



KENNETH BARISH

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF PARENTING AND GRANDPARENTING

Raising Emotionally Healthy
Children in a Challenging World

“Young people are facing a mental health crisis that we are ill-equipped to handle. With increasing levels of depression, anxiety, suicide, and loneliness, it is encouraging that we now have a helpful and wise guide from Professor Kenneth Barish. *The Art and Science of Parenting and Grandparenting* is the kind of book that will change your life as a parent or grandparent. In a positive, highly accessible style, Dr. Barish takes us through powerful and inspiring steps to help our children and grandchildren cope more effectively in a challenging and often confusing world. You will find recommendations that you can immediately use to help your child cope with difficult emotions, while developing purpose, compassion, and self-control. Drawing on the latest research in child development, Dr. Barish has given us a guide that will help you help your child. This is invaluable advice from someone who has spent his life working with children and families.”

**Robert L. Leahy, PhD, Director, American Institute
for Cognitive Therapy**

“Drawing from a treasure trove of experience as a very thoughtful and observant parent, grandparent, and clinician, Ken Barish gives the key adults in children’s lives a roadmap for raising children who are emotionally healthy and who care about others and a better world. This is a lovely, warm-hearted, engaging, and practical book that never shies away from tough challenges in child-raising and brings to them a great deal of wisdom and good sense.”

**Richard Weissbourd, Senior Lecturer and Faculty Director,
Making Caring Common, Harvard Graduate School of Education,
and author of *The Parents We Mean To Be***

“Surprisingly easy to read, *The Art and Science of Parenting and Grandparenting* is the best book on parenting I know of. Not only does it deliver the goods contained in the title as it blends Professor Barish’s lifetime experience as a child psychologist with the latest neuroscience and child developmental research, but it’s also a real page turner! Full of practical advice on the many contemporary challenges of helping children, including how to manage screen time, fight less with parents, and do well in school, Barish has his eye on longer range goals. He shows how to help children develop inner motivations for lifelong learning coupled with empathy and concern for others, all on the way to emotionally healthy, meaningful, and rewarding lives. This book should be required reading for all parents, a book I wish I’d had when younger, and one I’m giving to my grown children to help them parent my grandkids.”

Arthur Nielsen, MD, *Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Feinberg School of Medicine, Northwestern University, and author of A Roadmap for Couple Therapy*

“Has there ever been a more timely book on children’s mental health than Ken Barish’s *The Art and Science of Parenting and Grandparenting*? It’s extremely unlikely! At a time of unprecedented familial stress and erosion, Barish offers a nuanced, multi-dimensional depiction of why and where these stressors occur and how they present children and adolescents with near-impossible impediments to their mental health. In an era of overly simplistic ‘cures’ to these dilemmas, Barish offers sound, thoughtful ways to understand and aid children in their struggles toward personhood. This book is a must-read for parents, educators, mental health clinicians, and especially grandparents, who will find a warm advocate for their crucial roles in enhancing their grandchildren’s lives. This book and its author have my complete respect.”

Steve Tuber, PhD, ABPP, *Professor of Psychology, City College of New York, and author of Attachment, Play and Authenticity: Winnicott in Clinical Context*

The Art and Science of Parenting and Grandparenting

The Art and Science of Parenting and Grandparenting is an indispensable source of guidance and wisdom on the most critical challenges facing contemporary parents and grandparents.

Award-winning psychologist Kenneth Barish shows how we can protect our children's emotional health, support their love of learning, have better conversations, and nurture children's empathy and kindness toward others. Dr. Barish presents comprehensive, multi-step plans for solving many problems of daily family life. He offers insights from neuroscience, child development research, clinical and educational programs for children, and from his experience of more than 40 years as a child psychologist, father, and grandfather.

This book should be read by parents and grandparents, physicians, child and family therapists, teachers, child development specialists, and anyone committed to the well-being of children and families.

Kenneth Barish, Ph.D., is Clinical Professor of Psychology at Weill Cornell Medicine and a Fellow of the American Psychological Association.



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The Art and Science of Parenting and Grandparenting

Raising Emotionally Healthy Children
in a Challenging World

KENNETH BARISH

Designed cover image: Getty Images

First published 2026

by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Barish, Kenneth author

Title: The art and science of parenting and grandparenting: raising emotionally healthy children in a challenging world / Kenneth Barish.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2026. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2026005440 (print) | LCCN 2026005441 (ebook) | ISBN 9781032759319 hardback | ISBN 9781032759289 paperback | ISBN 9781003476245 ebook

Subjects: LCSH: Parenting | Grandparenting | Parent and child | Grandparent and child

Classification: LCC HQ755.8 .B37 2026 (print) | LCC HQ755.8 (ebook)

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026005440>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026005441>

ISBN: 9781032759319 (hbk)

ISBN: 9781032759289 (pbk)

ISBN: 9781003476245 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003476245

Typeset in Dante and Avenir
by codeMantra

This book is dedicated, with all my love, to my family – Harriet,
Rachel, Alex, Elliott, Andy, Dan, and Christina.



