

Q&A with Dr. Vanessa Lapointe, author of *Discipline Without Damage: How to Get Your Kids to Behave Without Messing Them Up*

Q. Congratulations on your first book! It's so well done. Have you always wanted to write a book?

A. Thank you! It's funny, when I was a young girl, I told my mom that I was going to write a book, but I was pretty convinced I was going to write Nancy Drew mysteries. [laughs]

Professionally, when I started offering workshops and speaking on a lecture circuit, I would constantly be asked at the end of each engagement, "So, do you have a book?" I began to see how important a book would be a vehicle for getting across my unique perspective to a broader cross-section of people.

This book articulates my very firm beliefs about the best waposible environment for healthy child development. People need this information. Working with children and parents and sharing what I know to be true is something that I just have to do while I'm on this planet.

Q. Let's start with the title: Discipline Without Damage: How to Get Your Kids to Behave Without Messing Them Up. That is pretty provocative. You don't just say there's a better way. You imply that what we're doing now is actually messing kids up. While parents are sincerely eager to learn how to discipline better, some may wonder: are we really messing our kids up?

A. A child's most profound need in terms of healthy development—not just emotionally but generally—is their connection with their big people. So why would we ever use that connection as a ploy for getting a child to come on side with us?

When we put a child in timeout, for example, the reason that we see such a quick reaction from them, at least initially, is that they're desperate to get back into the same positive relational space that they would have been in with you before the transgression occurred. The bottom line is, you've now put your relationship—their most essential ingredient for healthy development—on the line, just because you want them to behave well.

So, does that ruin every child? Well, it's not going to ruin every single child. But it does test the relationship and the child's resilience. And it does make a child more vulnerable. When we know better and have better ways, we just have to do better.

Q. You make it clear that we know better because of science. But instead of simply claiming the science and then launching into its real-world applications, you explain neurological development in a really accessible but thorough way. Why did you decide to unpack the science for readers instead of just gloss over it?

A. For a couple of reasons. The first is that, as soon as you say the word “attachment,” people immediately think of the stereotype that word has come to represent in pop culture—airy fairy, hippie dippy, hairy armpits, and organic food. While it’s fine to be a hippie and have hairy armpits, the bottom line is that is not what this is about.

This approach is about science. We are talking about how brains grow and what neurons need in order to line up and wire up in the best possible ways for promoting healthy development. So, I included an explanation of the science to dispel a lot of the misleading cultural baggage carried by the idea of attachment.

The second reason is that if people can understand the science of development, then why discipline needs to play out the way I’m suggesting becomes clear. And then, *how* we do it actually becomes a lot more intuitive. I explain how to discipline through connection with a mantra: “See It, Feel It, Be It.” Adults must see what the child needs, feel empathy and compassion for whatever it is the child is experiencing, and then be the answer.

I firmly believe that you cannot find your way through feeling the world for a child and as a result of feeling the world for them, be moved on their behalf to adjust how you’re managing things for them, without understanding what’s happening in their brain. When adults do understand child development, we get to the See It, Feel It, Be it solution much more holistically, and the adult feels much more empowered.

Q. Since you brought up See It, Feel It, Be It, let’s jump into some of the book’s other key concepts. You say that a child must see their parent or caregiver make decisions with confidence and swagger, which reinforces the child’s feeling that the adult can take care of the them, no matter what. You call this “hulking up.” The concept of “hulking up” could be confusing to some readers. As parents, aren’t we already tasked with being their authority figures?

A. First of all, there is a difference between power that is based on someone’s role in the world of a child and power that is based on someone’s relationship with the child.

When parents and caregivers believe that their role alone automatically grants them power over the child, they are misunderstanding how the systems within a child’s growing brain actually work.

As the parent, your true source of power for growing up a child is your relationship with them. When children have positive, very deep, very trusting relationships with their big people, they are intent upon pleasing those big people. That doesn’t mean that they’re not going to mess that up along the way—of course kids are going to break rules and step outside the lines. But at their core, they still desire to please you.

