

Babies don't come with instruction manuals, so here are five tips for picking a parenting book

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Babies don't come with instruction manuals. Children are at once joyful, sad, confusing, predictable, generous, selfish, gentle and mean. What's a

parent to do when faced with such perplexing offspring? Given the complex interactions of parent, child and surroundings, parents often feel lost. Many may seek answers in parenting books.

[Parenting books are big business](#), and there are tens of thousands of titles for sale. The big question, though, is: Do parenting [books](#) help?

How effective they are is a matter of debate, especially given the lack of scientific evidence regarding their usefulness. Limited research has found that [problem-focused self-help books may be helpful](#) to readers—think tips about time management or healthy eating. And studies find that using books independently to improve well-being—what psychologists call bibliotherapy—is [somewhat effective for addressing stress, anxiety and depression](#).

So it makes sense that reading a parenting book could be useful. In terms of quality and usefulness, however, they exist on a continuum.

[We're scholars of human development](#), have taught thousands of students about parenting and write about family, parenting and development through the lifespan. One of us (Bethany) is the mother of six little ones, while the other of us (Denise) has two [adult children](#), one of whom is Bethany. We believe that parents can become [critical thinkers and choose the books](#) that will be most appropriate for them. Here are five questions to think about when you're looking for the best parenting book for you.

1. Who wrote it and why?

A good parent doesn't need a Ph.D.; neither does an author. However, an advanced degree in an area related to parenting helps in understanding and interpreting relevant research.

Another consideration is the experience of the author. Having one or a dozen [children](#) does not make someone an expert. Doing more parenting doesn't necessarily make you better at it. Not having a child doesn't disqualify someone from being an expert, either, but should be thoughtfully considered. We taught parenting classes before having children, and it's fair to say that our own parenting experiences have added depth, insight and even grace to what we teach.

The reason someone wrote a parenting book can also be informative. Advice from authors who write out of angst about their own upbringing or who failed at parenting should be taken with a grain of salt.

Finally, don't let celebrities' books fool you. Most of these are written by [ghostwriters](#) and are primarily designed to sell books or build a brand.

2. Is it based on science?

Psychology researcher and [parenting expert Laurence Steinberg](#) writes that scientists have studied parenting for over 75 years, and findings related to effective parenting are among the most consistent and longstanding in social science. If you notice inconsistencies between parenting books, it's because "[few popular books are grounded in well-documented science.](#)"

How can you tell if a book is grounded in science? Look for citations, names of researchers, sources and an index. Also, learn the [basic principles](#) of effective parenting determined through decades of research and [outlined by Steinberg](#). They include: set rules, be consistent, be loving, treat children with respect, and avoid harsh discipline.

If the book you're considering is not consistent with these guidelines, rethink its parenting advice. Likely it's based not on science but opinion or personal belief. Opinion and belief have a place, but science is better

in this space.

3. Is it interesting to read?

If the book is not interesting, you are [unlikely to finish it, much less learn from it](#). Before taking a book home, read the first page and flip to a page in the middle to see if it grabs your attention. Try to find books that you can read in small bites, skip around in, and return to in the future.

Avoid books that contain "psychobabble," pseudoscientific jargon that has an air of authenticity but lacks clarity. For example, the publisher's description of the book "[The Indigo Children: The New Kids have Arrived](#)" reads, "The Indigo Child is a child who displays a new and unusual set of psychological attributes that reveal a pattern of behavior generally undocumented before. This pattern has common yet unique factors that demand that parents and teachers change their treatment and upbringing of them in order to achieve balance. To ignore these new patterns is to potentially create great frustration in the minds of these precious new lives." Pass.

4. Is it realistic?

Run, don't walk, from any book that tells you its method always works or any failure is because of you—or worse yet, ignores failure.

It's impossible to provide advice for every [single parent](#), child and situation! An effective parenting book appreciates context and complexity and informs the reader that not all answers are in the book. No parent is perfect, but [recognizing weaknesses and failures leads to growth and improvement](#), and no child is completely malleable. Even parents who do everything right may have children who become

wayward.

Make sure the book provides you with detailed [instructions and things to do](#), as well as ways to track improvements. In other words, make sure it is actionable.

Finally, a parenting book should respect a parent's instincts.

5. Does it motivate and inspire hope?

Some parenting books offer insights related to general behavior, like "[Raising Good Humans](#)." Others offer insights for specific issues, like "[Safe Infant Sleep: Expert Answers to Your Cosleeping Questions](#)." Likely, you will be more motivated to read a book that reflects your specific needs and values and leaves you feeling hopeful.

A word of caution, however. One study found that parenting books that stress strict routines for infant sleep, feeding and general care might actually make parents [feel worse by increasing depression, stress and doubt](#). Parenting research does not support overly strict routines, and it's easy to understand why most of these parents did not find such books useful.

Remember to trust yourself

When you read a parenting book, the goal is to feel empowered, more confident, excited and even relieved. You are not alone, nor are you the only parent with questions.

Psychologist [Edward Zigler](#) described parenting as "the [most challenging and most complex](#) of all the tasks of adulthood."

Yes, parenting can be tough. In your parenting adventures, you'll likely need all the resources and tools you can muster. With thoughtful and critical explorations, you can find books that enhance your personal wisdom and intuition to help in raising these delightfully complicated little humans.

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