INTERNATIONAL BEST-SELLING SERIES

THE RULES OF PARENTING

A Personal Code for Raising Happy, Confident Children

RICHARD TEMPLAR

THE AUTHOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER *THE RULES OF WORK*

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For Rich

'We are Earth's best that learnt her lesson here.

Life is our cry. We have kept the faith!'

Introduction

Nothing can prepare you for being a parent. It tests your stamina, your nerves, your emotions and at times even your sanity. You start out fretting over how to change a diaper or bathe the baby without drowning it, and before long you discover that's the least of your challenges. And just when you think you have one phase of childhood solved, they grow a bit older and it's a whole new scenario. Walking, school, boyfriends or girlfriends, driving lessons–it never stops. Luckily the rewards are huge–the fun, the hugs, and the closeness. Even the thanks eventually, if you're very lucky. And, of course, the pleasure of seeing them grow into the kind of person you can be proud of.

Along the way there's sure to be plenty of frustration, angst, bewilderment, and soul-searching as you look for the right things to say and do that will set your child on the road to growing up into a happy, well-balanced adult. And that's what this book is about.

The path you're now treading is well worn–millions of people have been parents before you, and by trial and error, some of them have worked a few things out that might just be useful to you now. I've been through the parenting cycle twice. I've had two families spread over a total of nearly 30 years. That means I've had the chance to make most of the classic mistakes several times. But it also means that, through my friends and my children's friends, I've had the chance to watch and observe other families in action and see how other parents behave. It's an endlessly fascinating study.

Some parents seem to know instinctively how to handle every situation. Others get some things wrong but have excellent ways of dealing with certain issues. If you study other parents long enough, as I have, you begin to spot patterns–tactics, techniques

and principles of behavior that get the best out of children and that can be adapted whatever the personality of the child. It's those attitudes and principles that have been distilled into the *Rules of Parenting*, to guide you through the tough times, help you bring your child up to be all they can be, and improve the relationship between you for life.

The *Rules of Parenting* aren't intended to be a revelation–they are a reminder. Many are common sense, but it's easy to lose sight of them when you with a two year old having a tantrum or a teenager who thinks the world and everything in it exists solely for his benefit. So even the seemingly obvious ones are worth putting in front of you again. After all, it's an important job to get right.

One hundred Rules might seem like a lot at first glance. But then, 18 years is a long contract for a job. More than 18 if you have more than one child.* You need to get your kids through weaning, diapers, learning to talk, the three Rs, school, friends, and sex, drugs, and rock-'n-roll. Actually, 100 Rules isn't much at all.

It seems clear to me how you can tell a good parent. You just have to look at their children. Some kids go through bad patches for a while for all sorts of reasons, many of which you really can't pin on the parents, but I've found that after they leave home, you can see what kind of a job their parents did. And I figure the parents whose kids can look after themselves, to enjoy life and to make those around them happy, to be caring and kind, and to stand up for what they believe in–those parents are the ones who are getting it right. And over the years, I've seen what kind of parenting produces those kind of adults 18 years on.

When you think about the huge responsibility you have as a parent, it can stop you in your tracks and take your breath away. What you do and say over the years can have a huge influence

* Yes, I know, not if they're twins. Thank you.

on whether your child grows up to be screwed up or well balanced. The good news is that by thinking about it all now, as you will if you read through this book, you can automatically begin to correct many of your little foibles or bad habits as well as introducing new more helpful ones (helpful for you and your offspring).

There's more good news. There are lots of wrong ways to bring up your kids, but there are lots of right ones too. What you'll find in this book are principles to follow, which you can adapt to suit you and your children. There's no list of instructions you have to follow to the letter if you don't want your child to end up a loser. I've seen parents find all kinds of original, creative and unusual ways of interpreting these Rules successfully. It's about following the spirit, not the letter. For example, I've known great parents who home educated their kids, excellent parents whose children went to public schools, and equally successful parents whose kids went to boarding school. If you have the right attitude, the rest will follow on.