Leading a child who wants to please you is so much simpler than attempting to lead a child with whom you are constantly jockeying for position, trying to out-maneuver, out-smart, and out-explain. So when we define power, we have to be careful to differentiate between the power that parents think they have because they're parents, versus the power they're capable of having when they're in a deep, trusting, loving, nurturing relationship with their child.

So that's one piece of it. The other piece is that power without kindness and nurturing compassion alongside of it is not going to get you very far. I chose the Hulk as a representative figure because I think everybody thinks of the Hulk as being very big and someone you would never mess with. But let's add a descriptor to the Hulk: when you are "hulking up," you are tapping into your nurturing hulk. It's finding a way to step in front of everything, be large and in charge, but also be kind, caring, and compassionate.

Probably the biggest challenge that parents and other big people have in the present time as far as figuring out this journey with their kids is that they've gotten freaked out. The big people are floundering. They don't understand what's going on, or why this child is so difficult, or so undone, or just so messed up. And kids can sense that. The kids will look around and say, "Oh, well, if you're not in charge, then I guess I have to be."

And then we're in for a ride.

Q. Right. You explain that a child will "hulk up" if she is not experiencing the dependent relationship she needs with her big person—she will fill the void. But how do we know when a child is hulking up as opposed to just displaying their natural "in-charge" temperament?

A. We all have our different personalities, and those are lovely. We would never want to chase that out of a child. The difference between a child whose temperament predisposes them to leading and a child who's been forced into that situation—either by challenging circumstances or big people who are not fulfilling that role—is the child who has been forced will be stuck there.

The child with the leadership temperament will be able to slip back into a place of being vulnerable with their big people. They will bring their big people their worries, concerns, and tears. The child who is "hulking up" will not feel like they can be vulnerable. Instead of being able to slip back into vulnerability and safety with their big people, the "hulking up" child is stuck in a place of driving, driving, driving at something. When they cry, it's angry, hot tears. It does feel very different.

It's one thing to have an alpha personality, but an entirely different thing to be forced into one and then trapped in it in order to survive.

Q. So much of what you discuss in the book regarding parents and caregivers properly “hulking up” is about being in the right the headspace. But as you note, we are all so tired, so stressed, and so stretched. What do you say to parents who are floundering—and their kids are noticing?

A. First, I often tell parents to just hold on, because it can feel like a bumpy ride, especially at the beginning. But as soon as we get our footing and start to cover some ground, there will be relief for them.

If you are feeling exhausted and flooded and just overwhelmed, connecting to your true source of power, which is your child, is going to turn this all around. It's going to make things a lot easier for you in the long run. You will need to find some space in order to be contemplative and thoughtful about this. But know that not only will the reward be some reprieve for you, but also a gift to your child, because you will be growing them up in the best possible way.

If parents are flailing and children are noticing, they're all just going to get sucked deeper and deeper into the vortex. At some point, we've got to just reach in there and pull them out.

How do you find those reserves of energy when you are simply running on empty? The thing is, there is no escaping that you are going to have to dig deep to get this done – but, if you don't, it's only going to make what already feels challenging even *more* difficult and overwhelming. With a little push of consciousness around this, you are much more likely to find yourself feeling some reprieve. To have what it takes to dig deep, I always tell parents to remember that your kids are counting on you to be good enough. It's your job to take some time to make that happen. Self-care for all of us big people is simply not an option. You just have to make it happen. You know when you are on an airplane and the flight attendant takes you through the safety demonstration about the oxygen masks? They always say that if you are traveling with children or dependents you should put your own mask on first before helping those traveling with you. Why? Because you are no good to anybody if you are on the ground gasping for air! So go and get your masks on! Take a walk, do some yoga, find a space to meditate every day, enroll in an exercise program, eat well, and find time to do the things you enjoy. You might think you don't have time to do this for an hour every day but ask yourself, do you have time to flail and flounder for 24 hours a day? Self-care is essential for the busy, stressed out parent to be the best they can be for their child.

Q. Will you define the vortex—specifically, the discipline vortex?

A. The discipline vortex is a cycle of behavior in which neither the child or adult is getting what they want or need. The child acts in a way that is deemed inappropriate, and the adult responds with consequences that involve physical or emotional distance or isolation—like a timeout. The child's brain will experience a surge of stress-related hormones, which prompts more acting out, because children communicate needs through behavior. Then, presumably, the adult will respond with more separation, and round and round we go.

