

An intimate conversation about the emotional challenges of parenting.

**ParentWise: The Emotional Challenges OF Family Life And  
How To Deal With Them**

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*Cairns: Stones, balanced one on top of the other, that serve as directional markers indicating a safe path across uncertain terrain.*

**Praise for ParentWise:  
The Emotional Challenges Of Family Life  
And How To Deal With Them**

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Cara MacMillan, Ecologist and Expectant Mother. "I love it already! I think that it is important for me to read this book, as I identify with the "conscientious parent" to-be, who also avoids some negative feelings."

Jeannie Ducher, Ph.D. Student and Mother. "It gave me hope, confirmed some of my beliefs, made me wonder about some others. I felt myself breathing in her definition of unconditional love, and wanting to retain her formulation in my mind."

Heather Laynor, Pharmaceutical Representative and Mother. "Wow... what an important book to read. I found that I am diving into myself and starting to realize things from my past that have held me back. It's the first book I've read that really focuses on me and my feelings as a parent. I love this book!"

Dr. Linda Evans, University Professor and Mother. "I tried to read it as an academic but found myself pulled into it as a mother."

Debby Parrish, Program Administrator and Mother. "Loren imparts a unique combination of compassion, vulnerability, knowledge and wisdom in her writing. She has a keen ability to help others see themselves through a forgiving and nonjudgmental lens. I found myself wishing I had read this book 20+ years ago when my now adult son was only a small child."

Debra Blackburn, Step-parent. "Even if you're not a parent, you'll appreciate all you discover between the pages of this book. If you want to better understand yourself and your relationships with others, read this book!"

Dr. Sylvia Johnson, Psychologist and Mother. "I will wholeheartedly recommend Loren Buckner's book to my clients. Parents will learn invaluable tools for healing themselves and their relationships with their children."

# **ParentWise**

**The Emotional Challenges  
of  
Family Life And  
How To Deal With Them**

**Loren Buckner, LCSW**

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Although the clinical stories are all based on actual psychotherapy sessions, none of the examples represent any one person or couple. They are composites of my experiences. These stories are about everyone I've worked with but about no one in particular.

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To John, Drew, and Melinda,  
the loves of my life.

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## On a Personal Note

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Three days after my son's sixteenth birthday he asked to borrow our car for his first solo ride. With the trepidation any parent of a sixteen-year-old feels when handing over the car keys, I said, "Okay, but be careful." What he did completely astounded me.

Not only did he pick up a few of his friends, he picked up a case of beer and then drove to the beach to celebrate his new-found freedom. To their surprise, a police car drove by and decided to check out their little party.

We were having our dinner when the phone rang.

A deep, formal voice responded to my hello. "This is Deputy Brown from the Sheriff's Department...."

Days later, unable to get the frightening scene out of my mind – seeing them drunk, the beer in the trunk of the car, the officers, and swirling red and blue lights – I wrote my son this letter:

*Dear D,*

*I can't wrap my mind around what you have done. I have gone over and over our conversations, thinking about our relationship over the years, about who I thought you were, how much I believed in you.*

*I will never ever forget the image of you sitting in the police car. I keep hearing my own shaken voice calling the other mothers to tell them what happened.*

*You made a terrible, terrible mistake, and it seems that you have lost your sense of right and wrong.*

*The disappointment I feel is overwhelming.*

*However, underneath all this We Love You. Good, bad, right, wrong. You are our child. I'm sure you can't quite understand what that means to a parent. But let me be perfectly clear. Our commitment to you transcends your*

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*mistakes. I am hoping to the depth of my heart that you will see the importance of what has happened and learn a very profound lifelong lesson.*

*Monday afternoon I found a penny in the street. I picked it up and threw it over my shoulder and I made a wish – God, please keep him safe. I hope and pray that those officers were an answer to that prayer. And that thanks to them, something far worse didn't come to pass. I hope that you will learn from this experience and that it will, in the end, keep you safer than you would have been had this not happened.*

*Love,  
Mom*

Remembering that evening still makes me cringe. I didn't know it at the time, but we were beginning the ride of our parental lives. Obviously, what he did that afternoon upset me for many reasons. My point here, though, is the shock and pain it caused. What is shocking to one parent may not be so bad for another, but shock and pain are emotions most parents wrestle with sooner or later.

**As individuals, our stories are different; as parents, we're more similar than we think.**

I didn't anticipate what being a conscientious parent was actually going to mean. The impact on me, on my relationship with my husband, and the intensity of my feelings were way more than I ever imagined as a young mother.

My reactions to what my son did that day, and the difficult years that followed, are some of the parental experiences that led me to write this book. As I thought about my own experiences and listened to those of the people who came to see me for therapy, I saw some universal feelings with which parents are trying to cope. It is time to talk about them.

My son has graduated from college and is preparing for graduate school. In our last conversation about those years, now several years ago, he told me how guilty he felt about all that happened. He told me he appreciated all we did as parents and that we were right to be concerned. He was also surprised to see how many of our values he has taken as his own.

