

Including
self-regulation
and mindfulness
for children...

saving *our* children from our chaotic world

Teaching Children
the Magic
of Silence
and Stillness

Building emotional intelligence

Special moments in life mastery

Maggie Dent
quietly improving lives

saving *our*
children
from our chaotic world

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D E D I C A T I O N

I dedicate this book to my special Dad
Bill Pennington who left our physical world and his beloved
farm and family on December 1st 1994.

Thank you for instilling in me a
non-judgemental compassion for people,
a deep love and respect for Mother Earth and
the gift of a shared passion in the lifelong search
for new knowledge and wisdom.

Maggie

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I sincerely thank all the students who graced my doors over almost three decades in the classroom and counselling room – you have been great teachers for me. To those individuals who have helped and encouraged me over the gestation and birthing of this book. To my family and friends for their love and support – the biggest thanks of all.

Since I first put pen to paper with this book – my first – I have been blessed with encouragement and support from classrooms and homes. For this I am very grateful. Many teachers wrote and said I had given them permission to come out of the closet! Unfortunately our curriculums have become even more crowded and students even more pressured to be tested more often. There is a new sense of urgency as our children are struggling with an even busier world than when I first published this book. I never even had the internet or a mobile phone back in 2003!

We must slow down our children's worlds or they will continue to become sicker, sadder, fatter and more disconnected than they are already. Let's slow down childhood, and let kids be kids. They know the value of stillness, calmness and quiet and that it happens when they have the space to listen to their inner wisdom.



INTRODUCTION

“Relaxation training can help people deal with distress. Helping people to be able to create for themselves a ‘relaxation response’ the opposite to a stress arousal response is incredibly beneficial to one’s health long term.”

— Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (1996).

The Magic of Silence and Stillness

Silence and stillness does have a magic to it! It doesn’t matter where you find it – in your home, your workplace or your classroom, when it occurs something magical happens.

I am really excited about writing this book. Those who know me know that I can get very enthusiastic and excited about the things that concern me most. On top of that list of concerns is the wellbeing and healthy development of our children. So often in my teaching career I met children who failed to take full advantage of their abilities, due to emotional challenges and a low sense of self or self-worth and values. Low self-esteem is an epidemic amongst our children. Unfortunately it is not the only unhealthy and frightening epidemic that is sweeping the children of the world.

More so than ever before we are seeing:

- ❖ More violence and assaults in our schools and communities;
- ❖ More children than ever before on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) medication to manage hyperactivity and inability to concentrate;
- ❖ More children presenting with depression or emotional overwhelm and overload;
- ❖ More reported cases of sexual abuse;

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- ❖ More children suffering obesity and diabetes;
- ❖ More children homeless;
- ❖ More children being diagnosed with mental disorders like obsessive compulsive disorder and severe anxiety disorders;
- ❖ Children as young as five who report wanting to die;
- ❖ Children as young as three on sleeping medication to help them sleep;
- ❖ An increase in childhood and juvenile crime;
- ❖ No real improvement in school retention rates for our Indigenous children;
- ❖ An unacceptably high teen suicide rate.

Professor Fiona Stanley, a world authority on child health, has expressed her concern:

“Health and behaviour problems among children have reached frightening levels and a national campaign is needed to avert a looming social crisis”.

— *West Australian*, November 9th 2002.

Why is this happening to our children and in such epidemic proportions?

It is the result of many factors. The ones presented are based on my experiences and perceptions only. We have moved from an old paradigm of being, thinking and living to a new, unfamiliar paradigm. Last century was the time of a male-dominated world that focused on competition and the pursuit of wealth and power, whether it was financial, military, intellectual or political. Parents, teachers, doctors and lawyers were seen to be people who held unquestioned power. Others, including our children, held these people in respect and awe. Only the educated were worthy of positions of high standing. There was still a deep lack of respect of Indigenous people. Another key element to these belief patterns was the strength of religion and its influence over individuals, schools and society. Women were seen as less capable and were less valued than men and, until late in the 20th Century, were paid less for the same work.

