

**Publications available online from the Australian Institute of Family Studies:**

Full text articles from Family Matters no.69, 2004 are now available in PDF. To view the table of contents: [www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/fm2004/fm69.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/fm2004/fm69.html)

Of particular interest is an article by Daryl Higgins, 'Differentiating between child maltreatment experiences', [www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/fm2004/fm69/dh.pdf](http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/fm2004/fm69/dh.pdf)

'The role of environmental characteristics in changing the pathways to adolescent antisocial behaviour of high- and low-risk children', by N. Richardson, D. Smart, S. Vassallo, and A. Sanson. Presented at the 19th Biennial Meeting of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development (ISSBD), Melbourne, Vic, 2-6 July 2006: [www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/papers/2006/richards-on-issbd.pdf](http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/papers/2006/richards-on-issbd.pdf)

Dr Sarah Friedman's, presentation at the recent AIFS seminar 'Is child care a risk factor for diminished cognitive and social child outcomes?' can be downloaded from: [www.aifs.gov.au/institute/seminars/seminarpapers.html#friedman](http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/seminars/seminarpapers.html#friedman)

National Indigenous Violence and Child Abuse Intelligence Task Force:  
The Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, and the Minister for Justice and Customs, Senator Chris Ellison, have welcomed a proposal that will see the Australian Crime Commission (ACC) lead a joint agency intelligence task force to address violence and child abuse in Indigenous communities. Media release: [www.facs.gov.au/internet/Minister3.nsf/content/indigenous\\_violence\\_and\\_child\\_abuse\\_intelligence\\_14jul06.htm](http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/Minister3.nsf/content/indigenous_violence_and_child_abuse_intelligence_14jul06.htm)

SNAICC has developed a collection of online resources, information and contacts to assist those developing responses to family violence, sexual assault and child abuse and neglect in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. You can view the page at: [www.snaicc.asn.au/resource/fv\\_resources.html](http://www.snaicc.asn.au/resource/fv_resources.html)

Recent publications relating to information on child abuse have been updated on the web site of the National Child Protection Clearinghouse. You can find this information on the What's New page and at: [www.aifs.gov.au/nch/afsapubs.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/afsapubs.html)

The conference page has also been updated. Note the 'new' stickers. This information is available at: [www.aifs.gov.au/nch/nchconfs.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/nchconfs.html)

## Take Hold Of Every Moment

A friend opened his wife's underwear drawer and picked up a silk paper wrapped package. "This," he said, "isn't any ordinary package." He unwrapped the box and stared at both the silk paper and the box.

"She got this the first time we went to New York, eight or nine years ago. She has never put it on. Was saving it for a special occasion. Well, I guess this is it." He placed the gift box next to the other clothing he was taking to the funeral home. His wife had just died.

He turned to me and said "Never save something for a special occasion. Every day in your life is a special occasion." Those words changed my life.

Now I read more and clean less. I sit on the porch without worrying about anything. I spend more time with my family, and less at work. I understand that life should be a source of experience to be lived up to, not survived through. I use crystal glasses every day. I'll wear new clothes to go to the supermarket, if I feel like it.

I don't save my special perfume for special occasions, I use it whenever I want to. The words "Someday..." and "One Day..." are fading away from my dictionary. If it's worth seeing, listening to or doing, I want to see, listen to it or do it now.

I don't know what my friend's wife would have done if she knew she wouldn't be there the next morning. I think she might have called her relatives and closest friends. She might call old friends to make peace over past quarrels. I'd like to think she would go out for Chinese, her favourite food.

It's these small things that I would regret not doing, if I knew my time had come. I would regret and feel sad, because I didn't say to my brothers and sons, not times enough at least, how much I love them.

Now I try not to delay, postpone or keep anything that could bring laughter and joy into our lives. Each morning I say to myself that this could be a special day. Each day, each hour, each minute, is special. Remember that "One day" is far away... or might never come...

### CFC-SA WEBSITE

**WWW.** [www.cfc-sa.org.au](http://www.cfc-sa.org.au)

Visit our website for updates and info

email

[enquiries@cfc-sa.org.au](mailto:enquiries@cfc-sa.org.au)

# Connecting Foster Carers - SA Inc.



"Together we can make a difference"

ISSUE 6 - SPRING 2006

## Welcome

Hello and welcome to our spring newsletter. It has been an exciting time with school holidays, our conference, and our annual general meeting fast approaching and Christmas right around the corner.

