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— Andrea J. Buchanan, *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Daring Book for Girls*

MINIMALIST



parenting

ENJOY MODERN FAMILY LIFE
MORE BY **DOING LESS**

CHRISTINE KOH
ASHA DORNFEST

Praise for *Minimalist Parenting* and Christine Koh and Asha Dornfest

“In *Minimalist Parenting*, Christine Koh and Asha Dornfest offer readers a much-welcome alternative to the usual parenting advice. With its focus on simplicity, self-knowledge, kindness, and confidence, this book gives parents the tools to help themselves—and, more importantly, trust themselves—as they navigate the often overwhelming terrain of managing family life.”

—Andrea J. Buchanan, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Daring Book for Girls*

“For any parents who feel overwhelmed with clutter in their homes, their schedules, or their brains (that is, just about every parent!), *Minimalist Parenting* is an invaluable guide to making family life more serene—and more fun.”

—Gretchen Rubin, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Happier at Home* and *The Happiness Project*

“Who says that parenting has to be about buying, watching, fretting, obsessing and scheduling? Well, no one—in those words. But for many folks, that’s what it is. Here’s a way to say goodbye to the treadmill and howdy to happiness, extra space, and free time.”

—Lenore Skenazy, author of *Free-Range Kids*

“Full of clear examples, helpful frameworks, and flat out wisdom from two sincere authors, *Minimalist Parenting* will help you identify exactly what your family needs are and how to fill those needs. Read this book and you’ll give yourself permission to say no to the activities and habits that are putting a drag on your family, and yes to the options that build a satisfying life.”

—Gabrielle Blair, author of *Design Mom* and founder of *Alt Summit*

“In ***Minimalist Parenting*** Koh and Dornfest offer keen insights about how to live a less stressful parenting life. This is a practical, comprehensive guidebook that also feels like a good, supportive, and upbeat friend. Harried parents may not have time to read it, which is exactly why they should.”

—Katherine Ozment, contributing editor at *Boston* magazine

“A sensible, calming tonic for parents trying to escape the maelstrom of impossible social expectations and unbearable childrearing anxiety.”

—Cory Doctorow, author of *Little Brother*

“What a great idea—for top parenting bloggers Christine Koh and Asha Dornfest to create a book, sharing their lessons learned and curating other advice from wise bloggers about how to simplify our lives as parents so we can enjoy everyday moments more. I was particularly inspired by the many unique suggestions about decluttering!”

—Ellen Galinsky, president of *Families and Work Institute* and author of *Mind in the Making*

“In parenting, less is turning out to be more. But how much less? And which less, exactly? ***Minimalist Parenting*** helps you figure it out in ways that fit your schedule, your style, and—most importantly—your values.”

—Katherine Center, author of *The Bright Side of Disaster* and *Everyone Is Beautiful*

“Asha Dornfest and Christine Koh buck the trend toward ‘expert’ parenting by encouraging parents to trust in their own competence. ***Minimalist Parenting*** goes further, providing practical tips for managing time, stuff, and perspective.”

—Chris Anderson, former editor-in-chief of *Wired Magazine* and founder of *GeekDad*

“When we exercise our creativity—and make something from nothing—we define ourselves. In this vivid and generous guide, Christine Koh and Asha Dornfest offer a practical and inspiring approach to creating the space for you and your family to thrive. You will be a happier person for having read this book.”

—Emma Lively, co-author (with Julia Cameron) of *The Prosperous Heart* and *The Artist’s Way for Parents*

“From the moment I read their phrase ‘wrestling with abundance’ I knew that Christine and Asha were on to something. ***Minimalist Parenting*** is just the boost you need. The tidbits of wisdom from some of my favorite bloggers on how they’ve handled the inevitable curveballs of parenting was inspiring reading for this newish mom.”

—Jory Des Jardins, co-founder of BlogHer
and mother of two

“If you learn how to be a minimalist parent, you’ll have a maximalist’s amount of time to love your family and life. I trust Asha Dornfest and Christine Koh with this stuff. This book is a go-to resource!”

—Chris Brogan, CEO of *Human Business Works*
and author of *The Impact Equation*

“***Minimalist Parenting*** is the solution to today’s over-scheduled, over-stressed, and over-tired family. Filled to the brim with practical tips, tricks, and shortcuts, this guide to modern parenthood encourages parents to release the guilt and embrace a system that *works*. A must-read for every parent who finds herself struggling for air in a sea of parenting pressure.”

