

Gentle parenting can be really hard on parents, new research suggests

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Are you a gentle parent? If so, chances are good that, just like your children, you may need a nap.

The idea of gentle parenting has been around [since the 1930s](#) but received increased attention over the past few years on [social media](#) and [blogs](#), as well as in popular [books](#), [magazines](#) and [newspapers](#).

Despite its growing popularity, what remains unclear is what, exactly, this [parenting style](#) entails. Parenting author and self-described "gentle parenting" founder [Sarah Ockwell-Smith](#) has described gentle parenting as "a way of being" and "a mindset," with "an emphasis on your child's feelings." But does it mean no yelling? No punishment? How is it different from other established approaches to parenting? Is it good for kids? Equally important: Is it good for parents?

To explore what this gentle parenting movement is all about, my fellow family studies professor [Alice Davidson and I](#) gathered data from over 100 parents across the country with at least one child between the ages of 2 and 7. We asked these parents to tell us how they reared their kids, how they were reared by their own parents and how they respond when their child misbehaves. We also asked if they identified as a "gentle parent." For those who saw themselves as "gentle parents," we asked them: What do you mean?

These preliminary findings, which will be submitted soon for publication, should be interpreted with caution since the diversity of our sample was limited.

An internet phenomenon

About half our sample identified as "gentle parents." Those who identified as gentle parents were almost all white—84%—and highly educated. The one diverse aspect of their profile was their age. Participants ranged from 32 to 51 years old, including both Gen Xers and millennials.

When asked how they were reared as [children](#), these participants described their parents in simplistic ways, with terms such as "confrontational" and "reactive." In contrast, when asked to describe their own parenting, they used 50% more adjectives, including terms

such as "affectionate," "conscious," "accepting" and, of course, "gentle."

There was, overall, a theme within these parents' responses that they would do a better job at parenting than their own parents did with them. In open-ended responses, some participants stated this goal plainly. One father replied: "[My approach to parenting is to] do the opposite of my parents. No spanking or physical punishment." Perhaps gentle parenting is more than just a parenting style—it's also a rejection of the parenting styles of previous generations.

Shifts in generational approaches to parenting are not new, from the [behaviorist movement](#) of the 1920s—Don't hug your kid!—to the [attachment parenting of the 1990s](#)—Always hug your kid!—to the more contemporary [free-range](#) parenting movement of the 21st century—Where is my kid?

Each movement is a reaction to the evolution of parenting scholarship. Yet the embrace of gentle parenting advice seems unique in that, despite its [popularity on social media](#), it is not born of scholarship. Child development researchers have not followed these families to determine the extent to which this approach to child rearing is good for either kids or parents.

Attempting to find a common definition, we analyzed these parents' open-ended responses that described what "gentle parenting" means to them. For most, gentle parenting was primarily about staying calm in challenging moments with their kids.

A 42-year-old mother of a 3-year-old only child wrote that gentle parenting meant "having a moderate reaction—never getting too alarmed or being too permissive, always monitoring and adjusting expectations to the needs of the child and environment." A 35-year-old mother of 6-year-old twins wrote that gentle parenting meant "trying not to yell, trying

very hard to manage my own feelings so that I don't hurt their feelings." These parents are working hard to keep their cool.

'Hanging on for dear life'

A secondary theme of gentle parenting among the parents we surveyed was about validating their kid's big feelings. Picture a kid having a meltdown at the mall. Sometimes this validation involved parents labeling an emotion: "I see you are very angry right now." Or they might allow their kid to freely emote: "We sit with the feeling." Often it involved giving affection: "I ask them if they want a hug."

These parents were also extraordinarily well versed in parenting literature. Many quoted bestselling author Becky Kennedy's [Good Inside](#) parenting manual or referenced philosophies from world-renowned early childhood educator [Magda Gerber](#) in their responses. They used nuanced terms such as "hand-in-hand," "gentle rein" and "conscious" to describe their parenting. They had all done their homework on how to be an excellent gentle parent.

Yet we noted two troubling themes in these parents' responses. First, none of them mentioned raising their children with help from their friends, family or community.

Second, many of them acknowledged, without prompting, that they were struggling to feel competent. When asked to describe her parenting approach, a 36-year-old mother of two children under 5 reflected that she often feels like she "has nothing to give" and gets "easily overstimulated and overwhelmed all day every day." She ended her reflections with the simple confession: "I often feel out of control."

She wasn't alone in those sentiments. Here are some others: -"I'm hanging on for dear life." -"I try to be gentle, but it can be challenging

working full time and being stressed and having little support." -"I confess I have no idea what I'm doing much of the time."

Over 40% of our "gentle parents" provided these sorts of confessions, illuminating a clear message: They are often not so gentle with themselves. They were frequently exhausted, uncertain, hard on themselves and lonely.

More harm than good?

We are currently expanding our sample with the goal of recruiting a much more diverse group of parents—not only in race or ethnicity but also in education level. We want to test whether this gentle parenting phenomenon is primarily limited to highly educated white parents. We also plan to follow these families over time to explore the sustainability of this gentle parenting approach and to see how their kids are doing. We wonder: Will the kids of gentle parents show the same sort of emotional restraint as their parents? Or will these children only build in the emotional control they wield over their parents?

Until we analyze that data, our message to these [parents](#) is short and sweet: Go easy on yourselves. Also, go ahead and take that nap.

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