



# Modern Family

Contemporary parenting challenges, new books suggest, may be best met by a return to old-fashioned virtues

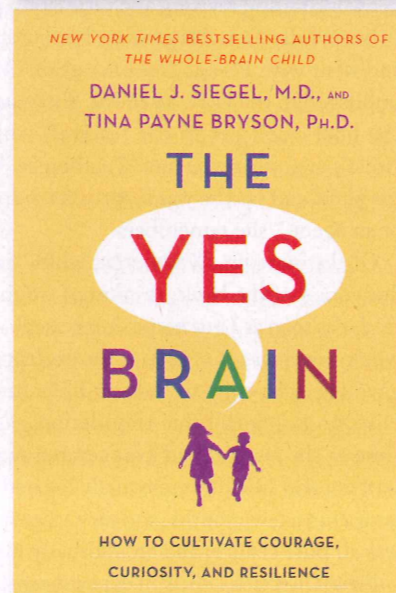
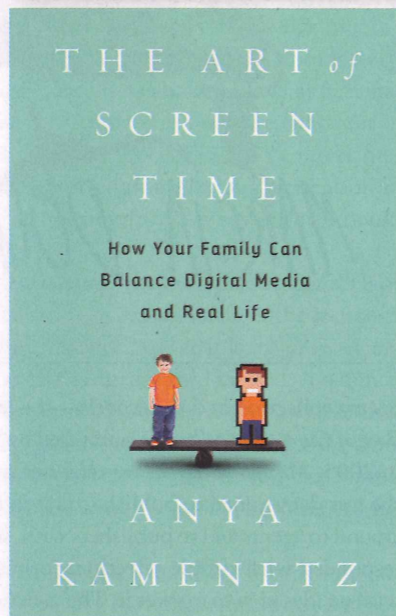
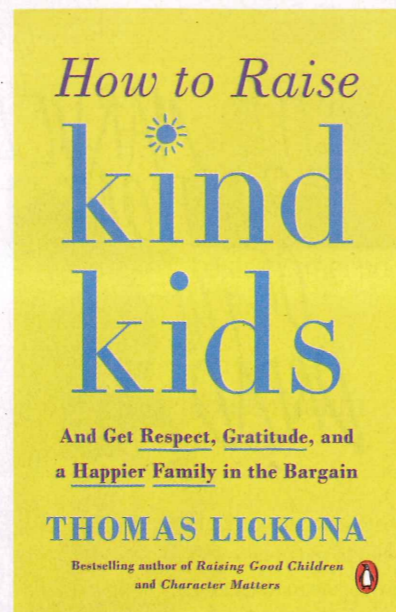
By Jason Boog

Psychologist Thomas Lickona has been championing character development for four decades, and today, he says, his message may be more important than ever. "Raising children of character is increasingly countercultural," says Lickona, whose books include *Educating for Character* (Bantam, 1991) and *Character Matters* (Touchstone, 2004).

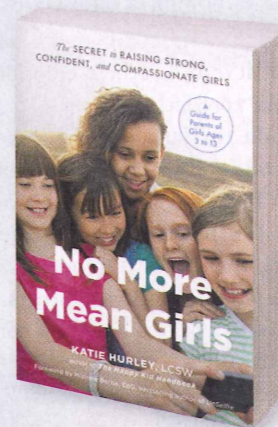
In *How to Raise Kind Kids* (Penguin Books, Apr.), he identifies a number of outside forces hostile to children's emotional development, including what he calls "the toxic political conversation" and "the sexualization of popular culture."

Kindness, Lickona says, begins at home: if children don't respect the ethical boundaries their parents set and are not held accountable for their actions, then they can't learn to be kind. "A lot of parents don't have a clear sense of their own moral authority," he notes. "Parenting becomes 10 times harder if children don't get it in their heads that they have an obligation to obey mom or dad."

Lickona's book is among the many forthcoming parenting titles that advocate traditional values, both at home and in school, as an antidote to modern woes.