We have just had our conference, the first for many years. It was a huge success with over 300 people attending. It was great to see so many carers from all over Australia. Very confident carers from South Australia presented workshops to share their valuable knowledge and skills and to help us face the growing challenges which seem to be getting harder every day. This is what makes foster carers so special: to help each other the way we do.

Degrees are fine but all the degrees in the world won't help if you haven't got compassion and dedication to make a difference in the life of a child. To get up night after night to help a child who keeps reliving the horrors of their past.

To sit with a child day in and day out at hospitals with all sorts of trauma. This is what makes you so special and you won't find these qualities in a book or a degree.

Maureen Madden  
Vice Chairperson

## A Farewell Letter from the Chairperson

"I have made something of my life, not because of the system and what it put me through as a child, but in spite of it. I wish I could take full credit, but the credit is not mine to take. The credit belongs to those who took, however briefly, the time to make a difference in my life YOU".

*Lawrence Adams (2004) 'A Tribute to Foster Carers'. Advocacy Ambassador for International Advocacy for Children.*

This letter has been a difficult one for me to write because not only have I resigned as Chairperson of Connecting Foster Carers - SA, but also as a foster carer. I have wrestled with the way in which to present my thoughts, that is, using either the more traditional, subtle tone or to say it as it comes from the heart. My personal belief is that being honest and frank is often the best way to communicate, and in doing so removes any layers of ambiguity which can misconstrue the issue at hand.

I hope foster carers take pride as I do in the establishment of Connecting Foster Carers SA as the peak representative group for foster carers, relative and kinship carers in SA. This is the result of three years of hard work through negotiation, consultation and planning. We now have a solid foundation for advancing and promoting the wellbeing of foster families. In the past 18 months our small volunteer organisation has achieved a considerable amount of success.

We have well over 300 members, and have been able to represent the voices of carers at state level forums to ensure that the valuable insights carers have are acknowledged and respected. After all, we are arguably the only group of people who KNOW what it's like to provide foster care. The policy and decision makers can only guess what it's like! Remember those first few placements you've had and the surprise about unseen and unexpected challenges they brought? That doesn't come in a book!

As carers, we can be proud that some of our recommendations have been included in the Foster Care Action Plan recently released by the Families and Communities Minister, Jay Weatherill. Recommendations in particular include reducing the financial burden on carers of child transportation through a fuel subsidy, a safe and accredited client transport system through hire car

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# Understanding Foster Carers' Motivations:

*Personal, political & historical perspectives on care provision in Australia*

and driver companies, and creating support groups to link foster carers with fosters carers. In 2005 we secured additional payments for emergency placements and assisted in the development of a checklist for initial placements of children and young people in foster carer.

As chairperson of CFC-SA I have found at times I needed to be outspoken and critical of the system to highlight the obvious flaws in bureaucratic practices which unnecessarily stand in the way of improved outcomes for both carers and foster children. Often the need to speak out has been underpinned by my experiences as a carer over seven years, together with the experiences of others. As a business owner and operator where service is the number one priority, responding quickly to rectify unsatisfactory situations is paramount whilst solutions did not get bogged down in bureaucracy for the sake of it. Children do not need bureaucracy like that! And critical shortfalls of child care and protection resources are not acceptable either. Ironically, the high standard of care expected of carers is not always replicated in the system.

In leaving CFC-SA I feel it is time to 'change the guard' and allow new blood to build upon the work of CFC to date. Much like those seizing castles in past history, carers need to chip away at the defences of a defensive system, in the hope of truly changing the culture. Lawrence Adam's tribute to Foster Carers at the start of this letter gives me hope. Foster carers are the backbone of the system, and need to be treated as partners, not as servants of the system (Adams 2004). We provide twenty four hour care for some of the most vulnerable, neglected and abused children and young people. We are not in it for promotion or power, but from the heart, in the belief that our consistency and nurturing will help these children.

As the achievements of CFC-SA are coming to fruition, it's unfortunate my personal dealings with the Department as a carer have become unsatisfactory. As an individual carer I have come to the realisation that by speaking out when representing CFC has had negative repercussions in my role as a carer. It is difficult to stay on as a carer when in my view, the government fails to support its resources. I have seven years experience as a carer - described by various social workers as a highly regarded carer while trying to make a difference to the lives of young people in care, and never regret a minute of it. I know I have made a difference, however fleeting, to the young people in my care. However the manner in which I have been treated leads me to the decision to also resign as a carer. I believe I can be just as effective as an advocate for carers and those in care, sharing my experience when needed and by maintaining an advocacy role without compromise.