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Acknowledgments

In this book, I discuss the importance of encouragement and emotional support in the lives of our children and grandchildren. But we all need encouragement throughout life. I am fortunate to have had the enthusiastic encouragement of many friends, colleagues, and family members at every stage of writing this book, from inception to completion.

The idea for a book on parenting and grandparenting began when I was invited to teach a course for Yale Alumni College by my colleague, Gary Schlesinger. I would like to thank Gary and also Sharon Small for the opportunity to talk with many parents, not-yet-parents, and grandparents across the country about the daily problems and long-term concerns that were most important to them.

I have also benefited from the support of colleagues I met with frequently to discuss problems in our work and find better ways to help children and families. Thank you to David Aftergood, Deborah Bader, Laura Bartels, Judy Berenson, Jane Bloomgarden, David Bloomgarden, David Breindel, Diane Caspe, Martin Mintz, Arnold Richards, Dick Stevenson, John Turtz, and the late Arnold Zinman. Several colleagues generously agreed to review my proposal and offered valuable advice: Thank you to Tim Cavell, Paul Donahue, Bob Leahy, and Michael Mascolo.

I would also like to thank Bob Barish, Jenny Barish, Steve Barish, Ariela Fuchs, Don Sklansky, and my good friends Bob Congdon, Mary Beth Congdon, and Jean Schreiber for many helpful conversations about being parents and grandparents.

I have had the privilege, for several decades, to teach and supervise students at excellent training institutions – New York-Presbyterian Hospital, the Westchester Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy, and the William Alanson White Institute Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy Training Program. In these educational settings, I have learned from discussions with both students and colleagues about advances in theory and research that broadened my knowledge of new ways to help children and parents.

My agent, Karen Gantz, encouraged me to write a book for grandparents, helped me find a publisher, and offered wise advice along the way. Chava Casper carefully reviewed the manuscript and offered many constructive suggestions. I would also like to thank Molly Selby, my editor at Routledge, for her confidence in the value of this book and her guidance in making it happen.

Most of all, I am deeply grateful to my wife, Harriet, not only for her encouragement and support but also for countless discussions of the ideas and recommendations I have presented and for reading every sentence – advising, correcting, and improving them – to make this a much better book.

Introduction

How to Be a Positive Influence in Your Grandchild's Life

Our children look up to us.

A child's knowledge that her parents and grandparents are proud of her is an essential good feeling – a feeling that sustains her in moments of discouragement and self-doubt.

American children and American families are in crisis. By almost every metric, our children are not doing well. To some extent, this is a global crisis; in other respects, it is a uniquely American crisis. Parents and grandparents are worried about their children in the present and about their children's future.

Over the past decade or more, there has been an alarming rise in mental health problems in American children and adolescents. The stress experienced by American families has also dramatically increased, and the support available to both kids and parents is less reliably present.¹

In this book, I will offer guidance on many of the most important concerns of contemporary parents and grandparents: how we can protect our children's emotional health; how we can support their continued interest and motivation for learning; how we can help nurture a spirit of kindness and generosity toward others and a commitment to ideals beyond individual achievement that provide

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a source of meaning in their lives; and how we can solve some of the common, but often difficult and persistent problems of daily family life that are a source of conflict and distress to many thoughtful and caring parents.

I will bring together the best parenting and grandparenting ideas and practices, based on both science and personal experience. I will discuss insights from neuroscience, from child development research, from clinical and educational programs for children, and from my experience, over more than 40 years, as a child psychologist and as a father and grandfather.

Some of the advice I will offer is derived from newly acquired knowledge, developed in the past few decades by psychologists and educators working to help troubled children and families. I will also return to timeless advice – patient listening, words of encouragement, having fun, and telling stories – that is now out of fashion. Too often, in our enthusiasm for new ideas, we lose sight of what is most important. New strategies are often helpful, but the quality of our relationship with our children and grandchildren still matters more.

At times, I will direct you away from some bad advice – parenting ideas that, although helpful in some circumstances, may lead us off-track, distracting us from better solutions. I will also offer opinions on current controversies in parenting and child development.

A Crisis of the American Family

The causes of our current crisis are not entirely clear. Many explanations have been proposed. In affluent America, teens face intense pressure for academic achievement. A culture of individual achievement above all else, with relentless demands to excel in all areas of life – in academics, athletics, music, art, and popularity – now dominates affluent communities. Many of us, despite our best intentions, have absorbed this ethos, or feel that we need to, or we will be putting our children at a competitive disadvantage.

