

'Simplicity Parenting puts forward a simple but supremely effective rationale for raising healthy, happy and well-balanced children. This new edition is a must-read for parents who wish to enhance the quality of family life and secure the best future for their children. I endorse it wholeheartedly.'

Sally Jenkinson, author of *Genius of Play*

'I loved this book, Kim John Payne's wisdom and compassion shines through. He writes so eloquently about how our modern lives of having so much choice, clutter and being busy have left both parents and children overwhelmed. Simplicity Parenting is a call to arms to parents to protect their children's childhood. He emphasises how relationships are often built on the incidental moments when nothing is going on. He gives a roadmap of how to achieve the type of family life that gives a reverence for childhood. I recommend it for all parents.'

Caroline Penney, Family Therapist and Parenting Educator, author of *The Parenting Toolkit: simple steps to happy and confident children*

'Everything, every single word in Kim John Payne's book will give parents the courage needed to embrace parenthood in not only an intelligent way, but with a change of attitude urgently needed to give children a chance to develop strong selves. That is in a world where educational beliefs and social pressure have become nearly impossible to endure long term. I have raised my three children with all the principles of Simplicity Parenting, and now as adults, they keep thanking me.'

Sylvie Hétu, Trainer for The International Association of Infant Massage, author of *Touch in Schools*

'Brilliant, wise, informative, innovative, entertaining, and urgently needed, this timely book is a godsend for all who love children, and for children themselves. It provides a doable plan for providing the kind of childhood kids desperately need today!'

Edward Hallowell, M.D., author of *The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness*

'A wealth of practical ideas for reclaiming childhood and establishing family harmony.'

Publishers Weekly

'[Payne is] like a master closet reorganizer for the soul.'

Time

'This book is a wake-call for all of us who have misjudged what children need and can handle, and who have wandered so far from the best practices that we are raising neurologically damaged and emotionally stunted human beings as a result. Simplicity Parenting arises from dialogues with real people, from their questions and their needs. Kim John Payne is sharp, funny, and wise, and – best of all – he has something shattering but positive to say to an America that is struggling to know how to live.'

Steve Biddulph, author of *The Secret of Happy Children*

'If you are raising children in these anxious times, you need this book. It will inspire you, reassure you, and, most important of all, it will remind you that less is more, that simplicity trumps complication, that rhythm and routine bring peace to the soul. In this profound and practical guide, Kim John Payne offers parents a doable, step-by-step approach to simplifying everyday family life, from the toy box to the dinner table. In the process, he reveals to us the rewards to be found in slowing down, savouring our children's childhoods, and more fully enjoying our own adult lives.'

Katrina Kenison, author of *The Gift of an Ordinary Day*

'Simplicity Parenting takes the unusual and unusually wise stance that sometimes less can be more. Less as in less frenetic activity, less racing around, less clutter. Payne provides practical strategies for turning down the volume and creating a pace that fosters calmness, mindfulness, reflection, and individuality in children. Simplicity Parenting should be on every parent's (indeed, every person's) reading list.'

Kathleen A. Brehony, Ph.D., author of *Awakening at Midlife*

'Kim John Payne helps parents better understand one of the most challenging issues of our time-the hurried, materialistic, competitive, highly pressured nature of today's childhood. After reading Simplicity Parenting, parents' new mantra will be 'less builds security, sanity, and connection.' And they will have the tools they need for implementing this mantra in their families.'

Diane E. Levin, Ph.D., co-author of *So Sexy So Soon*

Simplicity Parenting



by
Kim John Payne



Hawthorn Press

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*To Katharine, the love of my life,
and to Saphira and Johanna, the loves of our lives*

K.J.P.

About the Author

Kim John Payne M.ED has been quietly and passionately working to help countless people around the world give voice to the feeling that something is not acceptable about 'the new normal' of overwhelm that so many of us are now experiencing. He offers do-able ways to realise the hopes and values we all have for ourselves, and build deep connections with our children that give families resiliency, balance and simple joy.

Consultant and trainer to over 230 US independent and public schools, he has served as a school counsellor, adult educator, consultant, researcher, educator and an independent-practice family counsellor for 30 years. Kim regularly gives keynote addresses at international conferences for educators, parents and therapists, and runs workshops and trainings around the world. In each role, he has been helping children, adolescents and families explore issues such as social difficulties with siblings and classmates, attention and behavioural issues at home and school, emotional issues such as defiance, aggression, addiction and self-esteem, and the vital role played by living a balanced simple life.

Kim has also consulted for educational associations in South Africa, Hungary, Israel, Russia, Switzerland, Germany, Ireland, Canada, Australia, United Kingdom, Thailand and China. He has also worked extensively with the North American and UK Waldorf educational movements. He has served as Director of the Collaborative Counseling programme at Antioch University, New England. Together with his team, they have trained around 1,000 Simplicity Parenting Coaches and Group Leaders around the world. Kim is the Founding Director of the Center for Social Sustainability, an organisation that has trained thousands of teachers, parents and students in the Three Care Stream Process that gives social, emotional and behavioural support to children who struggle in the school environment.

In addition he has authored the number one best seller, *Simplicity Parenting*™ (Ballantine Books, 2009), of which the current volume is an

updated UK second edition; *Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier and More Secure Kids*, published by Random House / Penguin in 2009; *The Games Children Play*® (1996) published by Hawthorn Press, Stroud; *The Soul of Discipline* (Random House / Penguin, 2015); and co-authored *Whole Child Sport*™, *How to Navigate Child & Youth Sports*™, and *Being At Your Best When Your Kids Are At Their Worst* (Shambhala Press, 2019). Kim's books have been translated into over 30 languages.

He has appeared frequently on television, including ITV, ABC, NBC, CBS and Fox; on radio with the BBC, Sirius/XM, CBC and NPR Australian Broadcast Commission; and in print, including being featured in *Time Magazine*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Parenting*, *Mothering*, *Times Union*, the *New York Times* and the *LA Times*.

Kim strives to deepen understanding and give practical tools for life that arise out of the burning social issues of our time. He lives on a farm in Ashfield, Massachusetts with his wife and two children.

Other Books by Kim John Payne

Games Children Play

Simplicity Parenting, first edition

Beyond Winning (with Luis Fernando Llosa and Scott Lancaster), Lyon Press

The Soul of Discipline

Being at Your Best when Your Kids Are at Their Worst

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Abbreviations

ADD – Attention Deficit Disorder

ADHD – Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

API – Attention Priority Issue

CASA – National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse

CSR – Cumulative Stress Reaction

ESS – Electronic Screen Syndrome

ODD – Oppositional Defiance Disorder

PTSD – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

WHO – World Health Organisation

Foreword

Parenting – what we do for our children, and the way we help and teach them – is the oldest and most beautiful thing human beings do. And we have done it well for millions of years. Our ancestors were not big or strong or equipped with fangs or claws, but they had one skill that mattered more. They knew how to raise children to be caring, co-operative, skilful and wise, and that is how our species thrived and survived.

