

SECOND EDITION

**SatisfACTION**  
in  
Parenting

Larry L. Larrabee, Ph.D.

*This book aims to help parents raise children who become mature, self-confident adults through very easy to understand, practical measures. Topics covered include communication, confidence building, chores, rules and discipline.*

**SatisfACTION in Parenting**

By Larry L. Larrabee, Ph.D.

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This book provides content related to child rearing topics. As such, use of this book implies your acceptance of this disclaimer.

## **About The Author**

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Larry L. Larrabee, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist with over forty years of experience working with mothers, fathers and children.

He received his doctorate in clinical psychology at Purdue University, practiced briefly in St. Louis and in 1968 established his practice in Madison and Portage, Wisconsin.

Dr. Larrabee counsels businesses, individuals and families. He regularly speaks to professional, community, educational, and parents' organizations on a wide range of psychological issues.

Children and families remain at the core of his professional and personal interest. He and his wife, Carol, are the parents of three adult children, at whose urging this book has been written.

## About The Book

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Many parents reading this book, as well as some practitioners, have expressed that what is suggested here is too harsh. This is expected because, as the book explains, the child rearing attitudes in America today, for both parents and practitioners, base their philosophies and practices on a foundation of kindness and emotional support of the child.

I believe in these concepts as well, but I have found that using only such techniques does not effectively bring about the emotional maturity needed to be a happy, effective, confident adult. Kindness and emotional support alone lead to failure to achieve one's potential, depression and suicide, drug use, and other short-sighted behaviors. Kindness and support along with responsibility and accountability produces a much more mature human being who has all he or she ever needs in order to lead a happy and productive life.

I can see where the book comes across as if it were promoting a harsh environment with its emphasis on control of the environment rather than the child. The two largest chapters are devoted to rules and chores in the

child's life and, by today's standard, that seem harsh. But parents who do place more emphasis on these two areas experience a family environment that is calmer and more congenial as a result of having many, many less episodes of discipline and happier children who have a sense of self-worth.

My advice? Try to see the book to its end and it all will be more palatable. If you're having trouble doing that, skip to the last, brief, -chapter then try it again.



## **About This Second Edition**

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There has been a renewed interest in **SatisfACTION** **in Parenting** which has prompted me to go about revising it. The principles remain the same but some examples and certain expressions were outdated or unfamiliar to today's parents. This second edition is an effort to make the text and message more readable for today's modern parent.

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## **What is Parenting And What Should It Be?**

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A mother I know came home from work one Friday, the end of a long week. You can imagine the scene. She pulls the car up the driveway and into the garage. As usual, she is in a hurry, but not in too much of a hurry to notice that the lawn hasn't been mowed – again.

She parks the car, grabs two bags of groceries out of the back seat and nudges her way through the kitchen door. First, there's the music-as loud and raucous as teenage music has always been. Then there's the kitchen counter, littered with the remains of somebody's after-school snack. The dog, who was supposed to be outside in the yard after being locked in the house all day, runs to her and Mom can see how relieved he is that someone will finally let him out.

Using the bags like a snowplow, Mom clears a place on the counter and sets down the groceries.

“Hi, Mom,” says eight-year-old daughter Tara as she enters the kitchen.

“Hi,” Mom says, “Is this your stuff on the counter?”

“Nope,” Tara answers.

“Didn’t you have a jelly sandwich when you came home from school?”

“Yeah, but Nate did too...”

“So, nobody cleaned up,” says Mom. Tara shrugs.

“Where is Nate?” Mom asks.

“I dunno. Out”

“Well, who is playing that music?”

“Nate started it before he left.”

“Left? He’s supposed to stay home with you until I get here.”

“Yeah, but Corey and Matt came over and Nate went with them.”

“And left you alone.”

“Yeah,” says Tara

“He’s not supposed to do that. Wait until he comes home.”

“Mom?”

“Yes?”

“Claire wants me to go to the zoo in the city tomorrow and I told her I could. That’s OK, isn’t it? Her grandmother is taking her and Claire doesn’t want to go alone so I can, can’t I?”

“But I made an appointment for you at the ophthalmologist’s tomorrow. We had to wait a month to find an open spot.

“Oh mom, please, please can’t I go? You can cancel the appointment. We’re even eating at a fancy restaurant downtown afterwards and Claire wants me to go so bad. Please, can’t I go?”

“Oh Tara, you also have to go to Nate’s soccer game as it’s his last this year and you haven’t been to hardly any. He **has** to mow the lawn – where is he anyway?”

She looks around the kitchen – at the groceries to be put away, the counter to be cleared, the dinner to be cooked and the distraught child begging her to break an appointment that will have to be paid out of pocket if cancelled. And, oh yes, she also has to take off her coat, which she still hasn’t had time to do.