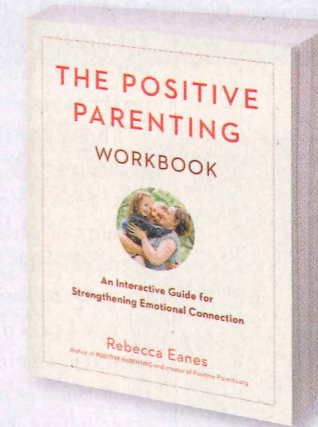


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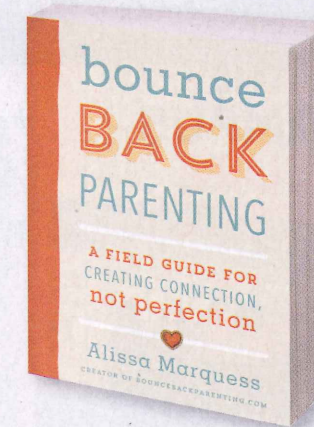
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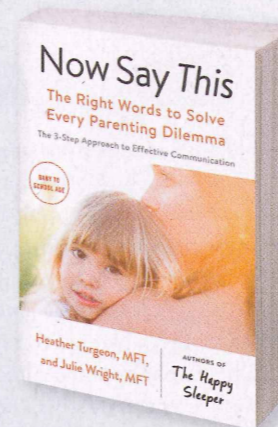
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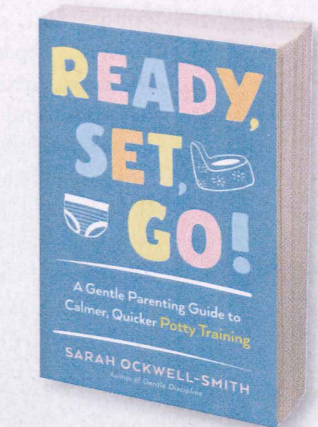
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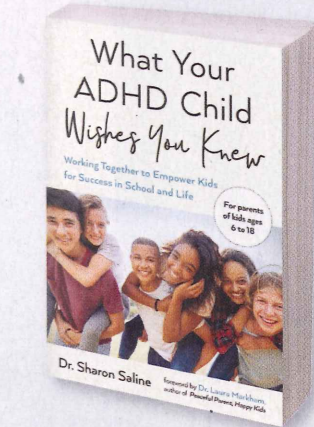
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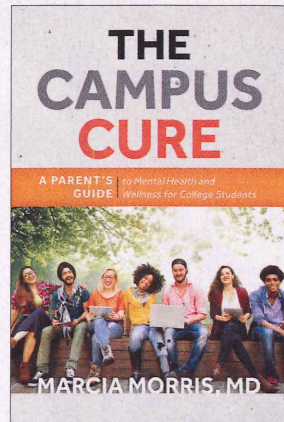


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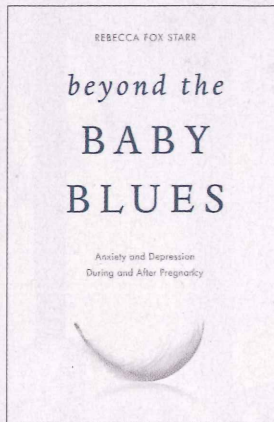
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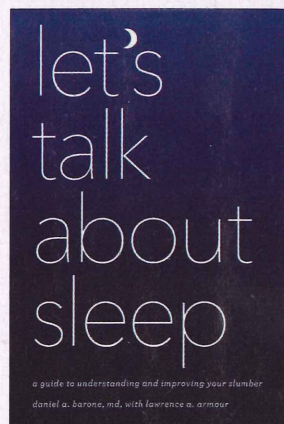
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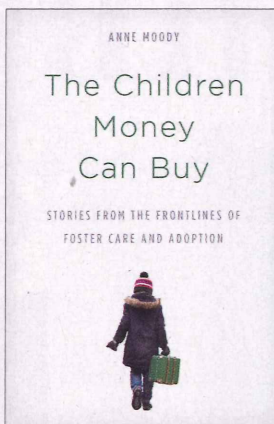
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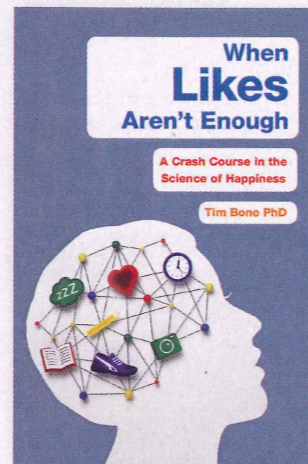
Fostering kindness not only makes for a more peaceful home life but also changes the way a child's brain develops, says Erin Clabough, a neurobiologist and *Psychology Today* contributor. In *Second Nature* (Sounds True, Nov.), she shows how repeated empathetic behavior—imagining what a friend might want as a gift, or analyzing a school bully's emotions—reinforces neural pathways in the growing brain. Children who practice empathy the way they would any other skill, Clabough says, grow into adults who are more adept at reading others' emotions and better at resolving interpersonal conflict.