—Erin Loechner, founder and editor of *Design For Mankind* and *Design For Minikind*

“The goal of ***Minimalist Parenting*** is stunningly simple—to keep the stuff that increases joy and reduce what doesn’t. There aren’t enough books like this in the parenting space! Reading it boosted my confidence.”

—Heather Flett & Whitney Moss, publishers of
Rookie Moms and 510 Families and
authors of *Stuff Every Mom Should Know*
and *The Rookie Mom’s Handbook*

“Wow. I wish this book had been around when I was still struggling with school, sports, music, meals, and the occasional meltdown! That said, there are lots of tips and much wisdom that is helpful to anyone trying to ‘minimize’ what it takes to get happily through the day. I will keep my copy ready at hand!”

—Ginny Wolfe, senior director of strategic
relationships, *The ONE Campaign*

Minimalist Parenting is the must-have book for any mom who feels her life is spiraling out of control. To-do lists, obligations, and commitments no longer have to define your days, nights and weekends. Learn from Christine and Asha how to reduce the physical and mental clutter, prioritize what's most important, and define parenting on your own terms, once and for all!"

—Erin Kane and Kristin Brandt, co-hosts of
The Manic Mommies Podcast

"This book is filled with honest, practical, and useful advice that will help any parent keep their sanity. Thankfully not just another parenting book, but a strategic guide to keeping your family happy and on track."

—C.C. Chapman, author of *Amazing Things Will Happen* and founder of *Digital Dads*

Minimalist Parenting is marvelous, rare, and generous thing: a parenting help resource that actually helps. Where others often overwhelm and oppress parents with "expert" advice, Asha and Christine provide affirmation, support, and invaluable counterweight to a frantic culture."

—Kyran Pittman, author of *Planting Dandelions, Field Notes from a Semi-Domesticated Life*

"In a culture of too much, ***Minimalist Parenting*** helps orient your compass to the important. Koh and Dornfest teach you to block out the background noise and focus on what matters most to you and your family. This book is like a warm embrace, helping you see that in fact everything will be alright."

—Isabel Kallman, founder of *Alpha Mom*

"Christine Koh and Asha Dornfest have masterfully shown a fast-paced generation that scaling back is not only doable, but extremely beneficial to any family's overall well-being and contentment."

—Jennifer James, founder of *Mom Bloggers Club* and
Mom Bloggers for Social

"In this era when parents get constant signals to speed up, sign up, and schedule every waking minute, it's refreshing that someone is finally saying it's alright to slow down and reclaim those serendipitous moments with our kids. For helicopter parents who can't slow down, ***Minimalist Parenting*** offers a welcome landing pad."

—Dave Pell, author of *NextDraft – The Day's Most Fascinating News*

MINIMALIST parenting

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Christine Koh: *To Jon, Laurel, and Violet—every day with you is a gift for which I'm incredibly grateful.*

Asha Dornfest: *To my parents, Rosalyn and Jagdish Jirge, for teaching me about love and trust. To my family, Rael, Sam, and Mirabai, for opening my world and my heart.*

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Introduction

As you scan the panorama of your life, you ultimately know you have a lot for which to be grateful. You have a wonderful family, a comfortable home, and plenty of opportunity as you look toward the future. Life's not perfect and there may be some problems to work out, but overall, things are good.

So why do you have a nagging sense that something's not right? Family life feels so full it's ready to burst. The schedule is packed, the house is cluttered, and your mind lacks clarity. It feels as if the many wonderful things in your life are crowding out something important—but what?

You know many families struggle with less security and fewer opportunities. You look around and it seems everyone else is juggling family life well enough. Perhaps you feel a little foolish for even *thinking* you might have a problem. But try as you might, you find yourself plagued by worry that you're somehow not doing enough, and that if you slow down, you'll zap your kids' chances at . . . happiness? Success? Something. You're not sure what, but you're not going to risk it.

We've been there. We still go there sometimes. But we've discovered a way to navigate past the self-doubt, guilt, and overwhelm inherent in today's parenting climate to a place of clarity, connection, and—most of all—fun. We call it *Minimalist Parenting*.