I can personally vouch for the fact that it's impossible to get all 100 Rules right every day for 18 years. But then, I also know that all the best parents I've watched have messed up here and there. Just not too badly, and not too often, and they've always known when they've gone wrong. That seems to be very important: Recognize where you've gone wrong and try harder to remember next time. That's as much as anyone can ask. And, from the kids I've watched grow up, that's good enough.

I can also tell you (and you may be relieved to hear this) that none of the Rules requires you to brush your child's hair religiously or make sure they have clean socks every day. I'm sure that's all very nice, but I've also seen parents bring up excellent kids with messy hair and no socks at all.

These Rules are about the important stuff. Things to do with your child's attitudes, values, and self-image, not to do with their socks. They are Rules that can help you and your child to enjoy each other, enjoy life, and treat other people with respect. They are broad principles that apply equally in traditional nuclear

families and in more modern formats, such as single-parent families or step-families.

I'm not claiming that there are exactly 100 Rules you have to follow and there will never be any more. Far from it. These are the Rules that I have observed as the most important, but I'm always interested to hear from you and would love to collect more Rules of parenting if you have any up your sleeve. You're welcome to email them to me at *Richard.Templar@RichardTemplar.co.uk*.

Richard Templar

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PART I

RULES FOR STAYING SANE

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This book is divided into ten sections, and I'm starting with Rules for staying sane. After all, if you can't manage that, the other 90 Rules are going to be rather pointless.

If you're a new parent–or about to become a parent for the first time–I don't want to alarm you by giving the impression that keeping madness at bay is the main occupation for parents, and that you'll be spending the next 18 years balancing on the edge of insanity. Not at all. It will only be moments of insanity you need to watch out for. There will be times when the moments are blissfully few and far between. But trust me when I say we all have these moments. Frankly, there are moments that challenge even the best Rules parents of them all.

The point here is that you'll enjoy the thing a whole lot more if you stay sane. Your sanity isn't only important because you are important, but also because your children need sane parents. And there are just a few Rules that you'll find, after you get the hang of them, help you keep your head when your children are crying theirs off.

RULE 1

Relax

So who are the best parents you know? The ones who have a seemingly instinctive ability to say and do the things that result in happy, confident, well-balanced children? Have you ever wondered what makes them so good at it? Now think about the ones you privately think are not capable. Why not?

All the best parents I know have one key thing in common. They're relaxed about it. And all the worst ones are hung up on something. Maybe they're not stressed out about how good they are as parents (perhaps they should be), but they're hung up about something that affects their ability to be a really good parent.

I know a couple of parents who are neurotically clean and tidy. Their children have to take their shoes off at the door or the whole world falls apart–even if the shoes are clean. They get really uptight if their children leave anything out of place or make any kind of a mess (even if it gets cleaned up later). It makes it impossible for the kids just to relax and enjoy themselves, in case they get grass stains on their pants or knock over the ketchup bottle.

I have another friend who is so obsessively competitive that his children are under huge pressure to win every friendly game they ever play. And one who frets excessively every time her child scrapes her knees. I bet you can think of plenty of similar examples among people you know.

The really good parents I've encountered, on the other hand, expect their children to be noisy, messy, bouncy, squabbly, whiny, and covered in mud. They take it all in stride. They know

they've got 18 years to turn these small creatures into respectable grown-ups, and they pace themselves. No rush to get them acting like adults–they'll get there in good time.

Between you and me, this Rule gets easier with time, though some people still never master it the way true Rules parents do. It's much harder to relax fully with your first baby than with your last teenager to leave home. With babies, you need to focus on the essentials–a healthy baby that isn't too hungry or too uncomfortable–and don't sweat the rest of it. It doesn't matter if their pajammas are buttoned wrong, or you didn't find time to bath them today, or you've gone away for the weekend without anything for them to sleep in. (Yes, I have a friend who has done this, and no, she didn't sweat it, being a Rules parent.)

It is much better altogether if you can get to the end of each day, put your feet up with a glass of wine or a cold beer,[1] and say cheerfully to each other, "What the hell…they're all still alive, so we must have done something right."

REALLY GOOD PARENTS EXPECT THEIR CHILDREN TO BE NOISY, MESSY, BOUNCY, SQUABBLY, WHINY AND COVERED IN MUD.

[1] No, I'm not encouraging parents to use alcohol to get them through. Just relax!