Those conflicts arise much earlier than they used to, according to Katie Hurley, a child and adolescent psychotherapist. In *No More Mean Girls* (TarcherPerigee, Jan.), aimed at parents of girls ages three to 13, she helps parents recognize signs of relational aggression, or behavior intended to cause harm by affecting the target's relationships with others. *PW's* review praised the book's "user-friendly layout and compassionate advice" on age-old issues such as peer pressure and their newer iterations, such as cyberbullying.

In an era when so many young people derive their sense of self-worth—or lack thereof—from social media, says Tim Bono, a lecturer in psychological and brain sciences at Washington University in St. Louis, it can be a struggle to find real meaning, connection, and happiness. "Social comparison is perhaps the single strongest barrier to happiness and well-being," he notes. "Every day, we're confronted with an unending stream of images, videos, and posts about other people's happiness." Bono's book, *When Likes Aren't Enough* (Grand Central, Mar.), which grew out of the college course he teaches on the science of happiness, details strategies for leading a more fulfilling life.

In *The Art of Screen Time* (Public Affairs, Jan.), Anya Kamenetz, NPR's lead education blogger, encourages parents to take an active role in managing their children's relationships with technology by participating in digital experiences together. (For our q&a with Kamenetz, see "The Importance of Sharing Media," p. 26.)

Angela C. Santomero, co-creator of *Blue's Clues* and creator of *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*, is an advocate for educational media but also encourages time away from screens. Her forthcoming book *Preschool Clues* (Touchstone, Apr.), cowritten with Deborah Reber, a *Blue's Clues* veteran and advocate for neuroatypical kids, "helps parents of preschoolers understand how to use media effectively and age appropriately," *PW's* review said, calling the book "wise and enthusiastic."



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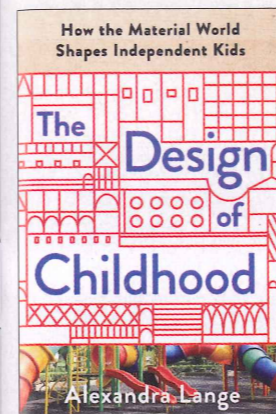
At the same time that some experts are urging parents to monitor and participate in their children's consumption of media, recent research suggests that a more laissez-faire approach may be beneficial in another area—namely, when it comes to kids getting their hands dirty.

"There are microbes that actually are good for you," says Jena Pincott, a science writer and former Random House editor, citing research that gut microbes may reduce stress and help kids manage emotions. In *Wits Guts Grit* (Chicago Review, Apr.), she makes the case for allowing kids to play with animals, dig in the dirt, and eat foods teeming with microbial life.



In a yearlong series of experiments, Pincott, along with her then-five-year-old and infant daughters, made simple changes such as eating more blueberries, making homemade yogurt, and, yes, digging in the dirt, and found these led to an increase in beneficial microbes, higher performance on memory tests, and an improved ability to bounce back from stress.

Architecture and design critic Alexandra Lange, in *The Design of Childhood* (Bloomsbury, Jun.), encourages parents to examine how children's physical worlds—their toys and schoolyards and



playgrounds—affect their development. She contrasts, for instance, cushioned, protected play spaces designed to minimize the potential for injury with adventure playgrounds, where children romp with near-complete autonomy. Her view: we should return to open play environments and cultivate a greater sense of independence in children, emulating playground and school designs from more permissive, less panicked eras.

Curiosity and courage are key concerns of the authors of *The Yes Brain* (Bantam, Jan.)—Daniel J. Siegel, clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine, and Tina Payne Bryson, a pediatric and adolescent psychotherapist. The coauthors, whose previous books together include 2011's *The Whole-Brain Child* (Delacorte; 263,000 print copies sold), explain how parents can nurture in children's minds a receptive state that enables curiosity and creativity and fosters resilience. "Siegel and Bryson have taken a high-level concept and broken it down into an approach that is easy to understand and implement," *PW's* review said, citing among other elements the explanatory cartoons that conclude each chapter, which are meant to be shared with children.