What Is Minimalist Parenting?

Minimalist Parenting operates on the knowledge that *right now*, you have everything you need to live the family life you want. You have

enough time to fully engage in parenting while still caring for yourself, your work, and your relationships. You have enough expertise, enough love, enough stuff, and enough confidence to give your kids a remarkable childhood and a running start on a happy adulthood.

The obstacle standing between you and a happier, less overwhelming version of your family life isn't something that you're doing wrong. It's that you're *wrestling with abundance*—too many choices, too many obligations, too much stuff, and too much guilt about trying to do it all.

It's no wonder. Never before have parents been faced with so many choices—of child-rearing philosophies, work schedules, educational options, savings plans, gadgets and gear, nutritional advice, even entertainment possibilities for our dwindling free time. The opportunity, comfort, and security of modern life inevitably come with decisions to make about each of these things, and many more.

Choice is good, but the sheer magnitude of choice we face today is overwhelming, even paralyzing. *Minimalist Parenting* is our prescription for how to handle too much of a good thing. We'll show you how to *minimalize* your family life—how to edit your schedule, possessions, and expectations so there's more of what you love and care about and less of what you don't.

Gradually, you and your family will be able to enjoy the freedom that comes with your newly found room to breathe. Imagine life as a minimalist parent:

- Your decisions come more easily because they're based on *your* values, not a fear of missing the boat or doing something wrong.
- Your schedule isn't packed to the gills with things you feel you *should* be doing. Instead, there's time to take care of your professional obligations and the requisite errands, homework, and appointments, and also jigsaw puzzles, bike rides, snowball fights, impromptu potlucks, occasional evenings out, and time to take care of yourself.
- Your home becomes a base for creative projects, raucous slumber parties, quiet evenings, warm memories, and plenty of open, free time instead of a repository for endless obligations and failed attempts at domestic perfection.
- You still enjoy buying things, but you choose your purchases

based on what will decrease your long-term stress and increase your long-term joy.

- Your kids have free time “padding” their activities and lessons, giving them the chance to explore, entertain themselves, and find out what excites and interests them.
- Feeding your family goes from the Gordian Knot of planning for and preparing a daily array of well balanced, beautifully presented meals to a simple and nourishing part of your weekly routine.
- You can relax and enjoy the magic of your kids growing up.

This isn't some Pollyanna fantasy of life over the rainbow. You can do this, and we're going to help you figure out how.

We don't profess to have Zen-like, perfect lives. If you spent a week at our houses, you'd see plenty of chaos and dust bunnies. But we *have* identified concrete steps that will help you reframe your thinking and craft a lifestyle so you can become a happier, more confident parent. It's time to redefine what it means to have it all. On your terms.

This book is as much about “life optimization” as it is about parenting. The prerequisite for a relaxed family life is the space in your schedule, home, and budget to be able to live it. Ironically enough, it takes work to create that space, and that's where we come in. We'll help you identify what matters and brings joy to your family, and we'll show you how to clear away the physical and mental clutter that's getting in the way. Our intention isn't to tell you how to parent, it's to show you how to find your *own* parenting “right.”

It's worth clarifying that our interpretation of minimalism veers from the traditional definition. Minimalist Parenting is not about living like a Spartan or a monk (we love our vacations and brownies too much for that). You don't need to become tightfisted or anti-achievement or saintly. There are no rigid rules to follow because each family's path is unique.

At the heart of Minimalist Parenting is formal permission to step off the modern parenting treadmill, and to have fun while you're doing it. You're not blowing your children's shot at success—just the opposite. Living a joyous life that's in line with your values (instead of some manufactured version of “successful” modern parenthood) will give your kids room to grow into the strong, unique people they are meant to be. More importantly, this way of being will provide a model that

shows your kids how to trust their instincts as they move toward independence and adulthood. Finally, Minimalist Parenting will allow you to claim space in your own wonderful life. This is your journey as much as it is theirs.

As you embrace Minimalist Parenting, the roller coaster of family life goes from anxiety provoking to fun. You'll still experience the white-knuckle drops, the ups and downs, and a few blind turns. But you'll be strapped in with direction and confidence, and *you'll enjoy the crazy ride.*

Who We Are

What do we know about Minimalist Parenting? We're both busy parents: between us we're juggling four kids, two husbands, several blogs, businesses and jobs, writing and social media careers, thousands of e-mails, business travel, two urban homes, and a dog. We know all about getting buried by what seems at first to be a good problem to have—lives full of opportunity in this fast-paced world that thrives on “more.”

