



NURTURE

The art of parenting

by Tracy Carter



You could be forgiven for thinking that our nation's happiness and wellbeing levels are at an all-time low. Heart-breaking suicide statistics ... high rates of depression and anxiety ... and excessive levels of domestic violence paint a grim picture of a country that, for the most part, has so much going for it.

But, thankfully, all is not lost! And according to Nathan Wallis, a renowned neuroscience educator, author and expert in child development, our children play a key role in boosting New Zealand's wellbeing.

His new book *Nurture – the Art of Parenting* (co-authored with Peter Alsop) – has just been released, and contains a unique collection of parenting ideas interwoven with key virtues for living a great life. Beautifully illustrated, it's a book that embraces the timeless truth: it takes a village to raise great children.

Nurture invites us all to lead the way to a community – and a country – of new possibilities.

GRAPEVINE: Your book is called *Nurture* – what is it that you're encouraging parents to nurture?

NATHAN WALLIS: We've come through a scientific generation where we believed it was all about 'nature'. We thought that genes drive development. But in neuroscience we've begun to understand that a lot of a child's outcomes are determined by a parent's *nurture*. So I suppose 'nurture' is a way of trying to prioritise that relationship we have with our child, recognising that it's not just pertinent to that child's emotional health. It's also important to their cognitive development – and to all their outcomes.

But it's not actually nature *versus* nurture – it's about how the two

accommodate one another. Because of the way the neural pathways are formed, practice (nurture) becomes biology.

GV: *Nurture* is unlike many parenting books in that it doesn't take a problem-to-solution format. It's a series of profound yet simple quotes – a presentation of parenting wisdom – set alongside beautiful vintage photographs of Kiwi life in the past. How do you hope parents will approach the book?

NATHAN: We designed the book's format to engage both sides of the brain – both right and left. Most books primarily engage the left brain. By using pictures, as we've done in *Nurture*, and by using the collective wisdom of the community, we open up that metaphoric transfer of

knowledge and wisdom – which is much more of a right-brain activity. So someone can pick up the book and see a picture that captures a moment – in itself worth a thousand words – and then underneath that will be a short statement about one of the virtues that inspires the parent or stimulates that pool of knowledge.

The book has an introductory chapter that puts all of this into context. It explains the complex brain science and explains the virtues (as identified by Martin Seliman, the father of positive psychology) – which are essentially the six elements that fuel wellbeing. So at some point the parent does have to sit down and read through that, but it's only the first chapter – after that it's designed to be something that you pick up and ponder, have a conversation about, or open up and be inspired.

It was important to us to make the book beautiful, too. The brain devotes a lot of space to the visual, so beauty matters – and the aesthetics were important to us.

GV: Many of us who are parenting today have had at least one person (often from an older generation) say things to us like, “*We didn't used to have to read books or do research to know how to parent back in our day!*” How do you respond to that?

NATHAN: First of all, they did do research. Parenting didn't stay the same for 3000 years and then suddenly change in the 1980s! Earlier generations were doing Dr Spock. And, even before that, infant mortality rates greatly improved because of Truby King and Plunket's efforts to educate parents. Families had been prioritising feeding the five-year-old, who was much more vocal about being hungry, without realising that so many infants

were dying because they were malnourished. The Plunket Society told them, “*You can't just give a baby flour and water because that looks like breastmilk!*” People listened, and more babies survived.

So really, our generation is doing exactly what earlier generations did – we're looking at how to optimise the wellbeing of our babies. But as you catch more flies with honey, I'd agree with those critical people and say, “*You're right. When you're fully committed – spiritually, emotionally, physically and mentally – to honour your child and to do everything in your ability to allow this child to be all that he can be ... then yes, you don't need research or education.*” It's possible to benefit from research and wisdom without being conscious of them, if your intentions are pure.

Nevertheless, it's very empowering to know that what you're doing intuitively is backed up by research. Most parents want to know if one thing they're doing is only achieving a little bit of good, while another thing they're doing is achieving masses of good. Parents are empowered by that knowledge. So we need to have these conversations.

GV: Early in the book, you say that “parenting is the cornerstone of community wellbeing” – how so?