My wish for CFC- SA and carers maintain integrity at all times, so that at least WE are able to sleep at night in the knowledge that we have been open and honest, but ultimately true to why we are carers and why we provide the care we do. Be true to ourselves, not succumb to the hurdles and buck passing role modelled by the bureaucracy.

I thank the members of the committee who have worked tirelessly for CFC-SA and provided strength during the difficult times. To all our members, thank you for

supporting CFC- SA and providing valuable insight, suggestions and feedback on carers issues, enabling CFC-SA to advocate on your behalf. I have no doubt that the achievements and inroads we have made over the past eighteen months will gain momentum. And remember Lawrence Adams' tribute:

'You may never get a medal or an award. You, however, will be able to know that many of your kids of today, or kids of yesteryear became something.....just because of YOU.'

Yours Sincerely,

Stephen Hodges  
Chairperson

## Some Tips for the Alternative Care System

Recently Connecting Foster Carers - SA compiled a list of feedback, thoughts and comments received from carers and some workers. We grouped this in to common themes which are represented in the following recommendations for improving the relationships and system.

\* Get back to basics and to the guiding principles of Children's Protection Act which requires, not suggests, that the best interests of the child are to be paramount.

- Remind your managers and supervisors that the best interests of the child are not always the same as the best interests of Government pride.

\*The best interests of those in care are not met by bureaucratic inefficiencies and an emerging culture which sees carers as 'threats' and 'risks' and not allies.

\*Follow through with the Premier and Minister Weatherill's commitments to being truly transparent and accountable.

\*Remember that around 25% of all SA's carers (as quoted in the press recently) face allegations of abuse every year, usually malicious or misguided. It's part of the foster care territory!! Yet many continue their commitment to those in care. Support them, don't assume the worst and discredit them.

\*It has been reported there are in excess of 1300 children and young people in care. If there were no carers (volunteering for free) the Government would have to find huge resources to return to institutional care, plus manage the hazards of the outcomes.

\*Please take on board a positive outlook about carers. We may not necessarily have university education (Although a lot of carers do), but this does not take away from our valuable grass root insights and experience. ■

### Aim of study

A principal problem in modern Australian foster care is Governments inability to recruit and retain foster carers. In this project the political, social and psychological factors contributing to these circumstances are examined in a national study of foster carers, policy-makers and other principal stakeholders. This project will elucidate the factors that motivate people to become carers, their conceptualisation of the parenting role, and the implications of these understandings for future foster carer policy developments; in particular, the introduction of professionalised care and new payment systems and structures. Initial foster group interviews will be held in South Australia with foster carers (both current and previous), policy makers and researchers, to ascertain the everyday understandings of motivation that circulate in regards to foster care provision.

### Background

The foster care system in Australia differs in many ways from that in the United States and United Kingdom, and as such warrants research that focuses on the specifics of foster care in Australia. Although there are many commonalities (e.g., high rates of foster care drift, increasing outsourcing of services and reduced residential care options), many of the issues facing the foster care system in Australia are the result of histories of care provision that are specific to Australia. Foster care provision in Australia differs from that in the United States in that the latter focuses primarily upon the policy of *permanency planning*, whereas Australia places a greater emphasis on *family preservation* (Ainsworth, 1997). Permanency planning refers to the desire to find stability (either via adoption, foster care or birth families), whereas family preservation makes reunification the primary object with less attention given to the development of adoption plans (Cashmore, 2001). As a result, the foster care system in Australia continues to be heavily reliant on long-term foster care arrangements. Over 85% of all placements in Australia are in family foster care with even higher figures in States such as South Australia and Western Australia.

This focus in Australia on long-term foster placements (as opposed to adoption or residential care) would not be problematic if foster carers were provided with the necessary support, remuneration and training to meet the needs of a wide range of children. However, as in the United States and the United Kingdom, the process of outsourcing services to private agencies has often led to a separation of statutory authorities and agencies providing care services (Barber, 2001). Although the State still retains guardianship of children in care, foster carers must shoulder the majority of the burden of providing care. Since most private agencies are funded via competitive tenders and forced to adhere to very strict budgets, there is often little funding available to provide intensive training and support for foster carers. Foster carers are resigned to the role of "hired helpers" in which they must petition to Government for extra financial support and defer to case-workers (who rarely see the children) whenever important life decisions have to be made.