Christine Koh

I'm the sixth of seven children—I grew up in a multigenerational household where my immigrant parents worked incredibly hard to keep both our nuclear family and various relatives afloat. At any given time, there were a dozen people, give or take, filling every nook and cranny of our three-bedroom home.

The affluent, predominantly Caucasian Boston suburb of my youth was a challenging environment in which to be so plainly different—both racially and socioeconomically. The racial slurs were painful, yes, but perhaps even more difficult to cope with was my embarrassment when kids in my class pointed out that I had worn the same shirt three days in a row (which was due as much to my lack of an expansive wardrobe as the fact that I really, really liked that shirt) or when I was excluded from the cafeteria table because I did not meet the minimum sitting requirement of owning three pairs of Guess jeans and two Benetton insignia sweaters.

These social hardships were challenging, as were dynamics at home,

but there was also a lot of love. My father was tough (even terrifying at times) but had a soft, charming side that I fully discovered later in life. My mother was the rock—she held everything together despite immense and sometimes intense challenges. And though it wasn't puppy dogs and unicorns all the time, my siblings and I share a deep sense of solidarity given everything we endured together.

Since becoming a parent, I have had many moments of internal conflict—stuck between the practical values instilled in me by my parents and the potential to overcompensate because of a childhood replete with exclusion. Ultimately, after much experimentation—and the irony of finding myself in a career where I now experience abundance—I learned that it *was* possible to find a middle ground. That I could acquire things I loved or found beautiful or interesting or meaningful without going over the cliff to excess. That there were ways for my children to experience cool things without becoming spoiled and entitled. That it was possible for me to find my own way, and to not only be okay *not* being the Tiger Mom, but also to appreciate that other parents—Tiger or otherwise—are ultimately working through their own issues and stumbling along trying to find their way, just as I am. That we're all in this together, doing the best we can for our kids and ourselves in each moment.

Childhood issues aside, why did I feel compelled and qualified to write this book with Asha? First, I have always been a writer and a sharer. As a child, I wrote stories. In high school and college, I was a reporter and editor of the school newspapers. In my previous professional life I was an academic: I completed a BA with a double major in music and psychology at Wheaton College, a master's degree in cognitive psychology at Brandeis University, a PhD in brain, behavior, and cognitive science with a focus on music and pedagogy at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada, and a three-year postdoctoral fellowship with joint appointments at MIT, Massachusetts General Hospital, and Harvard Medical School. I have written scholarly articles and have a rather meaty dissertation gathering dust in my basement. Since leaving academia for the freelance world, I have written thousands of blog posts and articles in the lifestyle and parenting space.

Second, every day I live the demands of negotiating a career and parenthood. As an academic I worked long hours in the lab while trying to

juggle motherhood (pumping breast milk while squatting on the floor of a single-stall bathroom at MIT was a particular low) and wrestled with the guilt of sending Laurel to day care (those days I would only see her a few hours a day, tops, before and after school) and the limited time in which to take care of everything not related to my job or my baby. I now have a “flexible” career (notice the use of quotes) in the sense that I work out of my home office. However, I work as many or more hours than I did as an academic, given my creative palette, which includes my work as founder/editor of the parenting/lifestyle blog *Boston Mamas*, founder/designer at Posh Peacock (graphic design firm), consultant at Women Online (digital strategy firm), cofounder of The Mission List (social media for social good community/consultancy) and Pivot Boston (event series for making your life awesome), managing editor of the academic journal *Music Perception*, not to mention my other freelance writing and advisory commitments, writing this book, and regular travel for work. The key difference between my previous and current professional lives is that I became miserable in academia and love what I do now.

Also, I now have two children: Violet attends day care part-time and Laurel is in public school but is reluctant to participate in camps and after-school programs. What this means time-wise is that I don't have full-time covered working hours during the day, work many nights, and have taken an impressive number of conference calls while nursing a baby, stretching, or eating my lunch. And I still have other professional dreams: future books, magazine writing, and on-camera work.

