

The science of parenting. Second edition

by Margot Sunderland, New York, Penguin Random House, 2016, 304 pp.,
\$24.95CDN (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4654-2978-0

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BOOK REVIEWS

The science of parenting. Second edition, by Margot Sunderland, New York, Penguin Random House, 2016, 304 pp., \$24.95CDN (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4654-2978-0

In her book, *The Science of Parenting*, Margot Sunderland provides parents with straightforward and invaluable advice for raising healthy, well-adjusted children. The book has 11 chapters that cover important and practical parenting topics such as ‘*Crying and Separations*’, ‘*Sleep and Bedtimes*’, ‘*Behaving Badly*’, and ‘*All about Discipline*’. But this book goes above and beyond the typical advice shared with parents and in some instances even goes against what is widely considered ‘proper parenting’. Sunderland presents some controversial child-rearing practices along with others that are commonly invoked by parents along with evidence-based information that allows parents to make informed choices on which practices they themselves will embrace. For example, the notion of co-sleeping is unpopular with community healthcare professionals and yet when the risks are mitigated, co-sleeping provides a means to improve the infant–parent bond, regulate baby’s stress, and improve infant and parent quality of sleep. The currently popular ‘sleep-training’ for babies and toddlers is exposed as a potential threat to emotional regulation of the child and parents should understand the risk of using such techniques – regardless of their popularity.

This book features chapters that describe the ‘*Chemistry of Love and Joy*’, the ‘*Chemistry of Drive and Will*’ and ‘*Your Socially Intelligent Child*’. These are not among the usual offerings covered in parenting books but because Sunderland chose to include these topics and use neuroscientific research as the basis for understanding them, adds both strength and interest to her book. In each of her chapters, the author sets up a scenario that a parent might face and then offers practical and alternative ways to interact with the child in order to produce desired outcomes. Each chapter ends with a review of the key points covered, which helps the reader to remember the intent of the many examples and photo captions provided.

The author starts her book with a review of how human brains were shaped through the process of evolution. This is followed by an introduction to the brain areas that play key roles producing behaviour and how they relate to the emotional systems of the brain. In her book, Sunderland introduces Dr. Jaak Panksepp’s ‘*Principles of Affective Neuroscience*’ (reviewed in Davis & Montag, 2019) to parents and points out the lower brain as the hub of three alarm systems: RAGE, FEAR, and PANIC/GRIEF and four prosocial systems: CARE, SEEKING, PLAY, and LUST. For the purposes of this book, Sunderland dismisses the LUST system as a lesser influence on child behaviours. The remaining six emotional systems form the framework of much of the information that is covered and are referred to throughout the book to ensure a parent understands the origin of the behaviour their child may be experiencing. Dr. Jaak Panksepp, an expert on emotion, was instrumental in shaping the author’s understanding of how critically important the consideration of a child’s emotional state is to effective and supportive parenting.

Aside from his seminal work on affective neuroscience, Dr. Panksepp added to his scientific reputation with his studies of play and its important role in brain development. The importance of play is also highlighted in this book. Play in its many forms are reviewed (i.e. physical, creative, solitary, child-led, parent-child) and their respective value in strengthening core skills are explored throughout the course of the book’s narrative. The author advises parents of the utility of play in strengthening attachment relationships and improving the ‘quality’ of time


spent with your child. The author has expertly woven in neuroscientific principles using easy to understand terms and in doing so allows parents a deeper appreciation of what is happening in their child's brain that is producing the 'behaviours' they are dealing with. Sunderland calls attention to the emotional basis of many of the behaviours parents wish to 'correct' in their children and in doing so constantly reminds us that our own emotional state is often reflected in the behaviour produced by our children.

As a developmental neuroscientist, I am keenly aware of the paramount need for children to have nurturing, positive, and supportive relationships in their lives in order to not only thrive, but flourish. This fundamental need is highlighted throughout this parenting guide and in fact, forms the focus of all of the author's advice to parents. What sets this book apart from typical parenting manuals is the evidence-based information and very practical child development knowledge that Sunderland shares with her readers. Many parent educators shy away from using neuroscientific information to support the work they engage in because it is complex and difficult to convey to the public. In my view, the public is more than ready to embrace the key principles of brain development and function that provides a deeper understanding of how experiences can shape the developing brain and why it is important parents recognize their power in contributing to the construction of their child's brain and subsequent behaviour. This work is easy to read and understand and the information shared is linked to the primary research so parents wishing to learn more have the ability to do so easily.

The only downside to the book is the ever so slightly annoying misspellings and typesetting anomalies that crop up now and then. I recommend this book to parents, caregivers, grandparents and childcare workers – any adult that spends time with a child and wants to have a positive influence on that child's life.

Reference

Davis, K. L., & Montag, C. (2019). Selected principles of Pankseppian affective neuroscience. *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, 12, 1025. doi:10.3389/fnins.2018.01025

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Inventing ourselves: the secret life of the teenage brain, by Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, New York, Public Affairs, 2018, \$27.00, ISBN 9781610397315 (hardback)

Sarah-Jayne Blakemore's book on the adolescent behavior is entertaining and written in a friendly but scientific style. She makes the important point that adolescent-typical behavior is typical across human cultures, human and nonhuman species, and history. She cites descriptions of adolescent behavior going back as far as Socrates and Aristotle to emphasize that adolescent behavior is part of being human. One early example in the book is a study of mice in which adolescent mice consume more alcohol when they are with cage-mates than they do when they are alone whereas adult mice drink similar amounts when they are alone as when with cage-mates. Similar behavior can be seen in humans.