Gradually, attitudes have changed. Individuals are taking more responsibility for their own lives and health. People now question everything and, due to some major disgraces within the medical and legal world, these professions are seen quite differently to the last

century. People will change doctors if they are unhappy with their treatment, which seldom happened before.

In schools the emphasis has been on teaching rather than learning. Furthermore, the cognitive domain was the major focus of students; high grades were seen as the sign of a successful student and suggested good parenting and a well-chosen, well-run school. Those students who struggled were seen as failures. Now, schools recognise the multiple intelligence theory of learning and know that students learn in their own individual ways. Achieving outcomes that are varied is becoming the way a student's academic growth is measured. Student-centred learning is encouraged and the building of emotional intelligence is recognised as part of the process.

Partly the causes of the crisis surrounding our children is that we still have parents and teachers trying to raise children using the old paradigm system of authority and power. Yet, research can now show threats no longer work. Violence and punitive punishment is not an effective deterrent – indeed it has been shown it can inflict long-term damage especially psychologically.

Our world is a harsher place in many ways and with 24/7 news cycles we are all living with higher levels of stress. Children respond to people who allow them to explore their own choices and give them the opportunity to make more of their own decisions, while being aware they themselves will also be responsible for the consequences of their decisions. There are now heightened stress levels for children in our schools as the Western systems have become driven by testing and accountability.

Children prefer to be the driving force behind their own learning. When I first wrote this book I observed that many children and young people had less desire to be rich and materially successful; they wanted to live effective lives with quite different attitudes and ways to their parents. They were much more environmentally aware, socially accepting of cultural differences, anti-war, aware of their own responsibility for their health and wellbeing, or lack of responsibility as the case may be.

Things appear to have changed with our 'selfie' driven world where being famous or a celebrity matters so much more than living a life of depth and meaning. The escalating levels of mental illness in our children and adolescents is a sign our ways of living have created a hunger for something more and yet a weakening of our sense of connectedness and community. **Many young people are now in a**

spiritual void, where emptiness, a lack of meaning in their lives and disconnection from society are part of their reality.

Then there are the simple things:

- ❖ Too many passive pastimes, from early childhood – too much TV, hand-held devices, screens and computer games;
- ❖ Too little quality time with family – especially recreational time spent surrounded by nature and being active;
- ❖ Too much exposure to the world's disasters via the media;
- ❖ An excessively consumer-driven world that conditions our children to believe that happiness will come from possessions rather than relationships;
- ❖ Too little value on virtues, especially now that traditional religion has decreased its influence in people's lives;
- ❖ Poor community participation in shared raising of our children;
- ❖ More disconnection in families, especially extended families;
- ❖ Poor understanding of the role of emotional intelligence and resilience building amongst some teachers and parents;
- ❖ A rapidly increasing 'welfare mentality';
- ❖ Increased 'them' vs 'us' thinking;
- ❖ Increased risk of terror attacks in the west against innocent people.

As a parenting and resilience educator with a special interest in building family harmony and cohesion, emotional literacy and human resilience, I am writing this book with a renewed sense of urgency. When I worked as a counsellor, I noticed I had begun seeing many children from 'regular' homes with serious anxiety problems and emotional vulnerabilities. The rapid-paced world was putting pressures onto our children. Kathy Walker in her excellent book, *What's the Hurry* (2005), writes:

"Children who are over scheduled into weekly activities may inadvertently be learning that life is about having every moment of their lives filled with entertainment and prescribed activities. Consequently, opportunities to show initiative, play alone and/or create experiences for themselves appear to have become lost."

— Kathy Walker, *What's The Hurry: Reclaiming Childhood in an Overscheduled World* (2005).

“I firmly believe that much of the stress and anxiety present in children’s lives comes from hidden pressures and overzealous expectations of well-meaning parents, and sometimes teachers. Adults want to hurry up the innate and unique development of children in a busy, instant world.”

— Maggie Dent, *Real Kids in an Unreal World* (2nd ed 2016).