In short, we've been doing it for a long time, and doing it well.

At different times in history, though, outside forces have made it hard for us to parent. Feudal times forced us to enslave our children to labour in the fields. Industrialisation forced us to regiment them into school, with rigid forms of learning and working. And hyper-capitalism now pressurises us all to hurry, work and consume, and be forever rushing through crazy daily routines.

Times really do change, and so quickly that we can see it in our own lives. My first parenting book, written almost 40 years ago, was about tackling the negative way in which working-class parents – especially from the background I was raised in and then worked in as a family psychologist – attacked their children's self-belief, calling them stupid, idiots, sluts, and worse. In the 1980s we had begun to move away from hitting children, but were still assaulting their inner selves with this terrible way of talking.

Today, people rarely abuse children, and mostly do their best to encourage them, and they show far more affection. (My 1950s parents loved me, but they rarely hugged me or my sister – that simply wasn't done. It's hard to imagine that today.)

And yet, despite all this parenting progress, we are witnessing a deterioration in mental health amongst children and young people that is rapidly becoming an epidemic. One in five children in the UK, the USA, and Australia where I live, suffers from anxiety or depression, and teenage suicides have started to rise again after falling for many decades. Divorce impacts about 40 per cent of families, and the average person

is just not happy or at peace. Studies of happiness and well-being show we were more content in the 1950s and believe me, the 1950s were not that great!

When I came across Kim's book *Simplicity Parenting*, I was so excited that I wrote to him and told him so, because I knew that this thinking was what was needed most in the world of child rearing, and child-rearing books.

Kim's message is now often repeated by others, but he really was the first, and remains the best, exponent of an approach to parenthood, and in fact life, that is in a proper rhythm and style, and at a pace which is the optimal for human growth.

It's such an important principle. Of course we want our children to learn, we want them to succeed. But in what way, and how that is achieved, is the question. Imagine that you are growing sweetcorn, and those green tender leaves are just starting to rise out of the ground, perhaps six inches tall. Anxious to speed them on their way, or to catch up with a neighbour who has taller corn, or worried whether you will have enough to eat in four months time, you go out with a torch at night time and pull on the leaves, trying to get them to stretch higher. Will this succeed? No way – you will damage the roots, your corn will not grow faster, and it might even be stunted as a result or even die.

Nobody would be that stupid, but that's how we increasingly raise our children. The human brain, easily the most delicate and amazing thing in the universe, knows how to grow. It plays, it explores, it nourishes itself, it seeks the most peaceful rhythm of activity, and rest, over and over – seeking and soothing, seeking and soothing. The toddler explores, runs back to its mother's arms, and then ventures out again. A happy family home is a peaceful place. There is activity, music, dancing, followed by rest: intense work, followed by chilling out. TVs do not blare throughout the home at all hours, bringing fearful or glitzy or jaggedly discontinuous overload into the growing brains of children, or to frazzled adults' nerves. People have time for each other: they reconnect after work or school, so that the complex and subtle

dance of family life – eating, talking, caring, getting things done – works harmoniously. Mum and dad are happily aware of each other, looking forward to time alone, exchanging smiles and encouragement amidst the melee of child management. Does that sound like your house – or like an impossible dream?

Kim uses a very apt word for the way we live now, often. He calls it a ‘fever’. That frantic, overheated, incoherent jumbled state we sometimes experience when we are sick. Our way of life is sick. It’s hurting us and our children, and making a time of abundance and safety, which ought to be heaven on earth, into a kind of hell. Too much stuff. Too much rush. Too little time, too little happiness.

Simplicity and slowing down are what our world needs most right now. This wonderful book is rich in ways to change that, starting in your own home, but hopefully rippling out to stop the madness around us. I almost said ‘Hurry up and read it!’ – but don’t do that! Take it slowly. It will change your life.

Steve Biddulph

*Author of *Raising Boys in the 21st Century*,
The New Manhood, and *Ten Things Girls Need Most*
August, 2018*

Introduction

*Go confidently in the direction of your dreams.
As you simplify life the laws of the universe will be simpler.*

— Henry David Thoreau

As parents, we're the architects of our family's daily lives. We build a structure for those we love by what we choose to do together, and how we do it. We determine the rhythms of our days; we set a pace. There are certainly limits to our control... ask any parent of a teenager. And it often feels that our lives are controlling us, caught as we are in a mad rush from one responsibility to another. Yet the unique way that we perform this dance of daily activities says a lot about who we are as a family. You can see what a family holds dear from the pattern of their everyday lives. I've been trained to do so as a counsellor and educator, but children need no such fancy training. They pick up the clues naturally. They see the golden overlay on all of our comings and goings, all of our tasks and busyness. What they see is that with our time and our presence, we express our love. Simple.

And they're quite right; as parents our motivations and intentions are few, our dreams nearly universal. No matter where, no matter how modestly or grandly we live, most of us want what's best for our loved ones. From these few common motivations – love, and the desire to protect and provide for our children – we build families. Every day.

As parents we carry the blueprints, the dreams of what our family could be. The plans change, the whole thing goes way over budget, there are unexpected additions, and the work never ends. Still, through the messiness of construction we see one another with such depth and hope. Our five year-old boy is still so clearly the baby he once was and sometimes – can you see it? – the young man he'll one day be. We draw energy and inspiration from our dreams; our simple, common motivations.

Protecting and Holding

In their development, we can see the extent to which our children feel protected. Surrounded by those they love, they make extraordinary leaps, fantastic moments of revelation and mastery. At our urging or prodding? Never. In flashes they show us who they are ... – revealing their golden, essential selves. And as parents we live for such moments. But we can't schedule them. We can't ask for, or hurry them.

We want our family to be a container of security and peace, where we can be our true selves. We want this most urgently for our children, who are engaged in the slow and tricky business of becoming themselves. Will our love and guidance give them the grace they need to grow? Children are so clearly happiest when they have the time and space to explore their worlds, at play. We may be bouncing between the future and the past, yet our children – the little Zen masters – long to stay suspended, fully engaged, in the moment. Our very best hope is that they'll develop their own voices, their own instincts and resiliency, at their own pace. And despite how many times we forget – sometimes in a single day – we absolutely know that this will take time.