Third, like you, aside from my identity as parent, I'm a cog in a system of relationships. I married Jon in 2000; he is my favorite human on the planet and is, by virtue of being the person closest to me, sometimes at risk for getting what we (only sort of jokingly) refer to as “the dregs of Christine Koh.” I also am a daughter, an in-law, a sister, an aunt, a cousin, a niece, a friend, and a community member—with all of the associated get-togethers, requests, correspondence, and periodic crises that contribute to a full and sometimes complicated life.

All of this is to say that *I get it*. Every single day I live the awesomeness and the challenges of being a parent and a professional. I have my share of freak-outs. However, the reason I have felt so compelled to

write this book (which has been percolating in my brain since 2010) is that I've been on a quest over the last several years to—forgive my bluntness—cut the crap. To focus on what's important and to minimize the obligations and “angry brownies” (keep reading because you'll benefit from the angry brownie story) and toxic people (yes, it's been crucial to minimize toxic people) in my life so my bandwidth is less cluttered. So there's more “happy and awesome Christine Koh” and less “dregs of Christine Koh.” Every day brings its challenges and the journey is an evolving one, but I've made a hell of a lot of progress. I know how palpable the pain points are for so many parents and I want to help people out of that woeful, aching, and stuck place. I hope you'll stick with Asha and me for this ride from dregs to awesome. We applaud you for showing up.

Asha Dornfest

My upbringing was solidly middle-class and happily uncomplicated. I'm the only child of an Indian father and a Jewish mother of Eastern European decent, and my childhood was distinctly centered in American Suburbia.

Growing up, there was no sibling conflict, no difficulty in school, and no questions about where I fit into the world. We lived a modest life but there were no major wants. Struggle wasn't something I was familiar with. My relatively easy, happy life continued all the way through college, marriage to my husband, Rael, and the beginning of my career as a writer.

While I was still happy, becoming a mother marked the end of easy. My day-to-day routine and self-image changed so dramatically that happiness was no longer my effortless, default state of being. It now took work I had no experience doing.

As my kids grew and changed, I embarked on a crooked journey toward a family life that worked for all of us. I struggled to find solutions in books and the experiences of seemingly knowing older parents, but always came up short. What worked for other families just didn't seem to work for mine . . . or for me. For a time I thought it was a failure

of my own parenting (those were long, hard years), but I slowly came to realize that parenting is more about being open to learning than it is about knowing the answer.

In 2005, I started a blog called *Parent Hacks* as a way to talk with other parents and swap ideas and discoveries about parenting. Those were the days before Facebook and Twitter, so the community that grew at *Parent Hacks* felt somewhat magical to me. So many other parents were stumbling along as I was, trying to follow their own paths to a balanced family life, and we could all talk about it and help each other along. We began a fascinating conversation that continues there today.

As *Parent Hacks* grew, so did the complexity of parenting. The early school years proved to be extremely difficult for my oldest child, Sam. As a grade-schooler he suffered from anxiety, and the resulting fallout at school was disastrous to his health and self-esteem. Thus began our family's three-year odyssey through the school and medical systems. It was a frightening and stressful time, especially because it coincided with my husband's founding of an Internet start-up. My daughter, Mirabai, was thriving in school, but Sam continued to struggle. Anxiety had effectively halted Sam's learning, and we were out of options. In the middle of Sam's fourth-grade year, we made a decision to do something I said I would never do: we decided to homeschool him.

I could write an entire book about what I learned during the maddening, delightful, eye-opening year and a half we spent educating Sam at home (and perhaps I will someday!). But for the purposes of *Minimalist Parenting*, my two biggest takeaways were confidence in my parenting decisions and trust in my kids. Many people disagreed with our choice to take Sam out of school, including people whose opinion and approval I valued. But we knew it was the right thing to do, even though we had no idea what was in store for us (and, frankly, we were petrified).

Eventually I found that the more I paid attention to my values and my family's unique needs—and the less I was distracted by parenting experts, social pressures, and the opinions of well-meaning peers—the easier and better our family life became.

Today, both Sam and Mirabai are doing wonderfully at their local schools, and Sam's anxiety is a thing of the past. My family is no longer in the grip of fearing for our child's health. My husband and I are both

doing work we love while watching our two amazing (and very different) kids grow up. And I believe, with all my heart, that Minimalist Parenting (even though I didn't call it that at the time) is what helped us get here. We've still got a ways to go, and we still wrestle with balance and all the other complications of modern life. But we're happy, we're healthy, and we're learning.