I told him we understood it was a difficult time for him, that it was part of growing up, and that I didn't want him to feel bad about it anymore. With a

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tear in my eye and a crack in my voice, I said his father and I were delighted that, in the end, what we did was helpful and meaningful to him. (At the time, we weren't so sure.) Although he assured me he wasn't losing sleep over it, he looked relieved and a little lighter as we hugged and changed the subject.

In addition to feeling the joy and satisfaction of a mother seeing her children turn into healthy, happy people, I also appreciate the psychological and emotional theories that influenced me as I was raising them. I didn't realize it at the time, and it didn't evolve the way I thought, but the psychological principles I am sharing with you I lived. They held up and came through for us. Both my kids are independent, thoughtful people and a pleasure to be around.

Parenthood taught me a lot about myself. As you read about my experiences and about the journey of other mothers and fathers, I hope you'll be inspired to deepen your understanding of yourself.

**Curiosity about who you are and how you got to be that way  
really can lead to a happier and healthier family life.**

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## **Introduction:**

# **The Truth about Parenting**

---

In that split second when sperm meets ovum, life changes and is never the same again. Following the fetus's development as "*it*" grows into a baby while imagining actually becoming a mom or dad stirs up all sorts of powerful emotions. Excitement and joy are the obvious ones. However, whether your new family is planned or unplanned, or is the result of adoption, parenting is an emotional roller coaster.

The physical nature of childbirth is fully anticipated. Soon after mothers discover they are pregnant, the reality of the birth and concerns about natural childbirth, having an epidural, or undergoing the possibility of a C-section grow along with the baby inside their belly.

The emotional trials of raising a child aren't as defined, nor are the coping strategies and psychological implications all that clear. Instead, powerful desires to love, care for, and participate in your child's life wrap you in a completely delightful and contagious glow of excitement.

There are, of course, nights when the thrill fades and nameless worries replace the happy fantasies that in the light of day seemed so real. If you had an unhappy childhood, it can be particularly difficult. Tossing and turning, you try to comfort yourself by planning how different life will be for your child.

As these doubts and fears swirl inside your mind, you want to convince yourself that parenting isn't that complicated and that you know what you're in for. You do your best to prepare yourself by focusing on practical problems: finances, diaper brands, child care, whether or not to breast-feed,

what stroller to buy, and what color to paint the baby's room. These pressing decisions are exciting, and as you check each one off your to-do list, you feel a sense of control and accomplishment.

Although you have a vague awareness that life is about to change, sleepless nights aside, in your cloud of happiness, it's difficult to grasp how strenuous and demanding it is to raise a child. The emotional complexities of child-rearing become obvious only after your baby is born.

This fact holds true even if you have done your reading and your "*preparing for parenthood*" homework because consciously raising a child is not simply an intellectual process.

Parenting books that minimize the complexities of child-rearing initially offer what seems like sound advice:

- Get on a schedule.
- Be consistent.
- Don't give in to tantrums.
- Don't disagree in front of the children.

But if you're unable to live what you read, these books leave you feeling even more inadequate.

**With the biological, cultural, social, emotional, and psychological forces all moving you forward into parenthood, simplicity is out of the question.**

Experienced parents haven't been that candid either. We find it awkward to speak about our darker moments. No one wants to expose this part of themselves or spoil the expectant parents' optimism. As a new mother struggling to meet the demands of my infant, however, I remember thinking: *Why didn't anybody tell me what this was going to be like?*

I'm sharing with you my perspective on the emotional and psychological demands of parenting from my roles as a mother of two adult children; as a psychotherapist with twenty-five years of experience counseling couples and families; and as a wife. My husband and I recently celebrated thirty years of marriage.

This book isn't about how wonderful parenthood is. You already know having children is a rewarding and satisfying experience.

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Rather, this is the whole truth about parenthood: In addition to the love and delight children bring, parenting is surprisingly difficult. Some of the topics and feelings I discuss on these pages may be hard to think about and uncomfortable to admit. At the same time, exploring them is what can help you get out from under them.

Mostly, I'll be talking about you: your childhood and your emotions. We need to talk about your childhood because it is the backbone of who you are. And we need to talk about your darker feelings – feelings that don't mesh with the more acceptable images of joy and family fun – because these painful emotions affect you and will affect your children if you ignore them. Troubling feelings are just as much a part of family life as are your happier ones.

Reflecting on your own emotional life may initially sound self-centered. You've been taught to focus mostly on your children's needs, not your own. This attitude isn't very realistic. You can't be fully present for your children or teach them to look inside themselves if you are afraid to look into yourself.

**The more comfortable you are with your own feelings  
and the story of your own life, the easier it will be  
to understand and take care of your children.**

Yes, parenting is wonderful and rewarding. Simultaneously, the responsibility, selflessness, commitment, and ongoing nature of parenthood take a toll on how you feel about yourself. In addition, the anger, worry, loss and guilt may be more than you bargained for.