The New Normal

The rest and rejuvenation we want from our homes is getting harder to find. Our working lives have moved in, taking residency in our computers, finding us wherever a mobile phone can reach. Children are overbooked as well. While parents may need software programs to keep track of their children's activities and schedules, developmental psychologist David Elkind noted in 2007 that children had lost more than twelve hours of free time a week in the previous two decades.¹

When 'multi-tasking' is valued as a survival skill, should we be surprised when increasing numbers of our children are being 'diagnosed' with 'attention difficulties'?

In every aspect of our lives, no matter how trivial, we're confronted with a dizzying array of things (stuff) and choices. The weighing of dozens of brands, features, claims, sizes and prices, together with the

memory scan we do for any warnings or concerns we may have heard – all of this enters into scores of daily decisions. Too much stuff and too many choices. If we're overwhelmed as adults, imagine how our children feel! Whichever came first – too many choices or too much stuff – the end-result of both isn't happiness. Contrary to everything advertising tells us (but obvious to anyone who's chosen a cellular calling plan), too many choices can be overwhelming. Another form of stress. Not only can it eat away at our time, studies show that having lots of choices can erode our motivation and well-being.

The Information Tsunami

Also finding its way into our homes, lives and our children's awareness is an avalanche of information, unfiltered and often unbidden. Home used to be a parochial outpost, and the outside world 'the big unknown'. Parents had trouble conveying all of the information that their children might need for facing life 'in the real world', beyond the confines of home and neighbourhood. Today, 'the real world', in all of its graphic reality, is available for view any time, any place, via the Internet. Our responsibility as gatekeepers is becoming exponentially more difficult, even as it's becoming more critical.

You've heard about how a frog dropped into a pot of boiling water will struggle to get out? Nothing surprising there; but it turns out that if you put a frog in a pot of cold water, and slowly heat it to the boiling point, the frog will remain still, without any signs of struggle. Based on the families I've been privileged to work with, the hundreds of parents who've shared with me their concerns, and my own experience as a parent, I believe that the pot we're in today as families is increasingly inhospitable for us all – but especially for our children.

Space and Grace

Are we building our families on the four pillars of 'too much': too much stuff, too many choices, too much information, and too fast? I believe that we are. But I also believe that we don't mean to be. I know for a

fact, and I've seen it many times, that parents can bring fresh inspiration and attention to the flow of family life. Without a doubt, as the family's architects we can add a little more space and grace, a little less speed and clutter, to our children's daily lives.

My experience with many, many children and families has helped me to work out ways for reducing the stresses, distractions and choices – all forms of clutter – in children's lives. I've seen how effective these strategies can be in restoring a child's sense of ease and well-being. This book is about re-aligning our daily lives with the pace and promise of childhood. Re-aligning our real lives with the dreams we hold for our families. Its goal is to help you strip away many of the unnecessary, distracting and overwhelming elements that are scattering our children's attention and burdening their spirits.

To have moments of calm – creative or restful – is a form of deep sustenance for human beings of all ages. Relationships are often built in these pauses, in the incidental moments, when nothing much is going on. This book should give you many ideas on how to reclaim such intervals, how to establish for your children islands of 'being' in the torrent of constant doing.

Slow Start – Strong Finish

If, as a society, we're embracing speed, it is partially because we are immersed in anxiety. Fed this concern and that worry, we're running as quickly as we can to avoid problems and sidestep danger. We address parenting with the same anxious gaze, rushing from this 'enrichment opportunity' to that, sensing hidden germs and new hazards, all while doing our level best to provide our children with every advantage now known, or soon to be invented. This book is not about hidden dangers, quick fixes or limited time opportunities; it's about the long haul. The big picture: a reverence for childhood.

When we act out of reverence instead of fear, our motivation is stronger, our inspiration boundless. The good news is that there are many things we can do as parents to protect the environment of

childhood. To protect the ideal environment for the slow emergence of their identities, resilience and well-being.

Many of the concepts in this book have their roots in the principles of Steiner Waldorf education. One of the most-used forms of independent education worldwide, Waldorf schools emphasise the imagination and the development of the whole child – the heart and hands as well as the head.

A Small Trajectory Shift

The simplification regime outlined in this book is eminently do-able, by any family with the inclination and motivation. The steps I outline in this book should be considered as a menu, not a check-list, from which you can choose what's workable and sustainable for your own family. Each family will have its own issues, areas of emphasis and levels of commitment. There is no 'right' order in which to work through the different levels, and no right or wrong time to begin.

The four layers of simplification will serve as a road map as you navigate your own way; each layer will be addressed in detail in the chapters to come.

How This Book Is Structured

In Chapter One we'll look at the reasons why simplifying is so critical and effective. We'll also consider how to reclaim the dreams you hold for your family, as these will be your motivation going forwards. A short meditation on parental instincts, reminding you (before we get into the practical 'work' of simplifying) of what you already know, Chapter Two will help you recognise and address the 'overload' in your children in much the way you might do when a little one has a physical fever.

Chapter Three begins at the doorway to your child's bedroom, as we begin to reduce the clutter of too many toys, books and choices.

Rhythm is another form of simplification, which we'll address in Chapter Four. A more rhythmic daily life establishes beachheads, small islands of calm and predictability in the flow of time. We'll look at how

meals and bedtimes can establish the major chords of a day's melody, and consider other possibilities for notes and pauses that a child can count on along the way.

From rhythm we'll look more deeply into the pattern of our children's days to consider their schedules. In Chapter Five we'll see how to balance particularly active days with calmer ones, challenging the notion that 'free time' means 'free to be filled' with lessons, practices, play-dates and appointments. The principle that too much stuff and too many choices are problematic for children can be applied to most aspects of daily life. In Chapter Six we'll then consider ways of filtering out adult information and concerns from our homes, and from our children's awareness. We'll look at parental involvement, and the ties that bind us to our children – ties that must stretch without breaking, as a child circles out and back again, on towards independence. We'll consider ways of simplifying our parental involvement and 'back out' of hyper-parenting, by building a sense of security for our children that they internalise and carry with them as they grow. We'll learn new ways to simplify our involvement, increase our trust and allow connection rather than anxiety to characterise the relationship we build with our children.

Note that in the first edition, I used the term 'kids' as a general term referring to children. In this new, updated UK edition, I use the more acceptable 'English English' term 'children' instead of 'kids', as the latter is sometimes used pejoratively and casually when used in Britain, in a way that's not the case in the USA where I live.

The Transformative Power of Doing Less

It's never 'too late' to bring inspiration and attention to the flow of family life. Parents of young children will find many seeds here to plant towards a family life that continues to protect and nurture as children grow. But every stage in a family's evolution can benefit from a little more space and grace, a little less speed and clutter. Another point to remember, as we begin, is that simplification is often about 'doing' less, and trusting more. Trusting that – if they have the time and security – children will explore

their worlds in the way, and at the pace, that works best for them.

