



# Do it your way

FINDING PARENTING CHALLENGING? PSYCHOLOGIST **DR KOA WHITTINGHAM** SHARES HER TOP TIPS FOR DISCOVERING AND IMPLEMENTING A PARENTING STYLE THAT WORKS FOR YOU.

**H**olding your newborn in your arms for the first time and realising you are responsible for this perfect little human can be both joyous and scary – and as your baby begins to grow, so can the self-doubt.

Each time we start to feel we have parenting figured out, a new challenge – sleeping issues, temper tantrums, beginning school – can throw us once again into uncertainty and fear. And it doesn't help that we are often bombarded with judgement, criticism and contradictory advice.

Like most parents, you would probably love to have the confidence to let go of self-doubt and parent in your own way. But that can also be daunting. You may not even be certain at times what “your way” is. Here's how to cut through all the confusion, criticism and doubt.

## 1 FIND CONFIDENCE IN YOUR VALUES

Discover what really matters to you as a parent – what gives you that deep sense of joy and satisfaction? What do you really want your life to be about? Values can't be right or wrong and don't come from the head: they come from the heart. It is when we live these values that we feel good about ourselves. This is where true confidence begins.

**2 WORK OUT WHAT IS IMPORTANT** Pause for a moment and imagine you could travel into the future and view your child as an adult. Imagine them grown up with adult friends, a

job, in a relationship and perhaps even with children of their own. Now imagine that your child is reflecting on their childhood and on your parenting, perhaps talking about you to their partner or friends. What would you hope to hear them say? Of course, we would all love our children to say we were good parents, but push past that to the specifics about the kind of parent you were.

Imagine your child completing one of these sentences: ‘What's special about my mum is...’ or ‘I'll always be grateful to my dad for...’ or ‘I'm lucky I had the parents I had because...’.

What popped into your head? Was it, ‘The thing that's really special about my mum is she was always there for me’ or ‘I will always be grateful to my father for spending so much time just playing with me’ or ‘I'm so lucky I had my parents because they were always so loving and affectionate’? Or was it something quite different?

**3 LIVE THE JOY** You can be certain that you've identified one of your parenting values if following it feels right and brings you joy. For example, a parent who values being loving and affectionate will genuinely enjoy physical affection. This doesn't mean that being affectionate is always easy though. When kids are sick they may require so many cuddles that even the most loving parent could begin to regret the loss of sleep or the inability to >



get any chores done. However, if you truly value being a loving parent, then being affectionate will feel good to you.

Once you've identified your parenting values, you have a guide to what your parenting style truly is. Confidence and having faith in yourself is really about trusting your own parenting values. As you learn to trust your own values, and to act in accordance with them, you will develop stronger confidence in your day-to-day parenting decisions.

**4 LEARN TO LIVE WITH SELF-DOUBT** What about self-doubt? Will it disappear if you know your parenting values? Unfortunately, the answer is no. Everyone experiences self-doubt from time to time. It might seem like the way to confidence is to eliminate self-doubt, but in fact by attacking our own doubts we are only attacking ourselves.

You cannot bully yourself into confidence, so waging a war on self-doubt will only lower your confidence further. Instead of trying to eliminate doubt, we need to learn how to live with it. Even though negative thoughts will surface from time to time, you don't need to take your inner critic too seriously. Even if that voice in your head keeps telling you that you are a lousy parent, you don't need to prove it wrong, nor do you need to become the poor parent that your inner critic says you are. Simply acknowledge that this is just the sort of negative thing that inner critics say, and then turn your focus back to living your values as best you can.

Try treating your critical voice like a radio station playing in the background of your life. Just because the radio is on doesn't mean you need to give it your full attention. Focus on doing what you value, rather than on listening to "inner critic radio". This will allow you to cultivate the kind of confidence that comes from being true to yourself – by slowly but surely moving towards what matters most to you in your life.

**5 BE FLEXIBLE** The final step to developing confidence is developing flexibility – the ability to adjust your parenting so that you are doing what works for you, your child and the circumstances in which you find yourself.

As we all know, parenting doesn't always happen according to our plans. Yet we often become too attached to very specific goals: 'My child will sleep through the night by six months', 'I will breastfeed for one year' or 'My child will be academically gifted.' And if, as often happens, that goal is not achieved, it can be a huge blow to our confidence.

Rather than focusing on plans and goals, your confidence as a parent will build if you focus instead on the best way of living your parenting values. What matters most to you? What brings you joy? Then decide how you can live your values in the situation that you find yourself, even if it is sometimes unexpected.

For example, not many parents expect to give birth long before their due date, let alone plan for parenting a premature baby in the neonatal intensive care unit of the hospital. But if you are clear on what your values are – be a loving mum, be there for your baby, spend time with your baby – you can adjust and discover how to live them even in difficult and unexpected circumstances such as preterm birth.

Truly confident parenting starts by knowing what is in your own heart. Your confidence in your own judgements will continue to develop if you focus on noticing what works with your child, in the context of what matters most to you as a parent, and adjust your parenting accordingly. It won't always be easy, and you'll still experience self-doubt from time to time. But as you do so, you'll discover the confidence that comes from being true to yourself. ✱

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