Anguish isn't limited to any particular kind of parent either. Maybe you believe only "bad" parents have these types of feelings. Such a belief is a mistake. You're being too hard on yourself if you think like this.

**Negative feelings create confusion, undermine confidence  
and self-esteem, but they are perfectly  
normal. Even when they are directed toward the  
people you love the most.**

If you're like most parents, when you find yourself hating your children it fills you with unspeakable guilt. That's partly why it's tempting to point a finger at a more obvious "bad" parent.

Judging others will only make you feel better for a little while, though. The problem with denying your hostile and negative feelings is that when they do break through, which is inevitable, you're horrified. Most parents admit to a certain amount of everyday anger and frustration. I'm not talking about those feelings. I'm talking about deeper feelings, the ones that make you question yourself.

Every day we hear about families and children in crisis. We read about kids committing acts of violence and about parents who hurt their children. More than ever before, doctors are prescribing antidepressants to kids and parents who are overwhelmed by how they feel. Over-eating, under-eating, addictions of varying kinds all become ways to cope. But to no avail. No matter how many new things people buy, they don't feel satisfied.

With your feelings of discontent just underneath the surface, you try your best to be a good and wise parent.

**A better understanding of yourself and your emotions,  
along with a willingness to accept the sacrifice  
and the inequities of parenthood, will help you be the  
parent you've dreamed of becoming.**

Clients often ask me: "*What's the point of delving into my feelings or my childhood? What's done is done.*" Just because you can't change the past doesn't mean it's insignificant.

Actual events can't be undone, that's true. If your father was an alcoholic, for example, expressing your anger, shame, and sadness won't change the fact that he drank too much. Speaking your emotional truths, though, means you don't have to pretend anymore that nothing happened and that you don't feel anything about it.

Owning your personal stories, and the complicated and conflicting feelings that go along with them, helps *you* feel better, more whole. Honestly addressing painful feelings, although initially disturbing, leads to feeling more grounded. It helps you find empathy, trust, compassion, and love – qualities that connect you to your higher self.

**Accepting negative feelings within yourself, about your  
children, and toward your partner can lead  
to positive changes in your relationship with them.**

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The strategy of avoiding your feelings probably started when you were a child and was effective back then in protecting you from becoming overwhelmed. It helped you get through emotions that were too difficult to tolerate. But over time, this strategy interferes with your emotional and psychological growth. Unacknowledged feelings tend to undermine how you feel about yourself and how you relate to others.

Without intending it to happen, when you avoid certain feelings you miss out on knowing these important parts of yourself.

Another unintended consequence of blocking unwanted feelings is that pleasure and happiness are also dampened. The walls you create to protect yourself from being hurt can't discriminate unsafe people and emotions from the more trustworthy kind. So you feel protected but isolated.

**Realizing that you no longer have to be afraid of your feelings means, at a core level, you no longer have to fear yourself. Believing there's nothing inside of you to be afraid of is extraordinarily freeing.**

The stories in the following pages are all about conscientious parents who very much wanted and value their children. The more negative feelings they reveal are not those of uncaring people – quite the contrary. This is a book about what it means to love your children and about how important it is to acknowledge the full spectrum of feelings that exist in all good and loving parents.

In spite of my experience working with couples and families, with all that I know about psychology and child development, and in spite of my training and communication skills, the emotional trials of parenthood rocked me to my core. I hope by sharing the following stories, you will be better able to cope and not feel so frightened by your disturbing and painful feelings.

## How to Use This Book

Spread throughout the book is a list of **20 Intentions**. Write them down as you go. Keeping a journal and having a list handy will help you remember and reflect on what you've read. These are not rules to follow or to rate yourself on every day. They are goals to strive toward as the weeks and years of parenthood unfold.

**Food for Thought** questions placed at the end of each chapter will help you focus more on your private thoughts and feelings. Do these questions at your own pace and adjust them to fit your own needs. Discussing your responses with your partner, a friend, reading group, or therapist will be more beneficial than just thinking about the questions by yourself.

Reacting quietly in your mind won't be as helpful. We are a relationship-oriented species and we do better when we have the support of others. Plus, you have probably already been thinking alone about these feelings for quite some time. How does it feel to keep your thoughts and feelings locked up inside? Has it been productive?

Contrary to what many people believe, seeking support is not a sign of weakness. It takes courage to face and share your true self with others.

As you read along, let your insights sink in. Don't rush. You may be tempted to put the book down and busy yourself with a chore or distract yourself with the TV when your feelings get stirred up. Try to resist this temptation. Sit quietly for a little while, and remind yourself that you don't have to be afraid of your feelings.

Remember that I'm not offering you rules or deadlines. Wise parenting takes effort, commitment, and love. And even if you haven't been dedicated to these qualities, you can certainly develop them now.

Parenthood is an amazing journey. You are not making it alone. Keep this book, me, and the people you're about to meet with you as fellow travelers.

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