

00:12

A few years ago, a student came up to me after the second day of my class on parenting and child development. She hesitated for a second and then she confessed, "I'm really interested in this material, but I was hoping your class would help me to become a better parent if I have kids someday." She was disappointed. We were going to talk about how parents do not have control in shaping who their children become. She jumped to the conclusion that my class wouldn't help her. I was caught off guard. Would confronting the science of parenting and child development, not be relevant to being a good parent? I hope that my class changed her mind.

00:58

Parents want what's best for their children, young and old parents, rich and poor, married and divorced. And parenting books promise to show how to achieve the best outcomes, to address the difficult decisions that parents face every day and in the process, to reveal why each of us turned out the way we did. The problem is that parenting books send conflicting messages. Tiger parenting or free-range parenting? Parent like the Dutch to raise the happiest kids in the world or like the Germans, to raise self-reliant children? The one consistent message is that if your child isn't succeeding, you're doing something wrong. There's good news, though. The science supports a totally different message that is ultimately empowering.

01:55

Trying to predict how a child will turn out based on choices made by the parents is like trying to predict a hurricane from the flap of a butterfly's wings. Do you know the butterfly, the proverbial one, that flaps its wings in China, perturbing the atmosphere just enough to shift wind currents that make their way to the skies over tropical white beaches intensifying the water evaporating from the ocean in a spiral of wind and fueling a hurricane in the Caribbean six weeks after that flutter of wings. If you are a parent, you are the butterfly flapping your wings. Your child is the hurricane, a breathtaking force of nature. You will shape the person your child becomes like the butterfly shapes the hurricane in complex, seemingly unpredictable but powerful ways. The hurricane wouldn't exist without the butterfly.

02:58

"Wait," you might ask, what about all the successful parents with successful children or the struggling parents with struggling children?" They might seem to show the simple power of parenting. But children can be shaped by many forces that are often intertwined, like successful parents, successful genes, successful peers and a culture of success that they grow up in. This can make it hard to know which forces influence who children become. "OK," you might think, "yes, it's hard to pull apart all these possible forces, but we can make pretty good guesses about the importance of parents." Perhaps.

03:38

Well, how many of you know how a bicycle works? Right, you've seen people riding bikes, maybe you've ridden one yourself or even tried to teach someone else how to do it. Just like parenting -- you've seen people doing it, maybe you've done it yourself or even tried to teach someone else how to do it. We can feel confident about what we know. When we say we know how a bicycle works, we think we have something in our heads like this. Something that relates the pedals to the chain and to the wheels. But when you ask people to explain how a bicycle works, they produce drawings like this. And like this.

04:22

(Laughter)

04:25

People have no idea how bicycles work. Or zippers or rainbows, or even topics they argue passionately about. When you push people to explain how these things work, they usually can't. Just caring about something, like parenting, or feeling confident about it, doesn't guarantee that we understand it. And everyone can't possibly be right about how parenting works, given how wildly beliefs have varied.

04:56

Mothers in a hunter-gatherer society regretted when their children cut themselves themselves while playing with knives, but they thought the cuts were worth the freedom to explore. Even within one society like ours, parenting wasn't a common term until the 1970s. Before then, parents weren't viewed as active shapers of children's futures. Years from now, people may look back on today's views and feel just as amazed as we feel when hearing about other times and places.

05:30

The science could help parents, and potential parents like my student, to understand how they actually shape who their children become. Millions of children have been studied to disentangle all those shaping forces that are usually intertwined. These studies follow identical twins and fraternal twins and plain old siblings growing up together or adopted and raised apart. And it turns out that growing up in the same home does not make children noticeably more alike in how successful they are, or how happy or self-reliant and so on. Imagine if you had been taken from birth and raised next door by the family to the left and your brother or sister had been raised next

door by the family to the right, by and large, that would have made you no more similar or different than growing up together under the same roof.

06:30

On the one hand, these findings seem unbelievable. Think about all the ways that parents differ from home to home and how often they argue and whether they helicopter and how much they shower their children with love. You would think that would matter enough to make children growing up in the same home more alike than if they had been raised apart. But it doesn't.

06:53

In 2015, a meta analysis, a study of studies, found this pattern across thousands of studies following over 14 million twin pairs across 39 countries. They measured over 17,000 outcomes. And the researchers concluded that every single one of those outcomes is heritable. So genes influence who children become. But genes didn't explain everything. The environment mattered too, just something in the environment that didn't shape children growing up in the same home to be more alike. Some people have looked at these findings and concluded that parenting doesn't matter. That you would have become the same person you are today, regardless of who raised you.

07:41

On the other hand, and really, I should say on the other hands, because there are many caveats to that story, but I'll focus on one. On the other hand, these findings are not all that shocking. If you think about how the same parent could shape different children in different ways. One child might find it helpful when her mother provides structure. Her sister might find it's stifling. One child might think his parents are caring when they ask questions about his friends. His brother might think they're being nosy. One child might view a divorce as a tragedy, while his sister sees it as a relief. Same event, different experience.