Although similar difficulties exist in the United States, many agencies are specifically funded to provide a wider range of specialised services that include substantial ongoing support and training. Such support can take the form of weekly consultations, support groups, opportunities for professional development and training, respite care, and 24-hour response teams who can assist in the event of emergencies or crises in the placements (Meadowcroft & Grealish, 1990). Similarly, in the United Kingdom there have been active attempts to elevate the status of foster carers by introducing a tiered payment system based on their level of training and expertise. In some programs, such as the Community Alternatives Protection Scheme in Scotland, carers are required to complete a series of counseling and behavioural management courses that prepare them for their role in providing care for behaviourally challenging young people.

Despite the difficulties associated with being a foster carer in Australia, many people continue to become and remain carers. The question arises, why certain people might be willing to provide care whereas others might not. Previous research on foster carer motivation has often focused on examining the relationship between reported motivation(s), the level of care provided, and how long the carers have remained in the system. Research by Dando and Minty (1987, p. 383) on the foster care system in England identified three principal motivational factors closely related to successful foster parenting; namely, "a desire to parent a child, when it was impossible to conceive a child of one's own... an identification with deprived children as a result of unhappy experiences in childhood... [and the] claim to act from motives of social concern and altruism". Research in the United States and Australia has found that people who provide foster care are motivated by similar goals.

In the United States, research by Gilles-Arnold, Crase, Stockdale and Shelley (1998) found that foster carers (who did not have the intended goal of adopting) were motivated by altruism, childlessness, and identification with abused children, in addition to financial motivations. Thus as Gilles-Arnold et al. (1998) suggest, foster carers not seeking to adopt may "look more at the financial gain than do [prospective adoptive foster carers] because they are not looking to gain legal guardianship and financial responsibility over a child" (p. 726). This may also be explained by the more adequate provision of reimbursement to foster carers in the United States. In Australia, Delfabbro, Taplin and Bentham (2002) found that foster carers were most likely to endorse motivations such as altruism, enhancing the social life of the home, to provide companionship and to have children where it was otherwise not possible. Very few of the participants in their study reported financial considerations to be a motivation, which would concur with the fact that foster carers in Australia receive very little financial support (Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999; McHugh, 2003). However, as and Denby et al. (2003) found, payments are likely to be important insofar that they make it possible for carers to provide care even if money is not the primary motivation.

**For full article, please see our website** ■

[www.cfc-sa.org.au](http://www.cfc-sa.org.au)

## The What & How, and the How Not

A summarised collection of views from carers, workers and other professionals that we have received at CFC over time, we are sure you all can relate to some of these; Professional behaviour towards foster carers at its worst:

- A brutal pecking order
- Entrenched practices of "doing to" rather than "doing with"
- Professional arrogance that they know the child better than the carer
- Power and responsibility in inverse relationship
- Deep suspicion of the motives for altruistic behaviour
- Pervasive dynamics of blame
- Cycles of conflict where the default mode is that the professionals decide what is truth and what is unfounded perception
- Bullying and intimidation
- Punishment of those who speak out and challenge.

Good social workers:

- Are humbled by the commitment of carers (who do what they are not prepared to do)
- Understand that effective care of a child means it is their job to foster a relationship of trust with both the child and the carer
- Are respectful and courteous down to the smallest detail.

Alternative care relationships are too precious and too fragile to withstand abuse of power. The care of a child needs to be based on nurturance and love, the support to the carer on understanding and respect. That social workers who are consistently respectful towards carers coexist with social workers who are consistently disrespectful suggests that the issue is not one of resource pressure (although that is undeniably a stressor) but one of attitude.