NATHAN: What is a community? A community is a group of families who are bonding together to help and support each other. It's not a bunch of individuals, really. We see cross-culturally – across the whole planet – that families work together with other families to support each other's needs, and in doing so they form a community. Because the family unit is such an integral part of what constitutes a community, if you nurture that unit so



that it's healthy and functional, then those healthy and functioning family units will together form a healthy and functioning community.

That may sound trite, but it's absolutely true.

GV: You identify six virtues as key factors in human wellbeing. Can you describe them for us?

VIRTUE #1

Wisdom

NATHAN: The first virtue we talk about, *wisdom*, probably describes itself. It's there to remind us that it's not just about research-based answers from cognitive-developmental neuroscience that informs us as parents. I do that for a job, and that informs me about 40% of what I know. But my base knowledge comes from people who've have said things to me that

resonate, like, "How you treat others is a reflection of YOUR worth, not theirs."

I remember my nana saying, "Happiness isn't getting what you want – it's wanting what you get!" Happiness is about being grateful. There's such wisdom in that, which I can recognise now as an adult. When you know how the human nervous system is set up, that whole thing of wanting more, aspiring to more, is linked to status. So knowing that, you need to kind of interrupt that internal drive to "do better, do better, do better ..." and just stop and be grateful.

GV: Okay. What's the next virtue?

VIRTUE #2

Courage

NATHAN: *Courage* relates to risk-taking, which is a huge part of cognitive intelligence. While parents might not always value their kids' risk-taking, if you can step back and appreciate it as an essential part of human intelligence – and a key factor in cognitive development – maybe it'll be easier to feel more positive about it. It takes courage to take risks. Humans aren't static; we're developing all the time – and you can't develop without taking risks.

Without courage we'd probably still be back in the Stone Age. Courage is what allows for innovation and creativity, and these are so closely linked to intelligence that you can't really talk about developing an intelligent child without talking about courage.

We as parents need courage as well, because parenting's a pretty tough job. It exposes your areas of weakness – the things you're bad at – and it demands

that you face up to them. You have to improve ... you have to deal with your shortcomings ... and that takes courage! That kid of yours who just rubs you up the wrong way – your ‘sandpaper baby’ – will be one of the greatest teachers you’ll ever have. But you’re going to need the most courage for that child. You’re going to have to really extend your parenting. You might be able to stay in your little comfort zone for your other kids, but your sandpaper child is the one who propels you to read that book and go to the parenting courses.

It would be easier to just throw up your hands and say, “It’s that kid’s fault – I can’t get anywhere with him – he’s just rotten!” So as a parent it’s courageous for you to realise that this is a journey that you’re both on. And it’s a relationship, not a power dynamic.

GV: So we’ve got Wisdom, those core human truths – and Courage, or risk-taking. What’s the third virtue?

VIRTUE #3

Compassion

NATHAN: When you ask people to point to the centre of their being, they don’t point to their head. It’s not the brain, but the heart ... and *compassion* is at the very essence of being human. If you put it in a very clinical, left-brain way, we’re an interdependent species so we survive better by relying on each other. But in a right-brain sense, compassion is essentially human. It’s said that you can tell how civilised a society is by the compassion they demonstrate to their most vulnerable members: their elderly, their

disabled, and their infants. The more compassionate a society is, the more advanced it is. Compassion is integral.

But there’s a scale: on one end, you get humans who have only a limited amount of compassion for their own pets and their own families, and at the other end of the scale you have people who have compassion for humanity. Compassion is what allows you to imagine what it’s like to be somebody else – it’s a higher cognitive function than simple emotion. It involves the frontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that allows you to have empathy.

GV: Okay. So what’s next?

VIRTUE #4

Integrity

NATHAN: I’ve worked for many years in teacher education, so I’ve been exposed to a lot of literature on the subject. And it interests me that the two components that make for a quality teacher are not things you learn in teacher’s college. The teachers who are a major, positive influence on kids – those whom they remember as being “*the teacher who changed my life*” – demonstrate *humour* (being funny) and *integrity*.

Humour we understand from a brain point of view because your brain’s either in survival mode or learning mode. When something’s funny, your brain gets the message that you’re not in survival mode, so you can learn. It makes complete sense from a neurological point of view that having fun while you’re learning will accelerate the learning, and it’ll speed up the consolidation of that learning as well.



