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Dr. Becky Doesn't Think the Goal of Parenting Is to Make Your Kid Happy

By David Marchese Photograph by Mamadi Doumbouya

Every generation, sometimes building on and sometimes rejecting what came before, develops its own ideas about parenting. For many millennials, the clinical psychologist Becky Kennedy, a.k.a. Dr. Becky, is the person whom they trust to deliver those ideas. Via her popular Good Inside podcast and her more-than-800,000-follower Instagram account, her newsletter and online workshops, Kennedy, who is 38 and a mother of three, offers advice aimed — and this is what she believes distinguishes her approach — at managing the thoughts and feelings of parents as much as children. “Millennial parents are more aware of things within themselves that don’t feel good, places that feel empty that they want to feel sturdier,” says Kennedy, who is currently working on a book, also called “Good Inside,” set to be published by Harper Wave next year. “These are parents dedicated to raising kids who feel solid and confident while also trying to heal *themselves*.”

There's evidence to suggest that parents are now spending more time¹ doing things like playing with and reading to their kids than previous generations of parents did. I assume that consequently they're spending more time thinking about how to be a good parent. But at the same time there's evidence suggesting that kids are increasingly unhappy.² What might that say about the limits of parental influence? Well, our kids live in a world of immediate gratification. The internet, the iPads, the ease of everything. Because there are so many ways right now to get around frustration, you have to be mindful to raise kids who learn how to tolerate it. But what would cultivate happiness? The work, the intention, the frustration, the failure. That used to be the pathway to happiness. Maybe we're spending more time with our kids, but the ease of things makes it harder to build pathways that lead to longer-term happiness.

Is happiness the goal of parenting? No. Anybody who had a childhood in which happiness was the goal would be predestined for a lifetime of anxiety — life is full of distress! What's something that's distressing as a kid? It could be, "My tower fell down." If happiness were the goal then my behavior would be, "Look, we fixed your tower, it's fine." What would I be wiring into my child by doing that? The more we focus on becoming happy, the less tolerance we have for distress and the more we search to feel any other way than how we're feeling — which is the experience of anxiety. So what's an alternative response to "My tower fell down"? It wouldn't be me saying, "Tough, things happen." It's the accumulation of feeling alone in our feelings as kids that gives us adult struggles. So how would I not do aloneness? Through presence. My kid's tower falls down? I would try to say: "I'm not going to rebuild it. I'm going to stay here with you"; and maybe it's [sings] "Towers fall down and that really stinks." Through my presence, what I'm doing is teaching my kid that when their distress light goes on, we want it to operate on a dimmer. If you think about all the worst adult coping mechanisms, they are an attempt to turn a feeling off, not an attempt to dim. I used to see adults in my private practice who came to me with eating disorders or bulimia. I would say to those with bulimia that the way that vomiting makes you feel as if, wow, you've cleaned out everything bad in your body — not just the food but the accumulation of experience — that's something I can't offer to you. I *can* offer you something different: It's dimming your distress — not to a zero, but from a 10 to a nine and then a nine to a eight and so on. Then you can learn how to operate in the world.

¹ According to one study, some four hours a week activities like reading, or helping with homework, about an hour and a half spent doing similar activ

² According to a Pew Rese analysis of data including National Survey on Drug 13 percent of U.S. teens reported having experie major depressive episod up from 8 percent in 20'



Dr. Becky Kennedy, bottom, with her guests Kristen Bell, top left, and Jackie Tohn on an episode of "Good Inside With Dr. Becky." Screen grab from Instagram

I would guess your interest in parenting has something to do with being a parent yourself. Is bulimia something you've also dealt with personally? I haven't. I used to work with a lot of clients with eating disorders during my postdoctoral training. Bulimia, addiction, these are all struggles with emotion regulation. They're all different ways of saying, "I can't be in my body."

Approaches to parenting probably always reflect, at least in some way, social or cultural anxieties. What are parents anxious about now that they're expressing through questions about raising their kids? The word that comes to mind is emptiness. We're living in such an external-validation-seeking world and parents are looking to feel filled up. That's the only way they can show up for their kids. Am I building myself up outside-in — *What do people think of me? What do people need from me?* Or am I building myself inside-out — *Who am I? What's inside me?* There are so many things capturing our attention that it's hard to have attention on *yourself*. How hard is it to sit and breathe for five minutes? How hard is it to not be on your phone? There are so many things that are orienting us away from ourselves, and that's the emptiness that we're all grappling with.

How do parents' feelings of emptiness connect to your ideas about parenting? Where parents make big shifts is when they empower themselves to think: *What's going on for me right now? What's my feeling? What's my worry? Why does this trigger me? What is it like for me when my daughter's not joining soccer?* Locating that makes you a sturdier parent, because you feel more filled up. Whenever any of us pictures a sturdy leader in our life, it's someone who has beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and is willing to name them. That person

is willing to say: "I'm feeling anxious right now. I'm feeling worried. This is what's going on for me." That allows them to show up as parents and to stay grounded even when their kids are not.

Is there a risk of constant parental self-monitoring turning into parental self-involvement? You have to take it that step further: *What does it bring up for me when my kid is having a tantrum? Oh, I picture my mom being like, "You have a spoiled kid."* Now that I know that, can I use that information to change? My hope is that self-reflection in parenting is the thing that allows for change.