In my descriptions of how I worked with other families you'll see what might work for your own. No 'expert' is required. In reading the stories I share along the way, you'll have moments of recognition and inspiration. My hope is that you'll come back to this book and continue to draw ideas and encouragement from it as your children grow.

While your daily life may seem like a radio bandwidth full of static, simplification allows you, with much more regularity and clarity, to tune into your own true signal as a parent. I think you'll find it very gratifying to feel your inner authenticity develop as you bring more awareness and attention to your relationship with your children. And with this process comes more opportunities to see deeply into who your children are becoming.

I sincerely hope this book will inspire you – give you hope, comfort, insights, and ideas – now, and as your children grow.

Kim John Payne

Summer 2018

CHAPTER TWO

Soul Fever



Let's begin at a comfortable starting place for any process: by remembering and appreciating what we already know. We know our children, that's for sure. We know them as no one else possibly could. We know their best, shining selves, and every degree removed from that. The edge of their 'too little sleep' selves, the delight of their 'overcome with silliness' selves, and the sometimes dangerous intersection of those two. We know the cadence of their voices, their smells, the meaning behind their expressions, the things that engage them. We almost always know what they want to say, but can't.

The depth of our knowledge of these small beings is phenomenal. It's certainly more than just what an accumulation of days, moods or experiences would show us. More than what we've learned from others on the subject (of children), or what we've experienced directly. More than everything we've done to record the time we've spent together – our notes and pictures, our videos and memories. Yes, we know our children better than everything we could show, or tell you about them. After all, we see them with a sort of X-ray vision. Not exactly a superpower, but as close as we come to one. We see our children with a depth of vision equal to the sum of our attention, our connection, our love for them and our fervent desire to understand them.

This deep, instinctual knowledge of our children – like everything else – waxes and wanes. While our love may always be there, our attention can suffer; our connection can sometimes falter, and when this happens, understanding them can seem like a whole lot of work. Our instincts are not always strong. Simplification is about stripping away the distractions and clutter that monopolise our attention and threaten our connection. It's about giving children the ease to become themselves, and giving us the ease to pay attention. To more fully develop, and to trust, our instincts.

In the chapters ahead, we'll begin the practical steps of simplifying, of peeling away the stresses and excesses that can overwhelm a child's emotional well-being, and short-circuit our instincts. But first let's look at how, with attention and connection, we can recognise when a child is overwhelmed. When they are being rushed along by too much stuff,

speed, stress, or when they have what I think of as an emotional or 'soul fever'. Let's look at how, instinctively, we treat an emotional fever in much the same way as we do a physical fever: by drawing the child close and suspending their normal routines.

As parents, we develop an instinctual sense of what to do when our children get sick. Our instincts are part childhood memories of what brought us comfort, a bit of science, a large dose of compassion, and some parental adrenaline. After all, it's a rare mum or dad who isn't humbled by their baby's first high fever, or by a long night spent sitting perfectly upright – motionless – holding a little one so congested that they can only breathe in one position. Sometimes routine, sometimes downright stressful, our children's illnesses are never convenient. Yet over time, we develop ways to see them through, changing our schedules and rising to the occasion.

We learn how to support them through the chills, coughs, fevers and rashes we come to expect. Our instincts even carry us (and them) through some of the more unusual symptoms ('So this is "projectile vomiting!"') with which they surprise us ('You have nasty red bumps where?!'). We learn that comfort is a large part of healing, an essential ingredient in any recipe for 'getting better'.

One touch of their forehead, one glance at their dull eyes and we know – the signs of physical fever are unmistakable, unavoidable. And so we begin the process of care-taking.

Just as inevitably, our little ones (into adolescence and beyond) will experience what I've come to call 'soul fevers'. Something isn't right; they're upset, overwhelmed, at odds with the world. And most of all, at odds with their truest selves. From the toddler who absolutely can't tolerate your authority when she is so newly intoxicated with her own, to the same child, eleven years later, who longs to fit into a social circle that bullies and berates her. Whether the source of the malady was internal or external, it's now raging within, occupying the child's attention and affecting their behaviour. Affecting, also, the emotional climate of the home. You could think of these as 'emotional fevers,' yet I prefer 'soul fever' because there

Chapter Two – Soul Fever

is something so uniquely individual about the way each child manifests their tribulation. Just as one child never seems to run a fever, while her sister's temperature climbs into triple digits for the slightest cold, so each child wrestles their inner trials in their own way.

Often when I'm giving a talk about parenting, a parent will ask, 'How can I tell when my child is overwhelmed?'. It's a common question, usually followed by '...And what can I do about it?'. As for the first question, my short answer is: instincts. Instincts that we may need to develop, or redevelop. Instincts that should be – and can be – as clear and reliable as those we count on to recognise and care for our children when they're ill.

This book is my best attempt to answer the question 'What can we do about it?'. It's indeed a question that so many of us ask ourselves. The truth is, what we do instinctually to care for our children when they're sick could be boiled down to this: we simplify. This is exactly what we need to do when they're overwhelmed; stretched thin and stressed out by the effects of having too much stuff, too many choices, and jumping through their days too quickly. It is also what we need to do when their fever is emotional rather than physical. Emotional growing pains, or soul fevers, are as natural and inevitable as the common cold, and can be 'treated' in remarkably similar ways. Simplification gives children the ease they need to re-align with their true selves, their real age, and with their own world rather than the stress and pressures of the adult world.

Let's start here, then, with an example that serves as a metaphor for the whole process of simplification. Let's look at what we tend to do without even thinking about it, once we feel our child's fevered brow, or see in them a tell-tale listlessness. The steps we take, and the attention we bring to caring for our children when they're sick are, essentially, simplification. We'll look at the signs and symptoms of soul fevers as well, and go through the steps we can take to help our children build their emotional immune systems, their resiliency. Just as we notice when they're fighting a physical fever, we can become more attuned to their soul fevers, and when they're simply overwhelmed.

We can learn to recognise when their systems are out of balance.

Simplicity Parenting

Remembering what we already know (and what it's so easy to forget when we are overloaded and overwhelmed), we'll reawaken our care-taking instincts by simplifying.

Noticing

Physical Fever: We begin to care for our child when we notice they're not well. Shivery or hot, slower to respond, not interested in eating, a heavy, vacant look in their eyes – from these signs, individually or in combination, we can tell they're 'off' , not themselves'. Your daughter may seem fine to me – active and bright – but one look in her eyes and you know that she has or is getting the cold her brother had last week. Their little bodies are not extensions of our own, but sometimes it feels that way, given how naturally we notice their physical fluctuations.