When their essential need for connection is being threatened, a child becomes desperate. And an adult's responses rooted in disconnection only fuel the desperation. So it becomes a cycle—the discipline vortex.

Q. But because of the way society views discipline, the way to break out of this cycle can be counterintuitive and even seemingly impossible.

A. Right. I think as soon as people understand neurologically and developmentally how this all works, there will be new hope for them. And there is such power in hope. It changes your biochemistry when you can be hopeful about something.

Q. In the book, you use a case study example of a 2nd grade child named Sophia, who throws a shoe at her brother because she doesn't get the opportunity to jump on the trampoline following school as she'd hoped. You present several discipline scenarios using this example, but the preferred one is when her mother responds with caring tone by offering her a drink of water and a chance to "come inside and figure it out together." But by doing this, isn't she rewarding Sophia with attention when her behavior was wrong?

A. A lot of people get worried about that. That fear is rooted in what psychologists would call behaviorism. It's the idea that all behavior is a result of this formula ABC: A, the antecedent or what came before the behavior; B, the behavior itself; and C, the consequence or what comes after the behavior.

If you ascribe to behaviorist theory, the worry becomes that when you love a child after they've behaved in a way deemed undesirable, you're reinforcing the behavior by providing attention.

But the reality is, that's just not the way it works for kids—and for human beings in general. When we look at what is neurologically happening for kids in those moments, it's this: their regulatory systems have become incredibly activated. If you could take a swab of their saliva and do a quick analysis, looking for cortisol—a stress hormone—in their body, you'd find very high levels of it at that point.

In order to help the child overcome the wretchedness that's going to flow out of them behaviorally while their regulatory systems are activated like that, we have to calm their regulatory system. The only way to calm the regulatory system that we have learned through contemporary science is to actually connect with the child—to reinforce our attachment relationship.

So, we're actually not rewarding the behavior. We are calming a child so that their neurons can settle down, quite literally. And as the neurons settle down, and the system backing all of those neurons goes back to baseline, the child will be able to conceptually think about the situation differently and to understand how we would like for them to handle it the next time around.

Because we responded that way, and because we are going to do it over and over again, day in and day out, we end up carving out a track for them that actually promotes self-control. We are helping to develop a child's ability to self-regulate in moments of feeling frustrated or undone. Ultimately, self-control will be the true fruits of our labor.

So it's just a misconception—but it's a very commonly held one. Because it's so common, it is very challenging to walk people out of that idea and to get them to really trust in the science of child development.

Q. If science points to connection as a child's most essential need, why do you think society is lagging so far behind? Why are you such a unique voice?

A. I think that it is a result of a bunch of forces that have combined to create the perfect storm. The bottom line is, we are parenting in a time that is very overwhelming. The world around us is overwhelming, and we as parents and caregivers are overwhelmed. Our children are under unprecedented pressure as well. At younger and younger ages, they have to perform academically and excel in extracurriculars to even dream about securing a spot in college or other post-secondary education.

As all of this pressure and exhaustion circulates, we have become a society that is very susceptible to quick-fix approaches. We aren't into delayed gratification—we are tired and just need this to be over.

So, when we give a child a timeout and see, *ta-da!* Very magically, the behavior stops. And we think, "Oh, perfect. That's the solution." It's instant, and on the surface, it appears to be working.

The difficulty is that we know neurologically and emotionally, this has been a sacrificial play. The adult has sacrificed the child's development to make sure that the offending behavior went away fast.

Instead, we need to focus on the longer term. We need to pull our point of view back and out, and be mindful of what true maturity is—and what growing up a child in the best possible way looks like. Sometimes, it'll be loud and noisy and crazy, but we will eventually land in a place that's so optimal for human growth and development because of handling discipline differently.

Q. Do you feel that, as a culture, we have begun to expect too much of our children at too young of an age?

A. I think we have. I think that we have lost sight of what the optimal conditions are for healthy child development and have been hijacked by our own fears and insecurities about what we want our children to be, or the success we hope they will achieve as adults.