Modern life is really putting pressure, usually invisible, on our Children — especially sensitive children. Children’s brains are immature and unable to cope with the stressors of modern adult living and often misinterpret adult challenges as being about them or their fault. Consistent stress becomes distress and the brain is seriously affected. Irrational behaviour, unstable emotions, sleeplessness and defiance and aggression are potential signs that a child is stressed, and struggling.

Dr Stuart Shanker in his latest book *Self-Reg* (2016) suggests that much poor behavior is not so much bad but more a response to stress. He calls it simply ‘stress behavior’.

Our children are struggling with:

- ❖ sensory overload
- ❖ over stimulation
- ❖ poor attachment
- ❖ passivity
- ❖ schoolification of the early years
- ❖ technological explosion
- ❖ consumerism
- ❖ stress and fears
- ❖ global uncertainty
- ❖ lower emotional literacy
- ❖ constant change
- ❖ poorer nutrition
- ❖ contaminated environments
- ❖ fast-paced living
- ❖ overscheduled childhoods
- ❖ less free active play
- ❖ family disconnection and dislocation
- ❖ digital abandonment from parents

I found an interesting piece in a book called *Infants, Toddlers and Caregivers: The Philosophy of Respect based on the work by Magda*

Gerber and the Hungarian paediatrician Emmi Pikler (2008) about children's needs. It resonated with me as being very true.

“For each individual there is an optimum amount of attention – optimum, not maximum. If the person gets enough attention, satisfaction results. An individual who doesn't get enough will seek it in a variety of ways early in life.

- ❖ By being attractive to look at
- ❖ Be being sweet and kind
- ❖ By being smart, skilled, capable, competent or talented
- ❖ By misbehaving
- ❖ By being loud
- ❖ By talking a lot
- ❖ By talking little
- ❖ By being outgoing
- ❖ By being shy
- ❖ By being sick
- ❖ By being helpless

Are you aware that girls are more likely to be noticed for their looks than for their capabilities?”

— Source: Janet Gonzalez-Mena and Dianne Widmeyer Eyer,
Infants, Toddlers and Caregivers (2008).

I was obviously not noticed in a healthy way because I became both loud and talked a lot! Maybe something we could consider when working with children. Their need to be noticed, valued, heard or accepted exactly as they are is a profound need. And it doesn't take a lot of time – just frequent consistent loving care would do it!

I know that our children's world can be made better. I know that because I am witnessing it in some homes and schools where the emotional wellbeing of children does come first. Research has long held the belief that happy children learn best. A safe environment where differences are accepted and welcomed allows children to learn social skills as well as academic skills. Humans are programmed to be social animals. Social behaviour is not genetic. It happens through the constant interaction of humans with other humans over a long period of time.

The magic of silence and stillness is something that helps shape the developing child in a positive way. While there are many cognitive

(left brain) benefits from teaching the magic of silence, there are even more emotional and social (right brain) benefits. The inner world of children today is in turmoil and the outer turmoil of the world that we have created probably contributes. I believe that children who can build a doorway to their own sense of value and worth will be better able to manage this chaotic rapidly changing world. This means children the whole world over, not just Australian children. This doorway is found on the inside rather than the outside. As explained by John O'Donohue.

"We need to return to the solitude within, to find again the dream that lies at the hearth of the soul. We need to feel the dream with the wonder of a child approaching a threshold of discovery. When we rediscover our childlike nature we enter a world of gentle possibility. Consequently, we will find ourselves more frequently at the place of ease, delight and celebration."

— John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World* (1997).

So please open yourself to the magic of silence and stillness first. Then teach it to children so that they too can take it out into the world and into adulthood as a skill that sustains them during life's challenges. Teach them so that they can hold more hope, optimism and enthusiasm, and that our world can be a better place than it is now. Please teach it now, before we lose any more of our teenagers to depression, mental disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide. We all need a place to escape the world that is safe and nurturing.



CHAPTER ONE

building emotional intelligence silence & *through* stillness

Forrest Gump was sent on his way to Heaven. Upon his arrival, a concerned Saint Peter met Forrest at the Pearly Gates.