There's no shortage of places for people to look for parenting advice. What's the thing that you're delivering that wasn't there before? I think people feel that we have equal respect and empathy for parent and child. We've often been presented models of parenting in which it's all about the kid's feelings, and you feel depleted. Or it's behavior training. I was trained that way initially. After my Ph.D. program, I did a very robust parenting program that was all about rewards and punishments and ignoring and timeouts. Nobody feels good giving a sticker chart. Nobody feels good sending kids to a timeout. How often do we do things to our kids and forget the parallel with ourselves? If my husband was like, "You have a listening problem; you're not going to get your iPad for a week," I'd be like, "No, you have a problem." Yet we do that to our kids all the time. We take things away to punish, to reinforce. That doesn't feel right.

It's probably safe to say that parents who are regular consumers of parenting advice are a relatively affluent bunch. What should well-off parents know about how money can screw up kids? I have a private practice in Manhattan, see a lot of affluent clients. People say to me, "How do I not have an entitled kid?" But entitlement, what does that mean? It's the entitlement to not feel frustrated. Because when a kid is like, "You didn't get me a first-class ticket," it's not that they expect "first class" so much as they feel that they shouldn't have to be frustrated. It's so easy to look at kids like that and think, What a [expletive] kid. But I would take the other side: That kid must be having a terrifying experience in their body to feel something that they've learned they should never feel. Using money to always avoid disappointment can lead to that. This is not, like, *Families with money, poor you*. But those parents almost have to think, Where is frustration built into my kid's life? So that when those frustrating moments come, the kid's body says, "Oh, this is part of living; I know how to do this" instead of, "This should not be happening; I have no skills to deal with it." Which is actually very sad.



Kennedy at home in her children's playroom, which doubles as her home office. Liz Clayman

You know, when you brought up bulimia before and I asked if you'd had personal experience with it, your body language changed. You put your hand against your cheek and you looked away when you answered the question. I'm not trying to pry, but is there more to that? Because if there is, I wonder if it had an effect on the work that you do? It's very perceptive. You're someone who pays attention to bodily cues. That makes me feel even safer talking to you. So, I did have an eating disorder when I was in high school. Anorexia. That was something that took me into my second experience with therapy. I was a very fearful kid: Early on I was terrified of separation, of sleep. I used to worry someone would kidnap me. So I had a round of therapy then. But my senior year of high school, I tore my ACL before my gymnastics season and my soccer season, and I ended up missing both. My whole world was turned upside down. So right before college, my separation struggles and *those* struggles came out in that way: Anorexia is a brilliant set of symptoms to kind of say to your parents, "I need to be my own person; I don't want what you have to offer me" without ever having to actually say it. I feel lucky that my parents caught it

early and were like, “We need help.” Then I had a really positive experience in therapy. So, yeah, when you asked about bulimia, it brought up those memories, because it’s a cousin of anorexia.

So your experience with therapy back then moved you toward considering it as a career? I had always been curious about people. I love asking questions. I love getting to know people. But my experience in therapy was so positive. It changed the course of my life.

To get back to parenting: Is there something maybe crazy-making about the idea that we could always be improving as parents? It almost reminds me of something like “wellness,” where you can get on the hamster wheel of self-improvement and never get off. Does the goal of constant parental self-reflection run at all counter to the idea, which I’m taking from D.W. Winnicott,³ that if you provide your kids with love and support and a comforting space and safety, it’ll probably be good enough? There’s definitely something to that idea. We all need to be self-aware enough to ask, Where do I fall on that scale? Being “good enough” makes me feel like, “I’m going to mess up; I’m going to do things, and at least some of those times I’m going to repair after.”⁴ I don’t even have to be perfect at the repair. But the repair moments are huge. I hear what you’re saying, though: There’s no perfect parent. But I also don’t think “good enough” parenting is defined by *Eh, it probably ends up OK*. We have to hold ourselves accountable.

On some level, aside from experts like yourself, we parents are all just kind of winging it, right? Don’t label me as an “expert.” That’s an anti-learning term. What I can say is, our kids are the most unique human beings. There has never been anyone like them. I don’t know if you’ve read Andrew Solomon’s “Far From the Tree.” His opening page is something I show to parents: “There’s no such thing as reproduction.”⁵ Parenting is being forever cast into a relationship with a stranger. Does *anyone* know how to be in a permanent relationship with a stranger whom they’re supposed to love and nourish? So, sure, everyone is just winging it, but they’re *also* looking to feel believed and supported and not alone.

³ The British psychologist the idea of the “good er

⁴ Roughly speaking, “repa means re-establishing tr connection after a mom been broken.

⁵ From Solomon’s 2012 nc about parents and their children: “There is no su reproduction. When twc have a baby, they engag production, and the wid word reproduction for tt best a euphemism to co parents before they get heads.”

This interview has been edited and condensed from two conversations.

David Marchese is a staff writer for the magazine and the columnist for Talk. Recently he interviewed Alice Waters about being uncompromising and Neil deGrasse Tyson about how science might once again reign supreme.