Any Storm

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1. *Dona- the title of your book immediately grabbed my attention- Finally someone who understand that there is no PERFECT approach to parenting. What brought the book about?*

Over decades of working with families (and being a parent myself), I noticed that a lot of parents are so hard on themselves they forget that what really matters is their relationship with their child. In their effort to provide whatever they think of as a perfect childhood—the best school, the most interesting experiences, the most fashionable clothes, even—they lose sight of the connection that’s at the heart of a child’s happiness. In the long run, it’s far better for your child if you can relax a bit and take good care of yourself so you’re in the best possible psychological place to give your child the love, patience, and guidance that they really need. I open the book by saying, “Good parenting starts with love and devotion, and if that was the only thing you knew about being a parent, you’d have a head start on the game.”

2. *Many people parent as they were parented- anything wrong with that?*

I guess it depends on how people were parented, but in most cases, it’s probably good to give our approach to parenting some thought, and learn what the current research says about brain development and other things that pertain to children’s thriving. One of the many ideas that often needs adjusting is that there is a right way to discipline a child. There really is no one right way to do anything, because every child, every parent, and every situation is unique, with unique challenges and resources. The right solution to a problem with compliance, say, is going to be different depending on many factors. As I say in *Imperfect Parenting*, “Your family’s situation is unique, as it pulls together your various and dynamic resources, experiences, attitudes, and temperaments. That means your challenges and your solutions are unique to you.”

3. *Obviously, parenting during COVID was something that NO parent was prepared for- how did most cope?*

I know families that didn’t cope very well at all and fell apart, and others that moved seamlessly into homeschooling, putting careers on hold to give their young children just what they needed. Some kids experienced tragic losses, abuse, or deprivation. For others, the pandemic was blissfully relaxed, creative, and free. Many families cobbled things together as well as they could, exhausted at the end of each day, but doing well enough to keep going. The pandemic illustrates how unique parenting circumstances and experiences are.

I include a chapter on creativity in *Imperfect Parenting*, arguing that “There’s nothing I can think of that requires more creativity than dealing with the everyday obstacles, calamities, and surprises that being a parent brings.” The pandemic was an enormous challenge to each person’s creativity, and in my opinion, the parents who did best through COVID were those who could respond creatively to the changed and changing situation.

4. *Some males can parent a boy, some females can parent a girl- what do you see as the main issues in this realm?*

I’m sure it happens, but I haven’t seen any patterns like this where a parent is better with a child of their own sex (or not). I have seen parents have a hard time reconciling themselves to a child whose character, behavior, or appearance doesn’t match their ideas of what a boy or girl should be. In those situations, I recommend focusing on loving the child you have, instead of trying to mold them into the child you wish

you'd had. That's often harder than it sounds, because we all have hopes and expectations of our kids.

5. *In terms of imperfect parenting, there probably is no 100 percent perfect way to parent, raise, rear, and nurture a child with special needs. This really puts a burden on parents. Let's take a child with autism- what do you see as the challenges, and what changes do parents have to make?*

Parenting a child with special needs of any kind is loaded with extra challenges. Parenting a child on the autism spectrum can be particularly challenging because the child is atypical both in their communication and in their social behavior. This usually adds an extra burden on the parents, where not only are they learning how to deal with their child's special needs, but they're also being judged by members of their network of social support—grandparents, other relatives, friends, neighbors, even strangers.

With its focus on taking care of yourself, *Imperfect Parenting* is particularly important for parents of kids with special needs like autism. Chapter 4 is called "Care for Yourself, and You'll Help Your Child Care for Themselves." In it, I discuss the research showing that, "By taking care of our needs for play or leisure, good nutrition, exercise, time in nature, and enough sleep, we improve our capacity to accept our imperfections, and our children's. We enhance our ability to enjoy our lives, and to be present to others in our lives, very much including the children."