We take an adult idea and press it down on our children, in the earliest stages of childhood, without honoring the ever-changing target of child development. That's why we idealize a child who is very independent, for example. We think they're magical and that they're going to grow up to be amazing, whereas children who are quite dependent

are actually just as healthy—and maybe even more healthy in some ways—because they are being held in the appropriate hierarchical structure of childhood.

Children are not tiny adults. They are children.

Q. What is the appropriate age that you should expect a child to exert self-control and mannered behavior?

A. There is a loose age and then a bunch of caveats. Generally speaking, the brain is developing in such a way that when the child is around 7 or 8 years of age, they're going to be able to hold on to their emotional selves a lot better in challenging circumstances than they have before then. You should start to see the end of the meltdowns and big tantrums. But even then, kids are going to be challenged when emotions become too intense or big—just like 42 year-olds are challenged. We all lose our temper sometimes.

In the book, I talk about the key neurological, developmental things that are happening to make 7 or 8 years old a turning point. It involves different executive functions and other pieces that children simply don't have the physical or neurological anatomy to manage before age 7 or 8.

One of the caveats—and it's an important caveat—is we have a lot of very sensitive children in society today. I think it's a result of the perfect storm I described earlier. These kids are just drowning in their worlds. Their nervous systems are really primed and they're extremely reactive to everything. If you happen to be parenting a highly sensitive child, 7 or 8 years isn't going to be enough. Those kids tend to need 10 to 12 years to be at the same place as their not-so-sensitive peers.

I think more than 90% of the children who come to my practice are highly sensitive—and I work with nine other clinicians, so we have a lot of kids come through our doors every week. I believe the parents of that population of children in particular are going to be very interested in reading this book.

Q. You firmly believe that there is no magic formula for discipline. That's why See It, Feel It, Be It is so important—it's about adapting to every unique child in every unique situation. But you do offer some actions that parents can take to help guide their children and cultivate connection.

A. Yes. I talk about concrete actions parents can take throughout the book and have really tried to offer a complete picture that explains both *why* it needs to happen this way and *how* it will look. The Nine Stepping Stones to Damage-Free Discipline in the Moment are an example of a "how" section. These are nine actual things you can do while disciplining that really nurture our relationship with the child and also address behavior. They're arranged in a hypothetically, loosely chronological order.

For example, the fifth step is No Explanations. This step is about recognizing that it's not helpful to explain your position—why you want the child to stop whatever it is they're doing—in the moment. Your child's regulatory system is heightened, they're stressed, and they're not able to process explanations. You just need to tell them to stop the behavior in a simple, quick way—step 3, Drop a Flag, actually explains this strategy and

provides three- to five-word examples like “This is not working,” or “That must stop.” Your job is to calm the child down in a loving, intensely caring way. Later, you will revisit the situation—this is step 9—and talk about how you want them to react next time, without shaming the child.

Q. Let's talk about helicopter parenting. Do you value this parenting method? Is it the same concept as parenting through connection?

A. I think helicopter parenting is probably one of the most damaging ways that big people can be around their children. People often confuse the way I talk about parenting in a nurturing, supportive, caring, and kind way with helicopter parenting. It's very frustrating.

The difference between what I'm talking about and helicopter parenting—and it's a really important difference—is helicopter parenting is born out of the parent's own anxiety about their child's development and the parent's inability to see and honor their child's development.

Helicopter parents respond to their children based on the parent's own needs and fears, not because of the child's needs. Helicopter parents miss the wonderful cues children offer that say, “Hey, I'm good. I've got this. Let me try, even if I may fail.” The helicopter parent doesn't understand or pick up those cues. They zoom in anyway, somewhat intrusively really, and say, “No, no, no. Don't be silly. I'll take care of that. Let me do that for you.”

It's very problematic. It's definitely not the same thing as being attachment-informed in the way you're approaching your relationship with your children. In fact, it's the opposite. An attachment-informed approach would have parents intuitively at the helm of the relationship, and wisely and confidently offering up room for the child to develop and be themselves in exactly the right moments. The helicopter parent is fraught with anxiety and cannot offer up that room, and rather, rushes in and fills all of that space up with themselves leaving the child gasping for space to grow and become all that they were intended to be.