What You'll Find in This Book

Minimalist Parenting is as much a mind-set as it is a set of recommendations for simplifying and streamlining your family life. In order to minimize your life in ways that are *lasting*, we'll guide you to shift your perspective as well as your practice.

We focus on the early to middle years of parenting (newborn to about age twelve) because those years place the biggest constraints on your time and space. We also see Minimalist Parenting as a way to build toward strong, healthy teen years. By the time kids are teenagers, the parenting focus shifts from direct care and teaching to promoting their independence, guiding and supporting their exploration, and preparing them for launch into adulthood. They'll be making their own choices and navigating the path to self-reliance, hopefully with a well-internalized dose of your minimalist modeling on board.

We lay the foundational groundwork for Minimalist Parenting in chapter 1. In it, we explain the six simple—but key—assumptions underlying Minimalist Parenting.

The next five chapters will help you clear the path to a calmer family life by minimalizing its major “containers.” Chapters 2 and 3 help you manage and open up your (and your family's) schedule. Chapters 4 and 5 address the whys and hows of clearing your space and decluttering your stuff. Chapter 6 offers our minimalist approach to money and spending, with tips for simplifying your financial setup.

The next six chapters move on to minimalizing day-to-day family life with children. Chapter 7 is all about rethinking playtime, and how fun and friendship don't require a house brimming with toys. Chapters 8 and 9 offer our minimalist approach to the school years (while inviting you to *enlarge* your definition of education). We devote

chapter 10 to extracurricular activities, providing suggestions for how to balance your kids' interests and learning opportunities with open, unstructured time for the entire family. In chapters 11 and 12, you'll find out how to minimize mealtimes: planning your menus so you're no longer caught unprepared, and "rightsizing" your expectations about family meals.

Chapter 13 addresses the special occasions in our lives. We focus on ways to keep the fun and joy of celebrations, holidays, and travel while losing the stress and excess.

Finally, we wrap up right where we started: with you. We devote chapter 14 to self-care: why you need it, how to embrace it, and, now that you have the space in your life, what you might like to do.

Throughout the book, you'll find anecdotes and contributions that help bring our concepts to life, whether from us (called out by our avatars), other parents (called out by a conversation bubble), or fellow colleagues in the parenting/lifestyle writing space (laid out as sidebars).

Minimalist Parenting is just the beginning. In the resources section, we share some of our favorite books, websites, apps, and other tools that will help you continue your journey to a happier, less cluttered life.

You'll find even more inspiration on the *Minimalist Parenting* website (minimalistparenting.com). Printable worksheets, activities and a community of support awaits you when you're ready to move beyond the book.

Buckle up: it's going to be an exciting ride. The scenery is fantastic and you're headed somewhere remarkable. Let's go.

1

The Road to Minimalist Parenting



You’ve just taken off on a road trip with your two new best friends, Fewer and Less. The six key ideas in this chapter are the compass points on your road map. Actually, *treasure map* is a better metaphor, because there’s no specific route you’re expected to take to get to the payoff. This journey will be more like navigating by the stars and the landmarks—with frequent stops to enjoy the view.

The first step toward Minimalist Parenting is to embrace a new mind-set that challenges the modern parenting prescription of “more.” As you reframe your unique constraints and assumptions, you’ll begin to understand how your life, once minimalized, can take on a shape you envision and create. What follows are the attitude shifts and perspective changes that will help you pull it off.

Make Room for Remarkable

If we’re talking about compass points, this one is true north. When you get rid of the stuff you don’t love, there’s more room for the stuff you do love. A simple statement on the face of it, but incredibly powerful when applied to your life.

A million things want your attention. The birthday gifts that need buying, the plans that need making, the after-school programs that need arranging, just to name a few. One of the benefits of modern

parenting is the sheer amount of choice available in just about every aspect of family life.

But the more choices, decisions, and stuff you must wade through, the more remote your remarkable life becomes. Have you ever spent fifteen minutes at the drugstore staring at the array of cold medicines, wondering which will best help your feverish, bedridden kid? Which is the *right* one? Fifteen minutes may not sound like much, but when you add up all the time and attention lost managing the barrage of choices thrown at you each day, each month . . . it adds up fast. More than that, the mental clutter that results casts a shadow over everything.