No One Is Perfect

Have you ever thought what it would be like to have perfect parents? Well, think about it now. Imagine your parents had been faultless when you were growing up (I'm betting they weren't.[2]) Suppose they were textbook parents–that your mother was *always right*. Sound like fun? Of course not.

Look, kids need something to kick against when they're growing up. They need someone to blame, and I'm afraid that's your job. So you might as well give them something to blame you for.

> YOUR CHILDREN ARE GOING TO BLAME YOU FOR SOMETHING, BECAUSE THAT'S HOW IT WORKS.

So what's it going to be? Nothing cruel or abusive of course–you need to pick something that's not unreasonable and shows a bit of human frailty. Maybe you've got a fuse that's just a little bit shorter than it should be? Perhaps you tend to put a bit too much pressure on them? Could it be that you're slightly neurotic

[2] Please don't write in to accuse me of insulting your mother. I'm just making a point.

about keeping everything tidy and ordered? Or tell you what, better still, why bother to choose? Just go with your own natural imperfections, and then you don't have to make an effort. Chances are you have a character flaw or two that will come in handy here.

Of course this doesn't mean that you're off the hook, that you shouldn't try to improve your parenting skills. Apart from anything else, that would make the rest of this book redundant. It just means that you shouldn't give yourself too hard a time when you fall a bit short of the standards you set yourself. After all, what kind of an example would it be to your kids if you were unable ever to fail, even a little bit? I wouldn't want to live up to parents like that, and I don't suppose your children would either.

Your children are going to blame you for something, because that's how it works. If you were perfect, they'd have every reason to blame you for that. You can't win. You can only hope that eventually, especially if they become parents themselves, they'll come to see that actually they should be grateful to you for not being perfect.

Know What You're Good At

When my oldest children were small, I was always jealous of those other dads who spent hours tossing a football around with their children. I felt slightly guilty that I couldn't do it for more than a few half-hearted minutes. It just wasn't me.

Then there was the friend who built a fabulous treehouse for his kids in their back garden ("Dad, why can't we have a treehouse like theirs?".) And the mother who created complex and intriguing treasure hunts for every party. And the one who took her daughter to the same ballet class as mine every week but managed to look as if she were actually enjoying it, and…I could go on.

You're probably ahead of me here. I was focusing on what they could do that I couldn't, but actually I could do lots of things *they* couldn't–all things I took for granted, but just as valuable.

For example, I love reading aloud to children. And being a fairly outgoing kind of a guy (alright, verging on the exhibitionist), I really relished spending hours reading long stories, doing all the voices and accents and characterizations and sound effects and dramatic whispers and all the rest of it. But it seemed so natural that it was years before I realized that it was just as valuable a skill as treehouse-building or playing football.

On those increasingly rare occasions when I've tossed a football around with the kids, it's been perfectly clear that I'm only really doing it because I feel I should. That's not a bad reason, and it's still worth doing, but I'll never be like my friend whose enthusiasm for the game shone through and inspired his children. Then

again, he probably can't read a story aloud like I can. Or cook such a mean spaghetti bolognese.

The thing is, Rules parents know what they're good at. We don't give up on everything else, but we play to our strengths. If we're lousy at football, we read more stories; we provide lots of delicious homemade meals; we're endlessly patient with them learning the piano; we teach them how to fix cars; we share their enthusiasm for Star Wars or skateboards or My Little Pony. (Yes, I know you'd have to work really hard at that one.)

It's important to know what you're good at and to have confidence in your own strengths. That way, you can watch other parents doing things that you never could without feeling inadequate. After all, you and I both know that those other parents can't do everything either. Whenever you feel a hint of jealousy rising, just stop and remind yourself of what you're great at.

RULES PARENTS DON'T GIVE UP ON EVERYTHING ELSE, BUT WE PLAY TO OUR STRENGTHS.

Almost Any Rule Can Be Broken Occasionally

We all know that there are rules and systems and procedures and policies that must be followed if you're a parent. You know the sort of thing: Don't feed them junk food, don't let them stay up too late, don't let their eyes cross in front of the TV, don't allow them to swear until they're old enough (before you ask, see Rule 76).