Q. For families with multiple children, what is a parent to do when one child is experiencing an emotional outburst/disruption that is upsetting for the other children? For example, if a three-year-old is having a meltdown that really upsets a one-year-old sibling, how can the parents tend to it outside of removing the older, upset child from the room in a timeout?

A. It is a good question and one that I get asked all of the time. Some parents' instinct is to tell your child that when he/she calms down, she can join the family again. But, this kind of forced disconnection just doesn't help your child.

It can be helpful in a multiple-child situation to separate the children—not as a consequence, but to give one child reprieve from another's upset.

If you're going to do that, the child you are not with physically is going to more acutely feel your absence, obviously. To manage this, we often talk about bridging that situation

for the child that doesn't have you with them physically. There are many ways to "bridge" a disconnection, or connect with a child when you cannot be with them. You can use your voice to call out to them. You can leave them a scarf of yours to hold onto. You can tell them you're coming right back—it's your favorite scarf and you're going to come right back and grab it in just a second, so they just need to hang tight. Any physical thing of yours that you can gift to them to hold onto can help underscore the security of the message that you're coming back.

But, also remember that even if one child is unsettled by another child's upset, this isn't necessarily cause to find separate spaces for them to be. Imagine the gift you are giving the child who is observing another child's upset, and then subsequently watches you swiftly move in with your big person swagger on display to calm, regulate, and care for the upset child. There is a beautiful and powerful message in that!

Q. You really empower parents in this book, but you give them all of the responsibility, too. What do you say to parents who feel guilty because we are all just so short of perfect?

A. I say a few things. First of all, the vast majority—99.5%—of the parents and caregivers with whom I've ever worked in my clinical practice have never set about to intentionally harm their children. In fact, the majority of the big people with whom I get to work are very aware, conscious, and focused on working really hard to do right by their children. In the case of the highly sensitive child or the child who has had challenging life circumstances derail things a bit, the parents didn't create those scenarios. They're figuring out how to react to them, but they didn't create them.

So I will often say, even though you didn't create this, it does not mean that you're not the answer. You can give your child the capacity to be more regulated by clearing a path for their healthy development. So even though challenges can exist for reasons beyond our control, some of what will happen is within our control.

I also encourage people to hold on to a little of their guilt. Too much guilt can sink your ship, but if you have just a little bit, the world of social psychology tells us that it's somewhat motivating. So hang on to it. It's going to help you do better and be focused on wanting something better for your children.

The final thing is a concept in the field of attachment and child development. It's the concept of the "good enough parent." Nature would never have designed a human being that is so vulnerable and delicate and easily harmed that a perfect parent is required to raise it.

Also: you are welcome to come and be a fly on the wall in my house. You'll see moments and think, "Wow. You're the woman who wrote that book?" [laughs] Because I don't always rock it out and hold it together. But I hold it together enough of the time.

Parents don't need to be perfect. You simply need to be good enough. And we don't need to hold ourselves captive with our guilt, but rather, use that guilt to move ourselves forward.

Q. What is the main takeaway you hope readers gain from your book?

A. I want readers and the world to be able to look in on our children with a sense of compassion. When we understand development, we can really honor and cherish what the needs of our children are. It will change in hugely substantive ways the way that we conceptualize them, understand them, and see them.

I always say that I'll know when these ideas have taken flight when I can stand in line at the grocery store and watch a child who is melting down about not being able to have a candy bar, and instead of judged, see that child and parent are looked on compassionately by everyone else in line as the parent lovingly tends to the child's regulatory needs.

Then, the angels will sing. [laughs]

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About Dr. Vanessa Lapointe

Dr. Vanessa Lapointe has been supporting families and children for over 15 years with her work as a registered psychologist and founder of The Wishing Star Lapointe Developmental Clinic. In her first book, *Discipline Without Damage: How to Get Your Kids to Behave Without Messing Them Up*, Dr. Vanessa offers a discipline approach centered around connection and compassion. Contrary to today's preferred parenting philosophies; Dr. Vanessa encourages a dependent relationship between a big person and their child. Based on extensive research and professional expertise, she shares that only through dependence can a child's true independence emerge. For more information, visit www.drvanessalapointe.com.