As one who tends toward over-research, it has taken me a long time to let go of my need to investigate everything. I've learned to shorten my search for the "best" answer and to just go with what's most likely to do the job. The time and mental space I've freed up feels

like oxygen for my brain.

Minimalist Parenting is about editing. Your time and attention are too precious to be nibbled away by everything that would thoughtlessly take a bite. You're panning for gold, swirling your life around to reveal the gleaming nuggets and letting the silt and debris wash away. When you edit out the unnecessary—whether these are physical items, activities, expectations, or maybe even a few people—you make room for remarkable.

The goal is actually quite simple: keep or add the stuff that increases the joy, meaning, and connection in your life, and reduce or get rid of the stuff that doesn't.

It's not exactly revolutionary to suggest that reducing clutter in one's life increases one's happiness. But unlike decluttering your house, decluttering your life can be a lot murkier. How do you know which things to keep and which to toss?

Know Yourself

When we encourage you to focus on joy, we're not talking about a flash of momentary happiness. We're talking about living in alignment with

your deeply held values. When you make decisions based on your values (as opposed to what all the external voices in your life are telling you to do), something inside goes *zing*. Not always immediately, and not always obviously, but it zings nonetheless.

Therefore, to figure out how to edit your life, you must first identify your unique set of values. “Values” is a lofty word—begging for Capitalization Due To Importance—but in reality your values are probably pretty humble and approachable. Simply stated: your values are the things you believe deep down.

Some of your values come straight from your upbringing (for better or worse). We all come from somewhere, and accepting that a big chunk of ourselves is bound up in our family culture is an important part of becoming a grown-up. For example, perhaps you—like us—have frugal tendencies instilled in you by the cultures of your parents. Or perhaps your glamorous mother passed on her exquisite taste in fashion and design. Or maybe you grew up playing in the woods, so you consider time outdoors to be a priority for your kids.

Other values may be in direct opposition to those of your family of origin. If yours was a cold, formal household, you may consider emotional warmth and laughter to be cornerstones of your parenting. If your parents withheld treats, you may believe in your kids’ right to a bucket full of Halloween candy.

The good news is you can cherry-pick the best of what you grew up with. (It may take some therapy to get there, but you can do it.) Take some time to zero in on your unique values. Everyone’s values are different so there are no wrong answers. No one will judge you on saintliness or profundity. Ask yourself:

- What am I grateful my parents taught me?
- What do I want to do differently from my parents?
- What do I want my family to represent?
- What do I care about? (If it’s easier to use the process of elimination, then ask, What *don’t* I care about?)
- What do I want my kids to take with them as they go out into the world?
- What roles do I want to play—as a spouse/partner, professional, and/or part of whatever village or community I’ve created for my family?

Zeroing in on your values is an ongoing process, so don't worry if your answers feel incomplete. Keep a notebook handy and scribble down relevant insights as they pop up. The most important thing you can do now is begin the excavation process. As you reveal the edges of your values, keep chiseling away and the bigger picture will emerge over time.

Know Your Family

While you're considering your values, it's important to recognize that your family members come with their own unique blueprints and a spirit and a constitution that may be different from yours. What if you and your partner crave adventure and excitement, but your kid is a homebody? You may feel at home surrounded by your books, but your partner is constantly trying to get you to go to social events. One kid may happily accompany you on errands while the other requires more control over his daily routine. (That's the one screaming in the airplane seat behind you.)



I wouldn't call my husband, Rael, and I opposites, because we hold so many basic values in common. But our day-to-day styles—how we operate in our daily lives—are very different. I'm fundamentally social, preferring to do things in a group or a community. He draws energy from quiet time at home and alone. I'm an intuitive decision maker who resists holding myself to a tight structure, which means my homemaking skills are . . . still emerging. He finds peace in routine and proceeds through his day systematically (and his office is spotless).

We've had to work on accepting each other's innate styles and on finding common ground so that we could create a unified family culture and consistently parent our kids. At the same time, we try to acknowledge each other's individual strengths and quirks . . . they attracted us to each other in the first place. It's a long-term process we revisit constantly as circumstances, goals, kids (and we) change.