## Invitation

Researchers at the University of Adelaide are seeking foster carers who are willing to share their experiences of care provision. As foster carers, you are invited to talk either in small groups or individually about why you chose to become a foster carer and why you continue to be one. Your involvement in the project will be confidential and experiences shared as part of the project will remain anonymous in any reports written. Participation in the research is considered entirely separate from Anglicare or other foster care service providers, and as such case-workers will not be aware of your participation. If you might be interested in having a casual chat about your experiences, or just want some more information, please contact the researchers either via email: [fostercareproject@psychology.adelaide.edu.au](mailto:fostercareproject@psychology.adelaide.edu.au) or via phone: 8293 6453. ■

## The Voice from the Southeast

Hello from the cold, wet and still a little green area of the state[sorry didn't mean to rub that in] We are all keeping busy, how could we not, as carers to our children, many of whom have very challenging and time consuming behaviour. I hope you are all taking a little time out for yourself. Because if you don't look after yourself and you fall in a hole then who will be there to look after the kids. So do something for yourself[ I like the hairdresser] As you would all know, we have just had the Annual Foster Carers Conference in Adelaide, which many of you may have attended. It was an interesting week-end to say the least. At the conference I was asked to give a snapshot

of what we do in the South East. So I have, in the interest of my writing power and brain skills, cheated a little and decided to print here what I said there, in a very shortened version. So for those of you who have heard it before you can skip this section. The aim and purpose of our support group was to be multifunctional. We hope to encourage, support, strengthen and increase the knowledge of our carers to be better equipped to raise the children that are placed in our care. We also hope to improve relationships between carers and all the associated agencies that work with the children. We have managed to succeed with these aims by facilitating support groups with training attached. I am always on the lookout for inspirational and educational training. My connection with Connecting Foster Carers as a board

member has been invaluable as I am able to find out about services and training that is occurring in the metro area and then work out ways of taking that to the country regions, where we so often miss out. The people who work at Families S.A and Anglican Community Care, CAMHS and even Regional Health have been very supportive and encouraging. Not only have we had training this year in specific areas such as Foetal Alcohol and Attachment, but we have also had a variety of interesting speakers, such as Centrelink,[W2W issues], Mr Ted Mulligan Q.C, Angela Andary from the Office of the Guardian and our own manager, Alan March from Families S.A who came and told us a little about himself. And as it turned out, he is not the big scary man who sits in the back office making bad decisions about people and kids that he has never met.

We have found, down here, that if you take a little time to get to know the people you are working with, you will be better able to understand them and the decisions that they sometimes have to make. Note, I didn't say always agree. I am also sure that this can happen all over the state. So give it a go, you start the ball rolling and see where it stops, if it does. [Some wise man once said that to me.] Amanda Waye South East rep board member. ■

## Russian Roulette

*Foster Parents Forced into Russian Roulette - by Caroline Overington, 26 September 2006*

ON an otherwise normal Thursday night last May, an Adelaide social worker marched into Kay Hackett's home, put a foster baby down on the floor, and started unpacking the baby's things.

"The baby was in a capsule. I was just looking down at him, thinking, 'What an honour to care for you', when I heard her say: 'Here are the nappies. Here's the formula, and here's the morphine'," Ms Hackett said. "I just went into panic mode. I thought, *morphine?* Is she kidding? She handed me this bottle of clear liquid, with these syringes, and she said, 'You'll have to administer this to the baby every four hours'."

Ms Hackett, who has been a foster mum for six years and has three adult children and five grandchildren of her own, says her eyes "just bugged out of my head".

"I said, 'This baby, this four-week-old baby, is addicted to drugs? And I'm going to administer the morphine? I don't have any training for this'." Ms Hackett said Families SA - the state government department that oversees foster placements in South Australia - did not warn her the baby was drug-addicted, or train her in how to administer the morphine.

For six weeks in May and June, she lived in fear of overdosing the baby, especially as she became so sleep-deprived "from this little baby just screaming and screaming and screaming. His legs would quiver and he'd shake and throw up his milk".

"I said to the case worker, 'What if I make a mistake? What if I give him too much?' And she said: 'Well, at least he'll sleep through the night'." Ms Hackett's case comes to light on the eve of the National Foster Care Conference to be held in Adelaide this weekend. She is one of thousands of foster parents who claim the system is in crisis.

The national president of the Foster Care Association, Ken Abery, said: "We had 14,000 foster carers five years ago, and now we've only got 9000. The numbers are just dropping away and it's because foster carers feel like they are treated with disrespect."

Nina Weston, who fostered children for more than 30 years and now runs a group called Children in Crisis, said: "It's Russian roulette. Children are just being shuttled from one home to the next. "Nobody listens to the foster parents. They might care for a foster child for three or four years, and then the social workers turn up and say, 'This child is going back to some family member'. Mostly it doesn't work, so off the child goes, to a different set of foster parents. There's no way anybody could say the system is working properly. They're not supposed to know the baby's history. They are just treated terribly."