Soul Fever: Generally, we need to see a few symptoms of disquiet to identify a soul fever. Inner turmoil extends beyond a bad mood or brief snit, and it also lasts longer. A child with a soul fever stays 'out of sorts', taking more than a step or two towards their quirky tendencies. A child being sullen is usually just that; but if they're sullen then feisty, and tangling with friends they usually adore, we might take a second look. Soul fevers begin with a sort of prickliness, which can take different forms. Children respond to an inner unease characteristically, depending on their temperament. An introverted child may withdraw physically and emotionally, but still perhaps 'snipe', or 'take potshots', at others to announce their discomfort. An extroverted child usually manifests their unease more directly, with anger or blaming.

The younger the child, the more obvious they make their unhappy state. They may become hyper-sensitive, aware of itchy labels, twisted tights, noises that they wouldn't otherwise even notice. Little things bother them. Tantrums become deeper, more intractable. Sleep patterns change. You can often see little changes in their posture: shoulders raised, fists clenched. Most of all, they're much more easily 'set off' than usual; their emotional switch has a hair-trigger sensitivity.

You could say that they're acting 'out of character', but in truth their

character is amplified, almost caricatured. In middle childhood you might see shifts in friendships, in dress or work habits. For middle-school children and teenagers, you might notice your child having difficulty settling into things, whether homework, a hobby or any activity that would usually hold their attention. Of course challenging rules and boundaries is the teenager's developmental job, but with soul fever you may notice particularly feisty challenges to rules that are firmly in place, accepted, and which have never been challenged before.

Let's take an extra moment to consider adolescence, a particularly 'feverish' developmental stage. Adolescence is all about polarities, and swinging between them. You can picture fairly typical ends of a spectrum: the teenager who is either a whirlwind of activity, or a motionless, dead weight on the couch. The young person who can suddenly outlast you way into the night can also sleep through their little brother's noon band practice. There is a need to belong in adolescence that's so intense it seems primal, yet a teenage boy or girl can spend more time alone, in their rooms, than they ever did before. A teenager's parents know that they can't make a comment, no matter how innocent, that is absolutely immune to challenge. Most every young person, in adolescence, seems to be heading towards a legal career. Yet among their peers the same child can be the picture of conformity, a wet noodle of agreement and acquiescence. The movement between these polarities is the norm in adolescence.

When a teenager is having difficulty, when they're emotionally out of sorts, they tend to get stuck in one extreme or the other, becoming tenacious and myopic. I remember a student I had, Teresa, who was 14 years old, with her life being rather topsy-turvy. She had many adults in her life (parents, step-parents and various parent substitutes), but she had little consistent, commanding and compassionate adult presence. One day in class Teresa was being quite disruptive, in an entertaining, attention-seeking way. When I asked her to get back to her work, she realised that she definitely had everyone's attention now, and she wanted to escalate the situation. It wasn't my finest moment as a teacher, but I

remember asking her, 'Must you be so subjective?', to which she shot back 'Do you have to use such big words when you're losing the argument?'. When I explained what 'subjective' meant, using the well-worn cliché of not seeing the forest for the trees, she looked at me with pure disdain. 'I'm 14, that's my job!' With that she turned and walked out of the room.

Teresa was right; teenagers are very self-absorbed. But she was also stuck. These outbursts – symptoms of the same soul fever – were echoing throughout her life. In no arena – home, school or friends – was she getting the counterbalance she needed. Nobody was helping her fill the middle ground, showing the value of warmth rather than anger's pure heat. Nobody was modelling compromise, how to build or hold on to relationships. She was being allowed to revel in her own power and independence, repressing her need to belong.

The developmental purpose of adolescence's polarities is a zig-zagged path towards self-regulation. We now know the brain is still developing during these years, particularly those sections that are critical for judgement and reason. What allows a teenager to move between polarities is the (boring) stability in their lives. A safe and stable context allows teens to swing between polarities without getting stuck in one extreme or another. It gives them a centre, a plumb-line to use as they learn to regulate their behaviour. Luckily for Teresa (who is now a college graduate and in her late 30s, by the way), the adults in her life – family, teachers and an athletic coach – met while she was in high school to discuss and commit to ways of providing more form and consistency in her life.

The first step then, towards taking care of our child's soul fever, just as with a physical fever, is noticing it. And there will be times when just that – our noticing – will be enough for a child to feel bolstered, supported, understood. When we think back to our childhoods (as our children will to theirs), these small acts of noticing can form the emotional foundation of 'home' or 'family': the place where we were 'read', understood, held in balance. And in adult life – in marriage and business – isn't it easy to see whose emotional landscapes were not well read? The symptoms

are the same – pouting, tantrums, icy withdrawal – but they get more convoluted as we get older. As parents we can be thankful for our six year-old's dramatically furrowed brow, his slouchy posture, his mumbled responses, his big sighs. And when he doesn't even laugh at his sister's silly dancing, you know – thank heavens that subtlety and subterfuge are still beyond him – that something is really bothering him. 'Sweetheart, what's up?'

Symptoms that are missed or ignored tend to worsen, or disappear and reappear in a stronger form, until the internal conflict is addressed. There are a couple of reasons why noticing a child's soul fever can be difficult. Parents who are very busy and preoccupied, overloaded themselves, can miss the initial signs of a child's unease. This happens, just as it's possible to miss the first signs of a physical fever. And as parents, we don't want to develop our own hair-trigger response to a child's normal emotional ups and downs. A pout, a bad mood – these come and go. Like the sniffles, or a bump on the knee, their effects are temporary, easily shaken. But a soul fever lingers. Years ago it might have been called a growing pain, both inevitable and painful. And while it may not seem like much to us (compared with the stresses of adult life), there is some sense of loss associated with these growing pains. When you imagine the incredible rate at which children change and evolve, you can begin to see how their heart sometimes resists the adjustment. They must let go of comforts and assurances with one hand to have both hands free to reach ahead, to pull towards some new level of maturity.

Understandably, life's pace and pressures can sometimes distract a parent from the signs of their child's soul fever. Yet when a child's emotional distress is routinely ignored, they will usually, consciously or unconsciously, find other ways to solicit attention. Parental attention is the safest and most convenient, especially when one is displaying all of one's 'nasty bits' (as one four year-old described a tantrum). But if a child can't garner attention from their parents, then attention from someone else will do; and if they can't attract compassionate attention, any form of attention can seem like a worthwhile substitute.

On the flip side of parental busyness, what I've often noticed in recent years are children whose behaviour is already so 'pumped up', so frenetic and on edge, that it's hard to notice when they're emotionally agitated. For children whose 'norm' has become an elevated emotional state, and whose daily lives are rushed and pressured, there's little equilibrium to measure against, no 'set point' or normal temperature to judge by. When this is the case, children can very quickly get into trouble, manifesting extreme behaviour just to say something quite simple: 'I need a break'.