"I'm sorry Forrest," Saint Peter said, "but Heaven is suffering from an overload of goodly souls and we have been forced to put up an entrance exam for new arrivals, to ease the burden of heavenly arrivals".

"That's cool!" said Forrest. "What does the entrance exam consist of?"

"Three questions," said Saint Peter. "Which are?" asked Forrest.

"The first," said Saint Peter, "is, which two days of the week start with the letter 't'?"

"The second is, how many seconds are there in a year?" "The third is, what was the name of the swagman in Waltzing Matilda?"

"Now," said Saint Peter, "go away and think about those questions and when I call upon you Forrest I shall expect you to have the answers ready for me".

So Forrest went away and gave those three questions considerable thought.

The following morning, Saint Peter called upon Forrest and asked if he had considered the questions, to which Forrest replied, "I have".

"Well then," said Saint Peter, "which two days of the week start with the letter 't'?"

Forrest said, "today ... and tomorrow".

Saint Peter pondered this answer for some time, and decided that indeed the answer could be applied to the question.

"Well then Forrest, could I have your answer to the second of the three questions?" Saint Peter went on, "How many seconds in a year?"

Forrest replied, "Just 12!"

"Only twelve?" exclaimed Saint Peter! "How did you arrive at that figure Forrest?"

"Easy," said Forest, "there's the second of January, the second of February, right through to the second of December, giving a total of 12 seconds".

Saint Peter looked at Forrest and said, "I need some time to consider your answer before I can give you a decision". And he walked away shaking his head.

A short time later, Saint Peter returned to Forrest, "I'll allow the answer to stand Forrest but you need to get the third and final question absolutely correct to be allowed into Heaven".

"Now Forrest, can you tell me the answer to the name of the swagman in Waltzing Matilda?"

Forrest replied, "Of the three questions, I found this the easiest to answer".

"Really!" exclaimed Saint Peter, "and what is the answer Forrest?" "It's Andy,"

"It's Andy??"

"Yes, it's Andy," said Forrest.

This totally floored Saint Peter and he paced this way and that deliberating the answer. Finally, he could not stand the suspense any longer and turning to Forrest asked, "Forrest, how in God's name did you arrive at THAT answer?"

"Easy," said Forrest, "Andy sat, Andy watched, Andy waited 'til his billy boiled ...".

And Forrest entered Heaven.

“Academic intelligence has little to do with emotional life. The brightest among us can flounder on the shoals of unbridled passions and unruly impulses: people with high IQ’s can be stunningly poor pilots of their private lives.”

— Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (1996).

What is Emotional Intelligence?

When Howard Gardner (1983) brought the concept of an emotional intelligence to light in his work on multiple intelligences it made so much sense to those of us involved in the teaching of children. Our teacher training had informed us that the cognitive domain was what we worked with – the affective or feeling domain did not concern us as educators. Many teachers found that emotions could positively or negatively influence a student and yet it remained an unknown and largely misunderstood concern.

Daniel Goleman believes that 80% of our potential to be successful in life is due to our emotional intelligence and not our intellectual intelligence. I discovered in my high school classes that my ability to be kind, firm and fair won respect from students, and they changed their behaviour accordingly. It was also obvious that my classrooms were safe and friendly places where students were encouraged and genuinely cared for – even those who struggled with the three ‘r’s of reading, ‘riting and ‘rithmetic, or whose behaviour was known to be disruptive. This resulted in good grades for my students.

Many other staff felt I was just an easy marker, or too soft on my students, yet independent assessment always validated that the work was graded correctly. I had decided that to get the best from students I would be kind, compassionate, competent and enthusiastic both about my subject and a student’s own unique potential.

This approach worked for the troubled students as well as the capable studious ones. Emotions can be contagious, according to Daniel Goleman, although some contagion will be subtle. I belief this contagion is also influenced by the parents’ or teacher’s beliefs about a child.

Those students with low literacy hated English. Being able to teach them in a subject they were very poor at was a challenge for a teacher