Ms Hackett said she had initially agreed to provide foster care for the baby's three-year-old brother. "Then the social workers rang and said: 'Can you take the baby, too?' And I

<http://theaustralian.news.com.au> report

believe children should stay together so I said yes, of course. And when she said: 'Here's the morphine', I just blurted out: 'Morphine?' I was horrified."

Ms Hackett said she was told to extract a small amount of liquid morphine from the bottle, using a syringe and squirt the drug into the baby's mouth.

After three days of near-constant screaming, Ms Hackett said she called the baby's paediatrician, who had told her, "Don't worry, mothers do this all the time".

"So obviously it's a very common thing - drugged mothers are sent home with babies and morphine." The baby went "cold turkey" after six weeks, Ms Hackett said. "He went through terrible withdrawal. He was shaking, quivering, screaming.

"I couldn't walk around, holding him all day. I had to do the cooking and the housework, so I had to put him down, and sometimes I just had to let him scream." She said she asked department staff: "If I mess up and make a mistake, will you stand by me? Or is the onus on me? And they said, 'Whatever happens, happens'."

Ms Hackett said she ultimately gave up caring for the baby, which is now believed to be back with his mother and three-year-old brother. "Afterwards, I said to my family: 'No, that's it, I won't do this again'. But somebody has to do it, and I feel I can pour love into these children. The big thing for me is, I want these children out of the system. The baby needed to be in a hospital, but I was told, 'Don't worry, it's all normal'." ■

## CFC- SA AGM

Date ; 4th Dec 2006

Place ; St.Pauls, Lutheran School hall, 44 Audrey street, Blair Athol.

RSVP by 25th Nov, to our website, or call us.

Expressions of interest for committee memberships are to be in writing or by email by the 15th November 2006.

[www.cfc-sa.org.au](http://www.cfc-sa.org.au)

# How to be the “Ultimate” Parent

by Dr. Noel Swanson

We all know what a bad parent looks like: intolerant, constantly critical, more interested in their own affairs (in both senses of the word) than in the needs of their children. But what does it take to be a good parent? What does it take to give your children the very best start to life that you possibly can?

In the 1960's John Bowlby did a lot of work looking into the effects of parenting on children. In those days he coined the term "good-enough parenting". His thesis was that provided you avoided the sins of "bad" parenting, you were doing okay, and your children, with their own natural resilience, would also do okay.

So is that all there is to it? Or are there things that you, as a parent, can do to be more than just a "good enough" parent. Can you, indeed, be a "super parent", even the "ultimate" parent? Or is that just a myth of the feminist movement?

Well, let's get one thing straight once and for all: No one is perfect. Try as you might, you will never be a "perfect" parent. You will never get it right every moment of every day for every year of your children's growing lives. Nor do you need to. In that sense, Bowlby's concept of "good enough" is very true. You do not need to be perfect. Your kids WILL survive. "Good enough" is good enough.

But, I suspect that you probably want more for your kids than just average. I strongly believe that there are things you can do, and attitudes you can adopt, that will give your children the very best start to life they could possibly have. And, at the same time, will actually make life easier and more fulfilling for yourself too. It is not a long list, but if you can manage the following, then I believe you have every right to call yourself the "ultimate" parent:

1) Recognize you are human. You cannot do everything, you cannot be everywhere, you cannot know everything. You will make mistakes. You also have your own issues, problems and hang-ups from your own past. That is all okay. The key to this game is not being perfect, but having the right attitude.

What is the right attitude? Being humble. Recognising that you have much to learn (we all do) and being willing to be teachable and to learn from your mistakes. A sign of genuine maturity is being able to look back at your past, recognize the mistakes you made, and say "this is what I have

learnt about myself, and what I need to work on changing in myself".

But there is a flip side to this. Constantly putting yourself down with an "I'm no good" attitude is just as bad as the "I have nothing to learn" attitude. Forgive yourself for your mistakes. Celebrate your successes. Look back to the past only long enough to learn from it, then set your sights forward, and press on in the directions YOU want to go. If you have any serious issues from the past, be brave enough to seek help and get over them.

2) Recognize you are playing a percentage game. We have all heard of them: the kids from the most abusive, deprived backgrounds who somehow manage to make huge successes of themselves. And the kids from the very best of families (as demonstrated by their siblings) who somehow go off the rails into drugs and crime.