Less affluent families face a different set of problems. Economic inequality in American society has contributed to an increasing

gap – actually, a chasm – in the opportunities and support available to affluent kids on the one hand and poor and working-class kids on the other. Neighborhood and community institutions that once helped all children imagine and achieve a hopeful future have weakened or collapsed entirely.²

How Grandparents Can Help

Children need grandparents, and they always have. We did not evolve to raise children with as little extended family and community support as most American parents have now.³ In the early 1900s, multi-generational households were the norm, and they were still common in the 1950s, when I was young. Grandparents, along with aunts, uncles, and cousins, often lived with or nearby their grandchildren. Increasingly, in recent decades, pursuing life opportunities, our children move away from us (or, in our retirement, we move away from them).

Grandparenting, when it goes well, is a win-win-win. It is a win for our grandchildren. As grandparents, we help nurture in our grandchildren the skills and moral values they will need to thrive as adults. We offer them a source of inspiration and, when needed, an oasis of emotional support. Because of our support, our grandchildren are healthier. In societies where children live with or have frequent contact with one or more of their grandparents, children have lower rates of mortality and disease.⁴

It is a win for parents. As grandparents, we can provide practical and emotional support that helps them be better parents. We can help reduce the small, daily conflicts that begin to erode the quality of parents' relationships with their children. Our presence helps them listen with more patience and have more time to play and have fun with their children.

And it is a win for us. Spending time with our grandchildren is not only a source of pride and joy; it is also good for our emotional and physical health. Although it is sometimes difficult to distinguish cause and effect, grandparents who spend time with their grandchildren live longer, happier, and healthier lives.⁵

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These wins reinforce each other. And the separation of grandparents from their grandchildren, more common now than at any time in human history, is a loss for everyone.

Support Them, Teach Them, Inspire Them

Our grandchildren need our support. They need encouragement in moments of self-doubt. They need someone to look up to – a model of caring, responsibility, and commitment – who becomes a guiding influence in their lives.

In school, children learn spelling and grammar, science, and history. As grandparents, we can support their education in a different way. We can help make learning meaningful. We can help them learn why it's important to know spelling and grammar, science, and history.

We can talk with them about how knowledge and communication have improved our lives. We can help them understand our indebtedness to others – how others help us and how we rely on others for our survival and success.⁶ We can talk with them about the first responders who risk their lives to save ours; about the scientists and doctors whose research and skill have helped us live longer, healthier lives; and about how they can make a contribution to solving problems and enhancing the lives of others, as adults or even now.

These conversations strengthen a child's sense of meaning and purpose. They are just as important as making sure kids have done their homework and correcting their mistakes, maybe more.

Our children look up to us. Young children regard their parents and grandparents with a kind of awe that is difficult to recapture in adult life. This aspect of parenting and grandparenting is discussed far less often than it should be. A young child's idealization of her parents and grandparents is one of childhood's most deeply felt emotions.

There is a picture in our home of our son, about one year old, looking admiringly at his grandfather, who is reading to him. In the photo, he is looking up, literally as well as figuratively. Most families

have similar pictures, and fortunate children have memories, from a somewhat older age, of sharing simple pleasures – reading, cooking, playing games – with a beloved adult. The activities themselves are not very important; what matters is the feeling of being in the presence of someone they adore, who adores them, too.

Especially because they look up to us, our pride in their character – their effort and the kindness they show to others – as well as their accomplishments is a source of motivation and emotional support throughout their lives. A child’s knowledge that her parents and grandparents are proud of her is an essential good feeling – a feeling that sustains her in moments of discouragement and self-doubt.

As adolescents (or before), they will no longer look up to us in the same way they once did. But even as the magic of early childhood fades, a child’s need for an affirming parental response – her need for a parent’s encouragement and pride, understanding and forgiveness – matures, but does not go away.

Why My Parents Did Not Need Parenting Books

In writing this book, I often found myself thinking about my own parents. I was fortunate to have parents I respected and admired. When I was a teenager, we often argued. (It was the ‘60s. I thought that they were too cautious in their support of civil rights and their opposition to the war in Vietnam. And, like many adolescents, I was not always as responsible and hard working as I should have been.)

My parents would have been puzzled by the word “parenting.” I grew up in a time when the word parent was a noun, not yet a verb. If they were alive now, I imagine them saying to me, “Kenny, it’s a good book. But why do parents need all this advice? Just give kids love and support; then they will give you “agita,” like you gave us, but in the end, they will be fine.”

There would be some wisdom in this. Our constant presence in the lives of our children as a source of emotional support is still the essence of good parenting and grandparenting.