08:25

My husband and I experienced this concept 20 years ago when we were 30,000 feet over the Atlantic, flying from Chicago to Stockholm to work on a research project. The flight attendants were clearing the dinner trays, people were getting ready to sleep. We hit a patch of bumpy air and a bunch of teenagers whooped in excitement. Then all of a sudden, the plane was plummeting, children and food carts hit the ceiling. The plane seemed to stabilize, but then plummeted again. The ceiling panels flew up into their compartments from the force, revealing wiring inside. Debris came crumbling down on us. People were screaming and sobbing. The plane plummeted again. After an eternity, the pilot came on and announced, "We don't know

what that was. We don't know what's coming. Stay in your seats." My husband came away from that experience feeling like planes are incredibly safe.

09:26

(Laughter)

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The airline sent a letter informing us that we hadn't simply been falling across those thousands of feet of clear air turbulence. The plane had been subjected to forces greater than 2G. We learned that planes can withstand forces many times larger. So my husband feels safe flying. He seems genuinely baffled by how anyone could feel otherwise. I get that concept, but only in the abstract. I've never been able to fly the same way since. Same event, different experience.

10:04

Just because an event doesn't shape people in the same way, that doesn't mean it had no effect. Your parenting could be shaping your children, just not in ways that lead them to become more alike. Your parenting could be leading your first child to become more serious, your second child to become more relaxed. Your first child to want to be like you, your second child to want to be nothing like you. You are flapping your butterfly wings to your hurricane children.

10:35

This isn't how we typically think about parenting. It doesn't make for simple advice. How could parenting books tell people how to raise successful, happy, self-reliant children, if the same parenting can lead to different outcomes for children in the same home? At this point, you might be thinking, like students in my class sometimes say, "OK, we get it. development is complicated. And maybe it's not worth studying because it's too complicated." But meaning can be made from chaos. Scientists now understand how babies go from these apparent lumps to become walking, talking, thinking, social independent beings. They understand this process well enough to intervene, to test newborns, for example, and treat them for a genetic condition that used to lead to mental retardation. Scientists are developing ever more sophisticated understanding of how parents could shape their children's futures.

11:38

Science can tell us a lot. But it will never tell us everything. So what can we do with this? First, know that parents matter. That might seem obvious, but smart people are arguing otherwise, and

what seems obvious is not always true, as we've seen. Second, know that how parents matter is complex and difficult to predict. For anyone who has ever been a parent, stop blaming yourself, as if you are in control of your child's path. You have influence, but you don't have control. For anyone who has ever been a child, stop blaming your parents.

12:20

(Laughter)

12:21

At least for the idea that you are defined by them. Stop blaming other parents. A recent survey of thousands of parents revealed that 90 percent of mothers and 85 percent of fathers feel judged. Close to half feel judged all the time or nearly all the time by people they know and by complete strangers. These judgments probably don't reflect what's best for the kids. How could they, given how profoundly parenting has varied around the world and across time? And given how the same parents can shape children under the same roof in such different ways. Even when parents try their best, they can't satisfy everybody. There's only so much time.

13:07

This is especially true for dragon parents. The author, Emily Rapp, came up with this term after her baby was diagnosed with Tay-Sachs disease. She knew then that Ronan would never walk or talk. He would likely die before turning four. I did not know that this could also be the fate of my firstborn son. He was born with a condition that prevents the intestine from absorbing nutrients or water for the body. It affects one in five million babies. One in five million. It is so rare that one doctor felt confident telling us that we would be screwed if that's what our baby had. He was the one who had to break the news to us later.

14:09

Dragon parents have a lot to say about parenting, even though they know their children will die young, or in my case, even if we have no idea whether our babies will live. Emily Rapp wrote, "We will not launch our children into a bright and promising future, but see them into early graves." This requires a new ferocity, a new way of thinking, a new animal. We are dragon parents, fierce and loyal and loving as hell. Our experiences have taught us how to parent for the here and now, for the sake of parenting, for the humanity implicit in the act itself. Parenting, I've come to understand, is about loving my child today, now. In fact, for any parent anywhere, that's all there is.

15:12

I had thought that my expertise in child development would help prepare me for becoming a parent. Instead, becoming a parent helped me to see the science in a whole new light. So third, appreciate how powerful the moments can be because of what they mean for you and your child right now, not because of what they mean for your child long term, which you do not know. The activist Andrew Solomon noted, "Though many of us take pride in how different we are from our parents, we are endlessly sad at how different our children are from us." Maybe we could be less sad if we were more realistic, if we let go of the notion that our children's futures are in our control. If we can embrace the complexity of our children's development that can transform how we approach those parenting decisions we face each day and empower us to realize how much more there is to having a child than trying to shape a specific outcome. So much more, which I appreciate every day in moments with my firstborn son, who is thriving and with his younger brother and the unique paths they are taking. We are not screwed.

16:33

(Laughter)

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The science of parents and children, butterflies and their hurricanes, can free people to focus on what is most important and meaningful in our lives. This can make the experience of being a parent and the experience of having been a child more realistic and satisfying for everyone involved. And that, I think, is very relevant to being a good parent.