What we Rules parents also understand is that there are very few rules that you can't break with a good enough reason. Okay, you're supposed to feed them good healthy food and the recommended "5 a day," but when you get home tired after a long day, it's not the end of the world to give them fish sticks once in a while.

It's just a matter of thinking through what's the worst that can happen if you break this rule. Sure, if you break the rule about buckling your seat belt up in the car the worst is pretty dire, so best keep to that one. But if you skip the bedtime bath because you're all exhausted–well, come on, how bad can that be?

Remember, this section is about Rules for staying sane. And the point of this Rule is to recognize that it's more important for your children to have a sane, relaxed parent than it is never to eat a fish stick. Some parents make life far too difficult for themselves by thinking that it's essential to stick to every rule at all times. They beat themselves up over some tiny thing.

We once took two of our children for a day out that started with a train ride. The youngest was only a few weeks old, and the other was two. It was only when we got out of the car at the station that we realized that the two year old had no shoes. Now, of

course, there's an unwritten rule that you don't take your children out for the day on trains without any shoes. We had two choices: Abandon the train ride or go ahead in bare feet. The two year old, of course, wanted option two and headed for the train determined to vote with his feet.

That left us with two further choices: Beat ourselves up over it or go with the flow. Well, as you and I know, the only sensible Rules choice is to let it go. Either we–and our two year old–enjoy a fun barefoot day out or we get stressed over something we can't change and ruin his day as well as our own. It was one of those times when a rule had to be broken (but, of course, not the best day to break the "have a bath before bedtime" rule as well).

So the moral of the story is, if you insist that every Rule has to be followed every time, you're breaking Rule 3. Ha!

AS YOU AND I KNOW, THE ONLY SENSIBLE RULES CHOICE IS TO LET IT GO.

Don't Try to Do Everything

So what do you want your child to be when she grows up? Champion jockey? Ballerina? Scientist? Professional athlete? Concert violinist? Actor? Hard to be sure when they're young, so maybe you should keep all their options open by making sure they have extra lessons in everything they show any interest in. That way they can't complain later that it's your fault they failed because you didn't start them young enough.

It does make for a bit of a busy schedule of course. Football on Monday, drama on Tuesday, clarinet on Wednesday–and swimming after that. Thursday is ballet and Friday he goes to the gym. And horse riding lessons on the weekend. And that's just one child. It gets really fun if you have two or three.

Whoa. Hold on there. We're missing something. What about playing happily in the garden? What about learning to find their own entertainment? Where in the weekly schedule do they manage to browse through a comic, or even just lay in the grass staring at the clouds and thinking of nothing in particular? These are all vital parts of growing up, too.

You know all those kids whose life is one long round of lessons and practice and extra tutoring? Have you ever seen what happens when you ask them to fend for themselves for a few days? Suppose they go on a vacation to some beautiful, peaceful place–the mountains, or the coast, or rolling countryside. Clueless, that's what. They've no idea how to enjoy themselves–they've never had time to learn. That's going to make adulthood really tough for them. They can't ever relax because no one's ever taught them how to.

RULE 5

Don't panic; I'm not suggesting you ban your children from all extra-curricular activities. That would just be silly. But I am suggesting you limit them to, say, two activities a week. And let them choose which two. No making them learn the violin just because you learned it as a child and loved it. Or because you never learned it and wished you had. If they want to take up something else, they'll have to drop one of their current activities to make room. (Yes, they're allowed to drop ballet if they hate it, even if the teacher did say she thought they had real talent.)

YES, THEY'RE ALLOWED TO DROP BALLET IF THEY HATE IT, EVEN IF THE TEACHER DID SAY SHE THOUGHT THEY HAD REAL TALENT.

Remember those chilled, relaxed parents in Rule 1? How many of the best parents you know take their children to different activities almost every day of the week? None of them. They let them learn a couple of activities they're really interested in, and the rest of the time their kids amuse themselves dressing up, doing jigsaw puzzles, getting muddy, making things out of empty cereal boxes, looking for bugs in the garden, lining up all their toy dinosaurs, reading books that are too young for them, and doing all those other things that kids are supposed to do because it's good for them, and it keeps them off your back.