Quieting Things Down

Physical Fever: There it is: a fever, an upset stomach, a nasty cough. Once we've noticed that our child isn't feeling well, what do we do? We stop our normal routines. Even as we're trying to work out how we can possibly accommodate the change, we're making the announcement: 'No school for you, love', or 'Oh dear, let's tell Erin you can play another day, but right now you need to rest'. Everyone else may gather at the table for dinner, but this child is off the regular eating routines and foods. They've been pulled out of the normal flow of daily life – the chores and activities, the comings and goings – and allowed to take a passive role, to be within the group while outside the action.

Soul Fever: So, you've noticed, and something is definitely up. No matter how quickly they're spinning (figuratively, or, in the case of the little ones, sometimes literally), they're actually exhausted, quite undone. With emotional overload or soul fever, just like a physical fever, once noticed, it is time to stop normal routines. Children may resist this, but at times they seem to be almost pulling you to a stop, with clingy behaviour and an uncharacteristic avoidance of anything new.

As when a child is ill, there is now a shift in the normal flow of family activities, an accommodation that needs to be made. Certainly the child needs to take a break from after-school activities; they might even need to stay home from school. A parent decides the length and breadth of the change for a little one. For a middle-school child, you might consult with

the child, still making the final decision yourself. And for a teenager, you collaborate on the best way to make sure they really take a step back, and out, from the pressures they're feeling.

Most children, no matter what their age, can reset their emotional clock, given two or three quiet days. One restful, simplified weekend is usually enough to make the difference, to break a soul fever. It affords enough space and grace to loosen an emotional knot.

When there's a real problem that underlies the soul fever, I'm not suggesting that a quiet weekend will directly address the issue. But it will help your child maintain the resiliency they need to address it. Especially with older children, who may be dealing with difficulties at school, with friends or romances, a quiet weekend is not a cure-all. But I still contend that it can be one of the best medicines. Our impulse as a parent may be to jump in and 'make everything better', which is impossible, and more clearly so as our children mature. But their success in facing and resolving issues depends on their ability to work through their emotions, to regulate their physical and emotional energy. That's when a little retreat, a break in the normal routine, can really help.

Early on in my eldest daughter's second-grade year, she told us about a girl in her class, Myrna, who was often 'silly and nasty'. We weren't quite sure what that combination meant, but we could tell that she was wary of Myrna. Mid-year, however, the silly/nasty threat seemed to be close at hand, and our daughter was clearly being affected. She didn't want to talk about it. Yet she was dragging her way through breakfast and getting dressed, even though she usually couldn't wait to get to school. 'You okay, love?' Her soft 'yes' was unconvincing. She took a day off school, and between my schedule and her mother's, spent some time with each of us, at home and running errands.

The next day, I decided to bring some of the security of home to school. I walked her into school that morning and lingered while she showed me her desk and recent work. I also made sure to meet her after school that afternoon, and for the rest of the week. We would take our time, hanging out a bit among her classmates before we walked home.

We never addressed the issue head-on, and perhaps it resolved itself in a mysterious child-like way. But over the week I could feel her step lighten, her shoulders settle, and her mood become easy and playful again.

Parents of teenagers may pick up the signs of a soul fever in their child, but they won't necessarily know what's bothering them. I've found that (yes, this is a generalisation, but one based on experience) with a girl, you may only need to say this once, whereas you might need to drop it casually a few times to a boy: 'Something's up; I've noticed. I'm here if you want to talk about it.' Even if your teenage son or daughter won't open up about what's upsetting them, you can still be available to them. And you can still suggest a pull-back from normal routines. 'You don't have to tell me what's up, but I can tell something's going on, something's bothering you. In this family, we pull back, take some quiet time. Let's figure out how we can do that for you.'

A colleague of mine, Margaret, used to tell me about her 15 year-old daughter who was busy at school and a competitive swimmer. Margaret said her daughter wouldn't slow down, and resisted opening up even when a dark cloud seemed to be following her. When I suggested a pull-back, Margaret rolled her eyes; but not too long after, she instituted a quiet weekend, missed training and all. The first weekend was enforced – 'You mean I'm grounded?!' – but subsequently Margaret reported that her daughter was now collaborating with her on making some downtime when she felt overwhelmed.

Margaret has also noticed that once that decision has been made, once they've cleared the calendar for a couple of days, her daughter is more apt to open up about what's bothering her, what brought her to this point. I think when your feelings are complicated (this could be a new definition of adolescence), it helps to know that if you do choose to open up, you'll have the time to talk it out. You won't have to try to explain the whole confusing mess on the way to swim practice, or between dinner and your brother's bedtime.

That first time, Margaret's daughter felt she was being 'grounded'. It turns out she was absolutely right. I love this very American expression,

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'being grounded', because in this context, it fits. When an adolescent is overwhelmed, in a soul fever the electrical current around them is so strong that they actually do need 'grounding'. They need to be brought back to earth, brought back to their more relaxed, resilient selves.

Bringing Them Close

Physical Fever: Normal routines are off, pyjamas are on, and the sick child needs care. At this point, we bring them close – physically, and in terms of our attention. We watch them closely. There are complications to illness and fever, repercussions we want to avoid. We might cosy up with them, or make them comfortable in bed. In our house we have a box of special books and little toys that we get out when one of the girls isn't feeling well. Curtains might be drawn, a special 'nest' of pillows made. Everything quiets down.

At this point we might also ask ourselves how or why this happened. Is there something going around at school? Is there anything we need to find out about, or seek help with? Do they need a doctor? Do we need a neighbour or friend to get a few things at the store?

Soul Fever: An emotionally feverish child is in need of care, too. Pyjama time may be optional, but down-time is not. Your child will probably not be holed up in bed, but they can still have a period of ease, time that will feel different from everyday life. Simple pleasures they rarely have time for – getting out the paints, family stories, a building project – can occupy their attention while loosening their emotional knot. One-on-one time with a parent can be a welcome change.

Physically and emotionally, they need to be brought close. Sometimes a child who is 'off their game' doesn't need pampering, as much as a quiet assurance of our presence and availability. When we change the routine and quieten things down, we're placing an unspoken emphasis on relationship, on connection.

Where do they feel safest, most at peace? For many children the answer is home, but not for all. A friend of mine takes her eight year-old son, Jason, fishing. 'We do that in good times, so I figure getting out on

the lake might help when he's having a hard time, too.' Nature is a warm sensory bath that can counterbalance the cold overwhelm of too much activity, information or 'stuff'. Time in nature calms and focuses; for most children, it takes only a few minutes for them to begin to explore. Watch as they seek out places that feel particularly right to them, as they gather symbolic objects – leaves, sticks, bits of moss – that they discover. You can't manipulate nature, it must be delved into; it's a vibrant but neutral canvas on to which a child can pour their creativity.

