

# 'Parents these days' are judged too harshly

January 13 2015, by John Pickering

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

I need to start with a confession: I'm not a parent. I am someone who investigates how science can help parents deal with the sleepless nights, the fussy eaters, the sibling rivalry, the intrusive in-laws, and a career that favours fulltime hours.

I certainly don't know what it feels like to hold your own child in your arms and to see that same child grow to become an independent human

being.

I haven't experienced these things.

What I have experienced, though, is the growing and seemingly widespread view that parents these days aren't doing a good job – that in fact they're doing a "[crap](#)" job.

Parents are out of touch, we're told, and too soft. They give in to their kids too easily. They're over-involved [helicopter parents](#), or under-involved don't care parents. Or they could be bulldozer or lawn-mower parents, the ones who smooth the way for their child's transition through life and make life difficult for everyone else in the process.

This is the old "kids these days" narrative but applied to parents.

## **Has parenting actually changed?**

A [2012 study](#) surveyed thousands of English adolescents in 1986 and again in 2006 to determine the extent that parent-child relationships had changed over 20 years.

The study showed that parental monitoring of youth behaviour and parent-child quality time increased from 1986 to 2006. Parents in 2006 also expected more from their [children](#) than they did in 1986, including the expectation of being polite.

The authors concluded that their study failed to provide any evidence that the quality of parent-child relationships had declined over time, and that there is little evidence of any decline in parenting across the target population.

This finding corroborates [earlier studies](#) which analysed parenting

patterns across generations and found that both mothers and fathers tended to spend greater amounts of time in child care-related activities in the 1990s than they did in the 1960s.

## **So what is different?**

The major trend that strikes me about parents today is the appetite for evidence that informs decisions about parenting. Parents want evidence that what they are doing is effective.

They invest time to research whether vaccines work; to find evidence that "breast is best"; evidence that [car seat A](#) is superior to car seat B; evidence that certain toys are developmentally appropriate; evidence that the discipline strategies they use are effective.

The costs of having children are also [on the rise](#).

In Australia the costs of raising a child are estimated at anywhere between A\$500,000 and A\$1 million [per child](#) – and that's just to the point when they leave home.

These costs have [doubled since 2007](#) while household income increased 25%, which is perhaps an indication of why people are having fewer kids these days.

## **How you parent is important**

Years of experimental research are now converging on a very simple, and plainly obvious, conclusion: the way we parent our children has a profound effect on how they develop and go on to contribute to society. Put differently, the specific parenting strategies we use with our children have a direct and significant impact on our children's life chances and

opportunities.

[Early family relationships](#) have been shown to have an impact on an individual's cognitive ability, social and emotional adjustment, health and wellbeing, and involvement in crime and substance abuse.

Recent research has also demonstrated how different parenting styles and strategies influence various aspects of brain development. One [study](#) showed how harsh parenting reduced telomere length in the brain (a biomarker for chronic stress). [Another](#) demonstrated that, even in environments of poverty, altering the way we parent our children can help alleviate some of the adverse effects of disadvantage and promote better brain development in kids.

A fundamental skill that parents can teach their children is self-control. It's a skill that allows us to get on with others, to focus and stick to tasks and to be sure to look after ourselves. The importance of self-control at both the individual and community level has been captured in a powerful [longitudinal study](#) which found that the level of self-control of children at age 3 could predict their later physical health, substance dependence, financial wellbeing and involvement in crime at age 32.

Nobel Laureate [James Heckman](#), points out that disadvantage is better defined by the quality of the early nurturing environment and the types of parenting that children receive, rather than by the financial resources available to them.

As this evidence begins to make its way into the modern vernacular of parenting, the physical, emotional, financial and intellectual resources that parents are now investing in raising their kids have never been greater.

We need to stop damning [parents](#) of today, embrace their appetite for

knowledge, and continue to evolve the sophistication and availability of evidence-based parenting strategies.

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