**Going Old School**

Ken Robinson, a former arts education professor in the U.K. who advises governments, nonprofits, and other groups on creativity and the education system, says that parents can work within the school system to foster beneficial mind-sets and encourage creative approaches. "There are all sorts of ways in which schools can be more open and flexible in the range of experiences they offer children," says Robinson, whose 2006 TED talk, "Do Schools Kill Creativity?," has racked up more than 13.8 million views on YouTube. He cowrote *You, Your Child, and School* (Viking, Mar.) with Lou Aronica, who was also his coauthor on the 2009 creativity title *The Element* (Viking; 142,000 print copies sold).

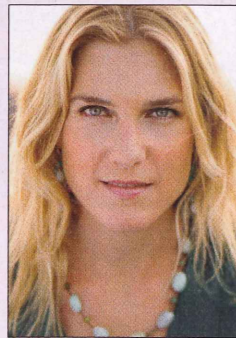
Robinson says parents should work alongside teachers to make school a more creative environment—a goal that stands in contrast to the teach-to-the-test style of education that prevails. He highlights, by way of example, a Texas school that made headlines by offering recess four times a day. "The extraordinary thing is that we've got a television crew in the playground at that school, reporting there as if they're embedded in some foreign military action," Robinson says. "'Children seen playing in Texas! When did we lose our minds like this?'"

This lament may be shared by parents concerned about the focus on test prep at the expense of physical education, outdoor

**The Importance of Sharing Media**

**PW talks with Anya Kamenetz**

Few topics can divide a room full of parenting experts as quickly as this one: how much time should children spend looking at their screens?



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NPR education reporter Anya Kamenetz, a three-time winner of the Education Writers Association's National Award for Education Reporting, helps parents consider all sides of this debate with *The Art of Screen Time* (Public Affairs, Jan.).

Kamenetz consulted scores of researchers studying children and screens and combed through decades of research into the effects of television on the developing brain. She also interviewed more than 500 parents, getting a realistic view of the varied ways families handle everyday device usage.

**Your advice to parents puts a digital twist on Michael Pollan's food rules: "Enjoy screens. Not too much. Mostly with others." How does this play out in the real world?**

"Enjoy screens" is really about emphasizing the powerful, positive uses of media. Media enables us to express ourselves, to be creative, to learn about the world around us and to connect with others.

"Not too much" is good advice for all of us. There are some huge virtues to offline time. Your kids need to move around, they need to run outside, they need to be engaged with family and friends.

"Mostly with others" means if you want feel better about the time your kids spend with media, get in there with them. Figure out ways that you can both enjoy it.

**You distinguish between solo and shared experiences on digital screens. Why should parents think about this?**

All the experts are starting to pay more attention to the importance of sharing media and avoiding solo use. The positive effects of media are amplified, and the negative effects are diminished, when adults make a concerted effort to get involved in kids' media use.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have the paradigm of background television. In the 21st century, children can be essentially exposed to some media all the time, wherever they go. That has strongly been shown to be detrimental. There is a huge drop, 90% in some studies, in conversations between parents and children when the television is on in the background.

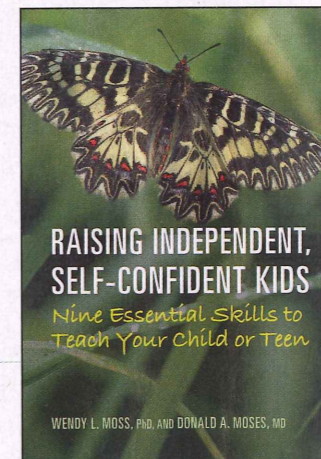
**What about video chat?**

Video chat is more about people talking to each other. The American Academy of Pediatrics is perfectly comfortable saying that you can Skype with grandparents from the delivery room with your newborn. Even though it's mediated through a screen, they feel that the social interaction happening there is worthwhile. It's more like a live interaction and less like watching a video.

**What do you say to parents concerned about the time their kids spend with video games such as *Minecraft*?**

You can play *Minecraft* alongside your kids. You can have them teach you the game. You can enter into the fandom with them. Because the *Minecraft* phenomenon is also about YouTube videos, costumes, and conferences, there are all kinds of ways to be involved and help your kid extend their interests. But, that said, there are also times when you may need to set limits on something that is as supercompelling as *Minecraft*. It's very easy to fall into a huge spiral with video games. Your kids need your assistance and scaffolding so they can figure out their own best practices and balance.

—J.B.



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