6. *I know of your work with gifted. A child may have an IQ of 130 or above- what do parents have to realize?*

Just like with autism, giftedness brings its own set of challenges, but each child is unique in their developmental trajectory, so there's no set of rules that helps parents deal well with their child's exceptionality. Instead, it's back to the basics that I discuss in *Imperfect Parenting*: love your child with all your heart, and take good care of yourself, so you're in the right place to respond to your child's needs in every dimension: cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual. Mindfulness can help you retain your sense of humor and perspective, both of which help a lot in dealing with the surprises that every day brings.

You can play a role in supporting the development of your child's giftedness, remembering that intelligence is "the result of complex and interacting developmental processes in which a baby, child, or adult actively engages with ideas, environments, people, and circumstances" (from Chapter 6, "Don't Stop Learning: You Can Keep Getting Smarter"). Be present to your child, listening to them, responding to them with kindness, interest, and patience, and supporting them in exploring their curiosities.

7. *Weathering the storms. Dona, are parents faced with more storms than ever before?*

Certainly the pandemic was—and is!—a terribly big storm. There are many signs that people are more troubled than ever before, for so many reasons, including the very real storms created by climate change and environmental degradation, as well as the metaphorical storms caused by systemic racism, increasing levels of poverty, and increasing conflict in so many areas. There are increasing burdens on mental health practitioners.

All of this means it's harder to be a parent today. That's why I wrote this book. So many parents don't realize that the answers to their questions are much simpler and more old-fashioned than they'd realized. Yes, they probably have more challenges than they can cope perfectly with, but they really don't have to cope perfectly. Much better to put the focus on your relationship with your child. That's the way to give them the resources they'll need to weather the storms life will inevitably bring.

8. *A big storm- and it seems to be increasing- divorce. Is there any even imperfect way for two people to come apart and continue to parent (imperfectly) that child?*

You're so right. Divorce is a big storm in a child's life. But yes, there are ways to navigate your way through those choppy waters so your child ends up more resilient, not less. I included a section on separation and divorce in *Imperfect Parenting*, as it's definitely one of the challenges more and more parents are dealing with now. I've also written about this on my *Psychology Today* blog: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/going-beyond-intelligence/201905/should-you-stay-together>

-only-the-kids

Most children whose parents divorce are resilient, and after a year or two exhibit none of the academic, behavioral, or psychological problems that can show up in the early post-separation days. The likelihood of good outcomes for a child is increased when at least one of the parents is warm, affectionate, and open with the child, and ensures they feel safe and secure. It also helps if each of the parents respects and speaks well of the other parent, and co-operates with the other parent about matters that involve the child. There are other helpful factors that I address in *Imperfect Parenting* and elsewhere.

On balance, most children of divorce become well-adjusted adults, as long as they have at least one loving parent who remains committed to their welfare. Far from suffering inevitable damage from divorce, children can benefit from seeing their parents decide for happiness and fulfillment.

9. *Kids grow up--and what worked when the child was 6 does not work when the child is 12 or 18. Are parents just supposed to mumble and stumble their way thru life?*

The demands on a parent change dramatically as a child develops, and that's a theme that runs through *Imperfect Parenting*. Each chapter focuses on a key relationship skill for parenting, with tips on how to practice it during different stages of your child's growth and in common—often stressful—social, school, health, and family scenarios. There are recommendations in each chapter for parenting children in the early years (1 to 5), during childhood (6 to 10), adolescence (11 to 18), and young adulthood (19 to 24). What's appropriate for parenting toddlers becomes seriously problematic when the child gets a bit older, and many parents need help figuring out how and when to adjust their approach to parenting. That's one of the reasons I wrote this book—I encountered so many parents who had enjoyed parenting their young child but were stressing about their pre-teen or young adult. I think we all mumble and stumble our way through parenting—nobody does it perfectly!—but there are some good ideas out there that increase the chances of building your relationship with your child so you can weather any storm together.

10. *Who publishes the book and how can imperfect parents get a copy to carry on?*

Thank you for asking, Michael! *Imperfect Parenting* is available directly from the publisher, APA LifeTools, <https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/imperfect-parenting>. It's also available from all good bookstores and from Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Imperfect-Parenting-Build-Relationship-Weather/dp/1433837560/>