Studies have shown that patients who have even just a view of trees in a hospital setting recover more quickly than those who do not. It's no wonder; nature is profoundly healing, physically and emotionally. Neurologically, time in nature can bring a child out of the amygdala-based fight-or-flight response, and into the higher functions of thought that are based in the limbic system (creative) and the frontal lobes (cognition).

There are complications to soul fevers as well as physical fevers, ramifications that we want to avoid. Little children under seven will work themselves right into a storm of some sort unless or until their unease is acknowledged. Too young to regulate their emotions, they'll act out until everyone, including the cat or dog, has felt the effects. As children get older they learn how to repress painful feelings – but not entirely, or for long. Especially in adolescence, unprocessed feelings can surface in all manner of seemingly unrelated ways: an extreme haircut, severed friendships, behaviour issues at school.

By simplifying, you offer your child support, and a container for the issues and changes they're working through. You also offer them a model, one that may be a life-saver as they get older. This is the lesson they will take with them: a small period of down-time is a form of care, a way of being cared for. It's true, you may be the one doing the caring now, and insisting on limitations that they may resist; but you're also beginning a pattern that they can continue for themselves, and which will serve them throughout their lives.

So why is your child overwhelmed? You may be asking yourself that question, just as you would if they came home with a fever. What

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brought them to this point? Have they been doing too much? Has there been too much to'ing and fro'ing, especially for children whose parents no longer live together? Is there a need for more consistency or balance in their schedules, their daily lives? Is school particularly stressful? With the current mania for testing in English and American schools (or 'No Child Left Intact', as I call it), is your child feeling the effects?

Is it time to reach out to others for guidance or help? In more serious cases of emotional issues, of course, professional help should be considered. What we're addressing here are common cases of overwhelm and upset, for which a day or two of down-time can be helpful. Still, you might want to consider whether your child would benefit from a little time with someone whose influence is steadying and reaffirming. As children reach adolescence, they'll naturally develop relationships outside the family with people who are in a position to be helpful. If your daughter loves and respects her dance teacher, a heads-up call might be worth making: 'Ellen seems to be going through a bit of a rough patch' – would the teacher mind staying close, keeping an eye out?

'When your child seems to deserve affection least, that's when they need it most.' I don't know which wise soul said it first, but I applaud them. And the saying has great relevance to the question at hand: How can we make ourselves available to a child who's in the midst of an emotional fever? It's one thing to cuddle up with a child who has the 'flu. They're certainly not at their best, and can be quite grumpy. They would rather hand you their used tissues and throw up in your lap than use the containers you've positioned all around them. But it's quite another thing to maintain a loving presence with a child who's exploring their inner shadow as they push every one of your buttons, as though you were the elevator panel in a skyscraper.

Their soul fever can easily prompt your own unless you take care of yourself, as you care for them. I counsel this to any parent whose child is having a difficult time, especially if those difficulties are being felt throughout the home. Take at least a few minutes a day (longer or more often is better, but everyone can spare three minutes) to picture

your child's absolute golden self, their 'good side'. This will give you the balance you need to look beyond the worst of a soul fever. It will help you with the questions that could surface, such as 'Is this really my child, or was he raised by wolves?'. If we can manage to hold a picture of our child's higher being in our hearts, then we won't need to be the Dalai Lama to get through their tough times. But don't fake it, or gloss over the exercise. Bring out the photo book. Just take a few minutes to look through, to see her leaning over the birthday cake with three candles on it, her ringlets shining in the light. Remember when they spent the entire week at the lake, playing in and out of water up to their dimpled knees? Remind yourself that the three year-old still exists in the 13 year-old – the one who just told you that you could never, ever, possibly understand what it's like to be her.

If you can't put together enough lovely images to be your ballast in the storm, call their grandparents, godparents, or favourite aunt. Choose the ones who love your child to bits and tell them: 'Look, this is your job as [fill in the familial relation]. Remind me of everything that's wonderful about Henry. And please – keep going until I say "stop"'. This will be so helpful to you, at the very time you need it most. Some parents who've tried this have become addicted to the endorphin rush that accompanies those sweet memories. How much you avail yourself of it is your choice, but please don't forget to do it when you most need to. Take care of yourself while caring for your out-of-sorts child.

Running Its Course

Physical Fever: We don't often know how long a virus is going to last, but we do know that there's not much we can do to short-circuit it. We can't force the pace of an illness, or control the duration. Once we've done what we can to make a child comfortable, we generally have to let them make their way through the biological process that's already begun. We've acknowledged the illness, stopped our normal routines, and brought them close. We've simplified their environment, their activities and their intake. We usually then find a balance between closeness and

the space they need to rest undisturbed.

Soul Fever: A soul fever, like a virus, has its own life span, its own duration. We simplify not to try to control, bypass or stop our child's emotional upheaval. Our efforts aren't a bribe, an alternative to a hard-edged 'shape up and get over it'. In acknowledging their discomfort and drawing close, we are offering them support – through this and, by extension, through whatever they may need to face.

We usually figure out that an emotional tempest can't be shortened with our toddler's first tantrums. I knew this intellectually – honest I did! – but I'll never forget the day I really learnt it. Our oldest daughter was three, and having an absolute show-stopper of a tantrum lying in the middle of our living room floor. There was the requisite scream-crying, the pounding of the fists; but then, as I stood above her, aghast, she also reared up and gave her head a good thwack on the floor. I was frozen (when my wife tells this story, she inserts this bit here with a kind smile: 'Kim, the child development expert, was frozen...'), when my wife walked in, picked up a pillow from the couch, calmly placed it under our daughter's head, and wordlessly sat down and began knitting. Our little one quickly wore herself out crying and fell asleep right where she lay. Phew.

Nobody gets to skip the soul fevers and growing pains of life. In order to learn who they are, and what feels right to them, a child must grapple with these emotional upsets. It's all part of self-regulation. One mother told me that her daughter Amy was having difficulty fitting in at a new middle school. She said that when Amy talked, she was speaking in different voices and inflections, taking on the speech patterns of the children she was hanging out with. 'I could tell when things eased for her; she wasn't "trying on" different people – she was coming back to herself, speaking with her own voice.'

Once we recognise the signs and simplify accordingly, we can support a child as they make their way through an emotional process that – like a fever – has usually already begun. Your support doesn't 'fix' anything; it just provides a loving container for them to process the things that are bothering them. With warmth you can help keep their

emotions, their sense of options, and their behaviour pliable. The roots of hopelessness and helplessness need hardened soil; you maintain fertile emotional ground around your child with the compassion of your noticing and caring.