The blaring music reminds her of Nate. He’s only twelve and it’s getting dark. Where is he?

“Gosh,” Mom says to herself. “I love these kids. But being a parent sure is tough.”

Parenthood certainly can be tough. It can also be a tedious, frustrating, heart-wrenching assault on your emotions that can deflate your ego as quickly as a pin pops a balloon.

But it doesn’t have to be. That is what **SatisfACTION in Parenting** is all about. It lays out a plan of action that parents can use every day to make parenting more effective and satisfying. This book is based on forty years of study and thought, but most of

all, on real experience working with parents and children.

My experience with families enables me to give this book a point of view that differs from that of most other guides to childrearing. While they focus on children and their development, **SatisfACTION in Parenting** concentrates on parents. It tells anxious, child-centered, self-sacrificing Moms and Dads that good parenting is not necessarily martyrdom, and that what is good for you is also good for your children. You can't raise prize-winning roses if you don't like gardening, and you can't raise *prize-winning* children unless you find the day-to-day process of parenting satisfying and enjoyable.

Yes, parenting should be pleasant and fun, warm and easy. Yes, parenting should be relatively stress-free.

“Oh sure,” you say, “where have you been, Doc? This is the 2000's. Parents have a lot more to feel stress about than a bump on the head at soccer practice. Ever heard of drugs, pregnant teenagers, and creeps lurking in the park?”

Of course, I have. Dealing with real problems faced by real people has been my daily work. I'm not about to tell you that you shouldn't worry about your children. Parents who aren't concerned about their children's health, safety and future are not doing a very good job.



Nevertheless, we can eliminate a lot of the frustration, a lot of the worry, and still be effective parents.

## **Maturity Is The Goal**

What is the purpose of parenting, anyway?

Human beings have been trying to answer that question ever since Cain and Abel gave Adam and Eve their first gray hairs and we will probably still be trying to answer it when Earth people colonize Mars. Here's my answer to the big question.

From the Stone Age to the Space Age, the circumstances of parenting have changed, but the basic goal has not. We no longer have to teach our children how to survive in a primitive jungle full of wild animals and poisonous plants, but we do have to prepare them for life in the modern jungle of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In short, the purpose of parenting *is to help children develop into mature adults, able to function in the world they will inhabit.*

And who is a mature adult?

A mature adult is a person who learns from experience, makes adjustments, steers clear of life's avoidable pitfalls, and largely fulfills his or her potential as a human being. Mature adults recognize and anticipate the consequences of their actions for

themselves and others. They try to maximize happiness and minimize pain today and in the future.

Mature adults – usually - do not make purchases they cannot afford. I know a man who loves sailboats. Every spring he is ready to take a second mortgage on home and hearth to purchase a forty-four-foot yacht. He goes to boatyards, answers listings on eBay and even gives his banker a call. Just when he is ready to close the deal, maturity strikes. He remembers that he has to sacrifice today in order to achieve his goals for tomorrow. So, instead of buying that expensive toy he would love to have right now, he pays on his first mortgage, puts aside money for a college education for his kids and invests for his own retirement. Occasionally, he manages to sock a little away to buy his dream boat, but he will not own it for many years.

That is the essence of maturity. It means taking care of tomorrow by taking care of today, while still leaving room for hopes and dreams.

To raise children to this mature state, parents have a two-fold and seemingly contradictory task. We must create a warm loving environment that protects young children from the genuinely harsh and harmful aspects of life. But, we must also introduce our children to the real world, for that is where those children will live as adults.

The easy way to teach children not to play with fire is to burn a few of their fingers. It is also cruel, contemptible and criminal. Teaching children to play with fire while protecting them from harm is more challenging, but it is what good parents do. Striking a balance between the sheltered environment children need while preparing them for the out-side world in which they must survive is one of the most difficult-but doable-challenges of parenting.

### **The Sagging Parent**

Parenting today has become very intense. Many parents say that it is as intense as a high-pressure job and consumes most of their time, thoughts and energy. Remember the Mom at the start of this chapter? She works at a job all week, then comes home to find that not only have simple chores been left undone, but that her eldest child has seriously disobeyed and placed her youngest child in a potentially dangerous situation. Now she'll spend her entire Friday evening and most of the weekend dealing with her children and with situations created by and for her children. She'll have to confront her son and attempt to correct his behavior, then worry if what she tries will work.

I have met many a parent who faces a schedule just as rigorous as this one. They share similar symptoms of life-style stress. They're a little bit absentminded, tired, and grouchy. They are starting to *sag* beneath the burden of parenthood, with obvious consequences for the family.