But I think we've all had teachers who were really funny but from whom we learned nothing – and the difference between that teacher and the one we remember making a huge difference for us, is integrity. Humour helps the student to learn the work, but the teacher needs to have the integrity to follow through on things, to make sure everyone's progressing on their learning journey. Integrity drives your good intentions. Integrity is very much about the left brain – it's about work ethic and follow-through. But it's important to get both sides of the brain going.

You may be brilliantly innovative – this is your right brain – and yet never actually get yourself into gear to realise those amazing dreams and designs. Or you might have integrity (left brain) to get up early every morning and get things done, but you're never inspired to do anything beyond that structured, regimented life.

I think the true geniuses in society are the ones who use both sides of their brain. They combine innovation with integrity – and that's gold!

GV: So, thus far we've got Wisdom, Courage, Compassion, and Integrity ... what's next?

VIRTUE #5

Self-Mastery

NATHAN: This is covered in the Early Childhood curriculum here in New Zealand, under 'Competence'. What it means is: if I take over and do everything for my child, the message they get is, "I'm not capable of doing this." But

if I encourage and support my child to develop those skills for themselves, then they develop a sense of confidence and mastery. So while it takes a great deal of patience on the part of parents to allow their kid to attempt things when they're not yet competent – like my 20-month-old granddaughter, whose favourite phrase right now is "My do it!" – it's so worth letting them struggle a bit, letting them give it a shot, and not just taking over.

Self-mastery is reminding us that it's good to nurture our kids, but not to the point where they become incompetent – where they feel they can't do anything for themselves because we're doing everything for them. Nurture is honouring that child's autonomy.

GV: Self-mastery or competence – it's all about making sure we give our kids opportunities to learn by doing, right? So what's the last virtue?

VIRTUE #6

Belief

NATHAN: *Belief* and *integrity* are two sides of the same coin, each dealing with a different side of the brain – integrity on the left, and belief on the right. Belief is probably the virtue most open to interpretation. But, at its most basic level, I think human beings have this faith ... and part of it is recognising that we can't comprehend everything.

By belief, I mean something that's more encompassing than simply religion – and it also includes self-belief. The virtue isn't telling people what their belief should be; it's simply acknowledging that, across



time and across cultures, humans operate with a belief base.

GV: In your introduction you describe the brain as a tree with four parts – with each part developing at different stages. Can you explain?

NATHAN: This is a simplified version – it makes the brain development sound more linear than it really is – but basically, as the brain develops, we have different parts taking centre stage at different times. The lower the part of the brain, the more central it is to survival – and the higher the part of the brain, the more optional it is. You only get to develop those higher parts of the brain when you're safe – when no-one's shooting at you or anything. That's when you get to do things like learning and developing compassion.

So basically, we've got, from the bottom to the top: **Brain One**, which is in charge

of survival ... **Brain Two**, which is clockwork, movement and motor skills ... **Brain Three**, the emotional brain ... and **Brain Four**, which is advanced functioning.

In terms of parenting, it's important to realise that when Brain One takes centre stage, as it does in a baby's earliest months, survival means developing that close bond or attachment with a primary caregiver. That doesn't necessarily mean Mum – it's not your *gender* that determines your ability to provide your baby with that close attachment, it's your *level of responsiveness*.

The research consistently shows that what's good for babies in that first year is being indulged to establish a really strong basis of trust, which is part of that frontal cortex development.

GV: Jumping ahead a decade or so, you say that part of the adolescent brain “closes for renovations”, as you put it, for a number of years. How does this affect the behaviour of adolescents? And how should that knowledge affect our response as parents?

NATHAN: This is why it's good to have a basic understanding of the four brains. If you understand that Brain Three is emotion and Brain Four is logic and understanding consequences, then you start to realise that as an adult you live in Brain Four. Part of our frustration with teenagers is that we want *them* to live in Brain Four. We want them to have an understanding of consequences and show empathy. But in order to facilitate the massive growth and change taking place during adolescence, they're biologically wired to shut the frontal cortex for renovations at this time.

