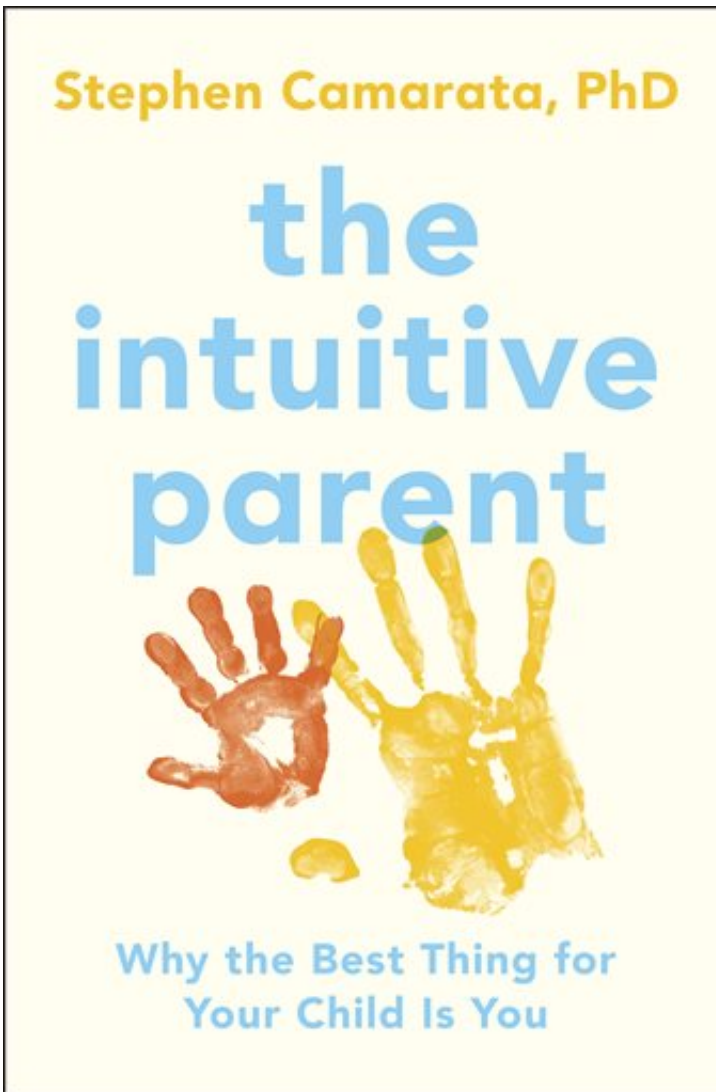


# Toss the flash cards: child expert urges intuitive parenting

July 29 2015, byLeanne Italie

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This book cover image released by Current shows "The Intuitive Parent: Why the Best Thing for Your Child Is You," by Stephen Camarata, available on Aug. 18, 2015. Camarata takes on the marketing frenzy aimed at ensuring educational

success, the neuroscience of learning and the heightened anxiety that has made parenting today a competitive sport. (Current via AP)

Parents should lose the flash cards, learning apps and other educational gadgets and strategies de jour, advises Stephen Camarata, a child development researcher and professor who thinks they need to rediscover their inner "parenting voice" instead.

He's had plenty of practice himself. He has seven kids, ages 19 to 35.

The Vanderbilt professor spanning the fields of speech and language, psychiatry and special education built a reputation as an expert in speech and language disorders in children. Last year, he put out a book, "Late-Talking Children: A Symptom or a Stage?" His follow-up in August has a broader focus, titled "The Intuitive Parent," published by Penguin's Current imprint.

Camarata takes on the marketing frenzy aimed at ensuring educational success, the neuroscience of learning and the heightened anxiety that has made parenting today a competitive sport.

A conversation with Stephen Camarata:

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AP: Has this generation of [parents](#) lost the ability to follow their instincts in raising children?

Camarata: They haven't lost their ability, but outside pressures are derailing that. Marketing is one factor, and there's a distortion of what neuroscience has told us.

Another factor is simply that our lives are busier and busier. A parent may have big job commitments and other things that lead to a lot of self-inflicted guilt and pressure to rush things along more quickly than they need to.

AP: Much is made of a "sweet spot" for young children in learning and brain development. You say there's no such thing. Can you explain that?

Camarata: When you look at the science behind the notion of critical periods that you have to wire something completely before a certain age, be it 2 or 3 or whatever it is, that is a complete misrepresentation of what the science says.

In a general sense, the studies on neuroplasticity show us that you have to have at least some exposure to hearing things, seeing things and so on for the brain to get acclimated. That's certainly true, but it doesn't have to be this specific, highly tailored kind of influence. That's a complete misrepresentation. The evidence for critical periods is really, really weak.

AP: What is whole-brain learning?

Camarata: It means that multiple parts of the brain are activated while the child is having a new experience. So one approach to learning is to try to really highlight and emphasize a certain area, like visual processing of letters for learning how to read, which really only activates primarily one area of the brain.

Whole-brain learning actually takes in multiple senses, so learning to read could mean sitting with a parent and holding the book. They're seeing it, they're getting touched, they're hearing the story. That's what computer games can't do.

AP: How does a parent of a child not responding to traditional American-style schooling advocate effectively? I think many parents feel powerless in the face of worksheets, too much sitting still, teaching to the test, rote memorization of facts and so on.

Camarata: It's really important that the parent enter into a dialogue with a teacher pretty early on. Parents have a lot more ability and a lot more authority than they might think at first blush.

When I would do homework instead of my child because it wasn't appropriate for them, I would sign it and turn it in. Studies show that parents are doing 75 to 80, 90 percent of the homework. That's not how a child is going to learn. I'd go to the teacher and say, 'Here's how much my child can do. I'm going to have him do that.'

AP: Where does technology fit into your model of intuitive parenting?

Camarata: Technology is not frivolous, but we don't want to turn our children's minds over to technology. We want to include that in our parenting but we want to make sure that children aren't psychologically imprinted on screens. I completely agree with those who don't recommend screen technology too early.

I don't want to see a child left alone in a corner with a device. A parent should be there and interacting in the same way they would with a book. You need to be actively involved. You want to wire their brains to be able to take advantage of technology.

We all use technology all the time and love it.

AP: What are the dangers of "regularizing" the school experience, meaning approaching all kids the same way regardless of learning style?

Camarata: Teaching [children](#) in an assembly line fashion doesn't work. Children are not Toyotas or Nissans. Because schools are struggling, there's more and more pressure to regularize things, which makes the situation worse.

We also have this fascination with accelerating development. Well, you don't really want to accelerate that. You want to let it unfold. Children are going to have natural strengths and weaknesses.

Parents are in a high-stakes game when it comes to education, and some states are exacerbating that. One of the consequences is parents feel like they don't have any choice.

I blame the system that rations a good education. I want to give parents the chance to hear that little voice in their head that's saying, 'Is this really what I should be doing?'

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