A parent who is *sagging* accepts behavior – like Nate's neglecting the lawn – she once would have deemed unacceptable. With Mom sagging, Nate and Tara will bicker with each other more than siblings usually do, which only encourages Nate to disregard the rules for safety and leave Tara home alone. Both children, but especially 12-year old Nate, will become increasingly sassy and disobedient. Although she probably knows better, Mom will let herself off the hook of responsibility by saying the children's behavior is just a part of growing up.

The more she sags, the more Mom will tolerate increasingly troublesome and disrespectful behavior. Finally, she'll just give up and say, "I can't do anything with these kids."

Those are sad words for any parent to pronounce, but more so for this Mom because she started parenting with blazing intensity. Well-educated, highly-motivated, she read a least eight books about parenting before her first child was born and slogged through another ten in

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the child's first year. She even sat through lectures delivered by learned child psychologists.

But, like the long-distance runner who forgets to pace herself from the start of the race, she faded long before the home stretch. She didn't give up during the early years, but in those difficult years when she had a child between the ages of 11 and 16. Unable to parent her children in a pleasant, fun, and stress-free manner, she sagged and gave up.

It doesn't have to be that way. Parenting was never intended to be an all-consuming, sag-inducing activity and it doesn't need to be today. Through the ages, raising children to mature adulthood has always been the most important contribution a parent could make, but it did not necessarily require an all-consuming share of their time and energy. In an earlier age, our lives were less parceled into segments labelled Work, School, Family, Recreation. On the farm or in the shop, children and parents spent most of their waking hours together making a living. It wasn't a special activity, like Little League on Thursday night. It was the normal progression of daily life.

We no longer share our daily lives with our children as we once did, but, even in this segmented, hectic and harried era, it is still possible to raise children without sagging. **SatisfACTION in Parenting** tells how.

## **The Misconceptions Of Parenthood**

First, parents conceive children, then they **misconceive** ideas about how to raise them. It seems to always have been so. Centuries ago, most American parents believed that as long as they did not “spare the rod” their children would turn out right. Yet 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century America had its full share of out-laws, misfits and others we would characterize as dysfunctional.

We have our own misconceptions about parenting today and probably more of them than our ancestors. Perhaps the most widespread of modern misconceptions is that if we merely love our children, everything will turn out reasonably well.

A few years ago I spoke about some of the pitfalls of parenthood to a group of expectant mothers and fathers in a pre-natal class. One woman in the class said, “But Dr. Larrabee, we want this baby and we’ll love it. I’m sure we won’t have those problems.”

Her classmates then and many others since have shared that hopeful attitude. As anyone who has raised children knows, reality alters attitude about the time of the baby’s first birthday. But the misconception persists. Love supposedly conquers all, even to the point that when I see parents of teenagers in my office, they often

feel guilty because they believe they have not loved their children enough.

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## **Five Misconceptions of Modern Parenting**

- **Love alone is enough.**
  - **The main job of parents is to make their children happy.**
  - **Happy children are well-adjusted children.**
  - **The only skill parents need to know to raise children is how to use praise and positive reinforcement.**
  - **Reasoning and explaining will turn children into mature adults.**
- 

In the 1960's the Beatles sang "All You Need Is Love," and you can still buy LOVE stamps at the post office, but neither the song, the stamp, nor the sentiment

will enable you to develop children into mature adults. A more useful catchphrase for the relationship between love and parenthood comes from Bruno Bettelheim, the late Chicago child psychiatrist. The title of his best-known book conveys a concept basic to successful parenting: **Love Is Not Enough**. As in marriage and other human endeavors, so it is in parenting. Love alone isn't enough.

Happiness is the source of another modern misconception. Many parents believe that their main job is to make their children happy. If the kids are happy, then all must be well with them and their relationship with their parents.

This assumption runs counter to reality.

The fact is no one can make another person happy and certainly no parent has ever been able to make a child truly happy. Parents who doubt this fact should remember the last time one of their children experienced a profound disappointment. Were they able to make the child happy?

One of the boys in our neighborhood was obsessed with sports and he played almost all of them but he felt the best about his baseball abilities. He worked on his baseball skills not just at practice but also for long hours at home with his pitch-back net and batting apparatus. Eventually he entered the age group where you no



longer simply went out for the little league team, now you had to try out to be selected.

But, he wasn't selected.

I don't know if I ever saw a youngster look so sad. He had worked so hard, had such high hopes, thought he had a sure thing, then saw it all crumble. His father tried to cheer him up. When words failed, Dad tried to distract the boy by taking him for a day at the water park. He bought him several electronic games that his son wanted to raise the boy's spirits. Dad ran out of ideas but the boy did not run out of the blues. When the games and fun were over, he was just as glum as before. Dad could not make him happy.