To help parents understand this, the frontal cortex is your thinking brain, and the brain underneath – the limbic system or ‘mammal brain’ – is your emotional or feeling brain. So don’t ask your teenager, “*What were you THINKING???*” – because the honest answer to that is, “*I wasn’t!*” A far more productive question would be, “*What were you FEELING???*” – because feeling is what forms the basis for all their decisions. That’s the brain they live in for three years – the emotional/limbic system.

You’ll have glimpses of them operating in their frontal cortex, because 10% of the time your teenager’s brain is the same as yours – they’re logical and understand consequences. But they’re only biologically set up to do that 10% of the time

but, as a parent of a teenager, don’t expect them to behave as if they were 25! If you think that their not acting like adults is something you have to fix, you’re going to have lots of conflict.

I tell people, you’ve got the first 1000 days to grow your child’s brain ... and you’ve got until they’re 11 to influence their character and values. After that, you’ve just got to live with them. So don’t try to put in all that character and all those values when they’re adolescents – don’t make that your central focus. Your central focus during adolescence should be to get through it and to maintain the relationship so it’s all still intact when they come out the other side with their ‘re-opened’ frontal cortex.

You’ve got the first 1000 days to grow your child’s brain, and you’ve got until they’re 11 to influence their character and values. After that, you’ve just got to live with them until they come out the other side of adolescence. Don’t expect them to behave as if they were 25, or you’ll have lots of conflict!

– 90% of the time they’re going to be in their limbic system, being emotional, not really understanding time properly, not really appreciating consequences or outcomes.

It helps for parents to know that, so you don’t try to get your kid to develop a work ethic during adolescence – because, if you do, all you’re going to have is conflict. Trust the work you put in during the first 11 years, because that’s what’s going to come back after renovations are done.

GV: We need to recognise their limitations – right?

NATHAN: Exactly. You still have to try and make them act punctual and responsible,

You have to be tolerant during those three years when your teenager is a bit lazy and self-obsessed. You encourage the other things, like compassion and consideration, because we want to nurture that into being – but you do so, understanding that they’re not biologically driven in that direction. My focus as a parent is to jump in and nurture that during the 10% of the time that it does show up, and just try and live through the other 90% of the time for those three years.

GV: All parents are imperfect – that’s one thing we know for certain! But many of us want to do better. What’s your best advice for those who want to get started?

NATHAN: I think the best advice I can give any parent is to reiterate what they say on the plane: **“Put on your own oxygen mask first!”** Your ability to help and protect your child is dependent upon your own wellbeing. So for you to parent well, you need to lead a balanced, healthy life in which you love and care for yourself.

I’m a grandparent now, and I can say that the major difference between being a grandparent and parenting your own kids is that, as a grandparent, you get to parent in your higher parenting-self most of the time. When you’re grandparenting you’re pretty much always in a good place – well-rested and relaxed – because otherwise you’d just say, *“Oh no, I can’t have them this weekend!”* And it’s not that you suddenly know so much more, but you get to put into action all that knowledge and those good intentions that you never had energy to action when you were parenting. And the result is that you can enjoy a much better relationship with your grandchildren than you were ever able to have with your children.


So, if you want to be the best parent you can be, you should aspire to bring a bit of that grandparenting relationship into your parenting relationship.

When we’re parenting, we’ve all got a range – from the parent we want to be, all the way down to the parent we are when we’re tired, run down, stressed, or whatever. And it’s such a full-on job that we spend a lot of time in the *lower half* of that range.

We shouldn’t beat ourselves up about that – but nor should we excuse ourselves with those old Kiwi mottos: *“She’ll be right!”* and *“Good enough is okay!”* We should all aim

to be in the upper range most of the time – to be the parent we are when we’ve just been to a parenting course and are feeling inspired, or when we’re energetic and have had something to eat...

When we’re operating in that higher level, that’s when we create our best family memories and enjoy parenting the most. The more time we spend in that top half of our parenting range, the more rewarding it’ll be, and the better and healthier our relationship with our kids will be. 🌸



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‘NURTURE: THE ART OF PARENTING’ BY PETER ALSOP & NATHAN WALLIS IS AVAILABLE IN ALL LEADING BOOKSHOPS.



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