The reality is that you, the parent, are only one factor in your children's upbringing. They are also subject to influence from the friends, other relatives, teachers, shop keepers, TV, magazines and, of course, their own genetic makeup.

You cannot control all the variables. You might be the very best, the ultimate parent, and yet your kids turn out as failures. You might be the very worst, alcoholic and abusive parent, and yet your kids do fine. Nothing in life is guaranteed.

So you play the percentages. You know that if you beat your kids, they are more likely to turn out bad than good. So, on average, beating your kids is probably not a good idea. Using fair and consistent discipline probably produces better odds for a successful outcome - so do that instead.

You success as a parent is NOT determined by how well your children turn out. It IS determined by whether you did all you reasonably could to do the right things and make the right decisions for them, WITH THE KNOWLEDGE YOU HAD AT THE TIME. Maybe those decisions turn out to be the wrong ones. So be it. That does not mean you failed as a parent. But, if you were too lazy to get the facts, if you just took the easiest decision without thinking about the impact on your children, then, I believe, you have failed - even if it turns out that the decision was the right one.

3) Recognize your children are not the only things in your life. In this day and age we seem to be obsessed

with the idea that the interests of the children come first, before anything else. I strongly disagree with that concept. Yes, we must consider the best interests of the child, but there are other things to consider too.

It may be, for instance, that taking a new job in a different city might be the best thing for your family - even if it means taking your child away from his school and friends.

By putting children first in everything we run the danger of creating a selfish, "me first" generation where they grow up believing that the world owes them a living. Sometimes children have to take second place - and that in itself is an important lesson about life. Yes, before making any decision consider its impact on the children. But, in the end, make up your own mind as to what would be best for the family as a whole.

4) Look to the long term. Raising children is a long drawn-out process. Have your long-term goals in mind. How do you want them to turn out as adults? What qualities and skills do they need to learn? What experiences do they need, along the way, to learn those skills and character traits?

Many times as parents we are faced with the choice of taking an easy, short-term quick fix, or a harder approach that will bear much more fruit in the long term. The TV is such a classic example of this. How easy is it, when the kids are playing up, to just switch on the TV as the electronic babysitter? A quick fix for the immediate hassle or rowdy kids. But how much better, in the long run, to spend a bit of time teaching them how to build a model, or sew a soft toy, or put together a jigsaw?

Call me a Luddite, if you will, but if you really want to be the ultimate parent I believe the very best thing you could do would be to sell the TV! Go out to the cinema as a family, instead. Or go around to your friends or relatives to watch a movie together as an "event". But don't just have the TV on for hours every day.

Why? Because of the old saying "garbage in, garbage out". Is the stuff on TV really what you want your kids to be absorbing and learning? Do you really want them to depend on passive entertainment? Is it not better that they learn how to entertain themselves?

4) Look for the positives. Like you, your children will

make mistakes. Forgive them. Correct them gently and move on. Always be looking for what they did right, not what they did wrong. Children crave their parents' attention. Pay attention to what they do wrong, and they will do more of it. Pay attention to what they do right, and they will be eager to please your more. Besides, it is just so much more fun to be in reward mode than punishment mode.

Finding yourself stuck in punishment mode? Then go back to Key 1, recognize you need to change something, and have the humility to go and get a good book, or seek help, so that you can find the way out.

5) Stick to your guns. Believe in yourself. If you are doing all the above, then you are well on the right track. There will be times when you make decisions and you get challenged on them, either by your children, or by others (such as interfering relatives). Unless there genuinely are new facts that you weren't aware of before, don't be swayed. And don't be afraid to say no - to your children and your relatives - if that is the right thing to say. Sure, your decision may turn out to be a bad one. That happens. Hindsight is 20-20. But far better to stick to your decision, than to be a plastic bag blowing about in the breeze. You children are watching you; watching how you deal with life, how you make decisions, how you cope with adversity, how you believe in yourself and stand up for yourself and your family. Be a good example for them. ■

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*Of course, this article barely touches the subject. If you are serious about giving your children the very best start to life, you really need to get hold of my book: [www.good-child-guide.com/st.php](http://www.good-child-guide.com/st.php) Hope you have enjoyed this issue of the Ultimate Parent - and don't forget to go and make time for some fun this week.*