All parents have tried similar tactics with the same unvarying outcome. The child doesn't cheer up and often becomes even more unhappy. In fact, this futile attempt prolongs the unhappiness due to the child's conscious or unconscious hope that the depressed mood will result in more "rewards." On an everyday basis, children who are generally unhappy, moody and disagreeable usually have parents who – like Dad at the water park – are trying too hard to make them happy.

Our job as parents is not to make our children happy. Instead, it is to present life as realistically as possible in a warm, loving environment. Our children will either choose to be happy or not and we won't be able to do

anything about it. Our satisfaction comes in knowing that we did all we could to prepare our children for life in the real world.

Part of the problem with happiness stems from another misconception – one that holds that happy children must be well-adjusted. This is certainly not the case. The mature adults we hope to raise are capable of happiness but they aren't necessarily happy all the time. All too often, our eagerness to please our children actually gets in the way of their developing into mature and confident individuals. I'm not saying that we should purposely set out to make life difficult or unpleasant for our children. However, if we are going to present life as it really is we must not hide its unpleasant, difficult aspects.

Another misconception today's parents believe is that all we need to know to raise children is how to employ praise and positive reinforcement. Unfortunately, these concepts have been promoted by a good many experts and are very popular in the media. Our schools unfortunately over emphasize this when dealing with misbehavior. We hear a lot about the power of positive thinking, and the effectiveness of a winning attitude. These bromides work well in the locker room at half time – at least in the movies and on **television** – but they are not necessarily helpful in the real world of

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parenthood. They soothe us into thinking we must never disappoint our children and must always make sure they are happy. Positive reinforcement and praise, or at least recognition, do have their place in effective parenting, but they have been grossly overrated by both parents and teachers.

The vast majority of conscientious parents use too much praise. We are so well-meaning, enthusiastic and unrealistic. We gush over a kindergarten art project as if our little Jessica were Rembrandt reincarnated and praise simply civilized behavior – such as Justin’s sharing a cookie or a crayon – as if it were extraordinary when we all know that it should be a basic expectation.

In addition to not helping, too much praise can be harmful. Youngsters who have had a large amount of positive reinforcement and praise often experience difficulties in the first three years of school simply because they have become addicted to regular doses of positive stroking. Take away the praise and reinforcement, and they become insecure and less confident. Although a percentage is hard to gauge, if 50% of a parent’s interaction with the child is praise, that is too much. Few, if any, adults experience a constant diet of praise and children shouldn’t be fed one either.

The most common misconception today's parents believe is that reasoning and explaining will make their children mature. Just as parents of old believed that all children needed to know was right from wrong, today's parents believe that children must understand why they should act or think a certain way. Once they understand, children will become confident, mature and the fine, upstanding citizens every Mom and Dad desires. The fantasy is heavily promoted in television programs and motion pictures where difficulties are resolved only by violence or reasoning, neither one of which is the best way to solve interpersonal problems.

One result of excessive reasoning, and one that is a staple of the so-called "family" TV sitcom, is the child who always sasses, puts down and talks back to parents and other adults. The writers who create these characters must all have been raised by parents who went overboard on reasoning. In a real-life conflict, reasoning only encourages the adversaries to develop their own set of arguments to defend themselves. When two nations declare war on each other or when two children get in a fight, they both have a long list of what they consider to be good reasons to enter combat. We tend to think of violence as irrational, but violent people are convinced that they are rational and that they have many very good reasons for acting as they do.

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Excessive reasoning also encourages excessive egocentricity. Children feel that if in their own minds they have a good reason for doing something, then they are entitled to do it. For example, look at a child who can't find any logical reason for doing math homework and builds an elaborate set of reasons why math homework is unimportant. For every reason a parent presents in favor of doing school work, the child will concoct at least one reason for not doing it.

Hobbled by all these misconceptions, it's not surprising if parents are confused about what parenting is all about. They are not alone in their confusion. Most childrearing books I have read offer some excellent, effective suggestions, but most of them overlook the first, basic principle of parenting. For any technique to work, respect must exist between parents and children. It is a basic concept of human relations that many of us seem to overlook when we are talking about parents and children.

Communication, learning and development to genuine adulthood cannot take place without respect between parent and child. Since it emphasizes the basic concept of respect, **SatisfACTION in Parenting** gives parents a foundation upon which they may try many of the techniques found in other childrearing books. But, before you try other techniques, you should learn how to

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acquire and maintain the respect of your children-which leads us right into the next chapter of this book.

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