If we respond to our children's soul fevers by simplifying, chances are we won't get lost in the hyper-parenting jungle. The emphasis is not on us, not on parental heroics or histrionics, not on micro-managing our children's lives and every emotion. The emphasis is on creating a calming, supportive atmosphere so that they can get through what they need to get through. Simplifying is not about using guerrilla tactics to clear a path through life for our child. So often these tactics – the immediate urge to pick up the phone and harangue a teacher, or another child's parent – is a response to the worst parental nightmare: our child is in pain, and there's nothing we can do. Simplifying is something we can do. By simplifying we take clear, consistent steps to provide our child with what they need – time, ease and compassion – to process what is bothering them.

A Slow, Strong Return

Physical Fever: Don't you love the little signs of recovery a child gives when they've turned the corner of an illness? One mother reports that her son is such a chatterbox that the worst part for her when he's sick is the quiet. 'I can't count the number of times I've prayed for a moment or two of quiet when he's well. Yet it's the silence that kills me when he's sick. I hate to see him lying there on the couch, not saying a word. I breathe a sigh of relief with the first "Hey Mom, guess what?" Then I know he's feeling better.'

Slowly we reintroduce easy, solid foods as well as activity into our child's schedule. They might go back to school for a half day; they may get to play outside, or reconnect with a friend. You're careful to ease them back into regular life, especially if they've been sick for more than a couple of days. You may notice a change in them; they've grown up just a bit. Most of all, there will be a closeness between you. You've travelled this land of illness together and made it back to everyday life. You return

with greater strength, and usually with at least one or two tales to add to the family storybook. While unpleasant for them, and at the very least inconvenient for you, this illness has brought you closer. You've made it through.

Soul Fever: We certainly do know it when the emotional storm has passed, the fever broken. Our child, in his or her ease and brightness, is back. Even more noticeably than after a physical bug, children emerge from a soul fever stronger, with greater resiliency. Their feelings of overwhelm have receded and they're ready to dive back into the flow of life again. If we pay attention to our instincts, we monitor their re-entry, especially if they're recovering from the effects of 'too much'. Can we ease them back into their previous schedule, or is a more permanent simplification in order? Are they doing too much?

You'll notice a change in your child with each passing emotional storm. They'll take something from the experience; hopefully a sense of their own strength; certainly a sense that 'things get better'. Even if their unease remains nameless, unacknowledged by them, they'll know that you cared enough to support them through it. You didn't walk each step with them, but you eased their way. These experiences, never convenient or fun, bring us closer. 'Take the day off work?! You've got to be kidding!' Quite often I hear that response to the suggestions I've described to you. It usually happens just after I've been told about a child who's acting out in some way, clearly overwhelmed by something – or too many things – going on in his or her life. When I suggest that a little time off, spent together, could be helpful, the idea is sometimes met with amazement. 'A day off? Why?! This is an absolutely crazy time for me!' Most parents are relieved and enthusiastic about the notion of trying a little period of connection and care-taking with their out-of-sorts child. But some find the idea vague and amorphous; they'd much rather I handed them a phone number, or told them of this or that expensive purchase or expert who'll 'set things right'. The more adamantly a parent tries to convince me that a break would be impossible, the more certain I become that both parent and child need

to take a step out of their everyday lives, towards each other.

Our child's fevers – physical or emotional – can be downright inconvenient. Yet their well-being is going to cost us, and them, a lot more in the future if we ignore it now. What will we 'save' in terms of heartache? What are the financial savings of occasionally scheduling a day or two's camping trip, or quiet weekend together – convenient or not – compared with the cost of long-term professional counselling? My fellow Australian and dear friend Steve Biddulph (author of *Raising Boys*) doesn't equivocate. He says, 'If either parent spends more than ten hours a day at work, including travel, then their child will suffer. Fifteen hours a day almost guarantees damage. Emotional problems, addictions, suicidality, depression, poor school performance – all are increased by parental absence through the workplace demands made on us. Children are especially vulnerable to the absence of the same-sex parent as themselves. Boys to dads, and girls to mums, although the opposite-sex parent is obviously also important. To have emotionally healthy children in today's world means making strong choices in the face of the consumerist economy.'

By carving time out of our busy schedules we place an emphasis on connection. When we simplify our child's daily life and their environment, we support them, making room for contemplation, restoration. We also provide a counter to hopelessness and helplessness. A child can always refuse the support, though, and continue to grapple with issues, sometimes in increasingly self-destructive ways.

What do you do then? You continue to offer support, and alternatives, and with your love you counter despair. Just as most children come through the average mix of childhood illnesses and scrapes, most manage their emotional upheavals and move on from them, stronger and more self-reliant as a result. Even when the going gets really tough – imagine an act of vandalism, or an eating disorder – the consistency of your love and support is the best you can offer. I've sat with parents who find themselves in extreme situations with their children: in hospital waiting rooms, police stations, truly at a loss. I think then about love's

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constancy; about how we carry this parental love resolutely, wherever it leads us.

In other words, we're in it – loving and caring – for the duration. From her first high fever as a baby, when motionless, you held her upright all night, so she could breathe. On through the physical and emotional fevers of childhood and adolescence. The steps are fairly simple. The instincts kick in as you notice, stop the ordinary routines, and draw them close. You don't 'make them better' when they're sick, yet your care and support allow them the ease to fight off whatever nasty virus they're grappling with. When they're overwhelmed by the pressures and pace of daily life, or when their 'fever' is emotional, you can offer the same pattern of care to support them. Above all, you notice. And simplify. You draw them near, while affording them the time and space to work through their own issues.

In our sped-up world, this is as close to a panacea as we can offer to our little ones: a step back, a bit of time and leisure to rejuvenate. Simplification, in a small dose. A detangler of emotional knots, it's an effective tool to remember and use in the swirl and bustle of daily life.

There really are no great stunts. With care and a bit of luck, there needn't be. The cape around your shoulders – the heroism of parenting – is well earned and deserved. But the cape is not for flying, or special effects. It is a symbol of heroic consistency. Heroic. Consistent. Simple. Lifelong. Love.

Imagine how secure your child will feel knowing that...

- when something is really 'up', when they don't feel right, you will notice and respond;
- when they are overwhelmed
 - physically or emotionally
 - normal routines will be suspended;
- when their well-being is threatened, they'll be brought close, be watched and be cared for;
- when they're not well, they'll be afforded the time and ease to recover their equilibrium;
- your love will accommodate, and look beyond, their less-than-best selves;
- they're deeply known and instinctively cared for.

