

## FRUIT ONE: EMPOWERMENT

Why your children are stronger  
than you realise

*Your children don't need you to be perfect.  
They just need you to believe in them*

- Colette Marchant, from the movie *Dumbo*

John Ssebunya was born in the village of Bombo, Uganda, in the 1980s, a time when Uganda was embroiled in a brutal civil war. He was just two years old when he witnessed his father kill his mother and then hang himself. And so John ran off to the jungle near his village, a move that probably saved him from becoming a child soldier. He had somehow survived a few days alone in the jungle when a troop of green vervet monkeys approached him. At first, the monkeys were cautious. It's not often you find a little human wandering the jungle on their own. But the monkeys soon realised that John posed no threat. So they began offering him food – nuts and sweet potatoes. They let the boy join them as they travelled around the jungle, teaching him how to climb trees and find food. John was in the jungle for three years before he was

discovered, aged five, by a woman from a nearby tribe who brought him back to civilisation.

I'm sure you have heard similar stories, like Mowgli from *The Jungle Book*, about feral children raised by wild animals. But these stories are just fiction, aren't they? John Ssebunya's story is real. How could a toddler – such a vulnerable creature – survive on his own in the jungle?

Perhaps our children are more resilient than we might think. According to Dr Alastair Sutcliffe, senior lecturer in paediatrics at University College London, children are more likely to survive even extreme physical trauma than adults. There are so many stories of children surviving where adults died – babies being pulled alive out of collapsed buildings after an earthquake, children surviving falling out of high windows. Dr Sutcliffe says: 'It's simple physics. They have chubbier bodies, they are more flexible, their lungs are healthier, so they are more robust to injury.'

We'd never wish any of these events on any child. And as I said in the introduction, in some ways, human children are the most vulnerable creatures on planet Earth. But in a world that is pushing us into states of helplessness, we each need to ask ourselves: could our children be stronger than we realise?

## Playing with knives

A few years ago, my wife Laurey and I went to visit a Peruvian shaman living in London called Don Oscar Davila, who was known for helping couples with fertility issues. We were struggling after a series of miscarriages and prepared to try all kinds of routes to conceive.

Don Oscar sat us down in a room adorned with huge, exotic feathers and filled with the sweet scent of palo santo

wood. He told us about his wife back in Ecuador, who at 48 had given birth to a child, a daughter. There was no IVF, no medical intervention. We lapped up this information. But the story that really stuck in my mind after this visit was the one where Don Oscar gave his four-year-old daughter a machete so she could learn to make her way through the forest on her own. He told me this was normal practice in his village. How could a four-year-old ever be trusted with a machete?

Well, it turns out to be more common than you'd imagine. In an article called 'Playing with Knives', anthropologist David Lancy describes the surprising (to us Western folks) level of trust and autonomy that children in some tribes are given from a very young age. He shares an anthropologist's description of a Pirahã child, from an indigenous tribe in the Amazon rainforest of Brazil, who 'was playing with a sharp kitchen knife, about nine inches in length. He was swinging the knife blade around him, often coming close to his eyes, his chest, his arm and other body parts. When he dropped the knife, his mother – talking to someone else – reached backward nonchalantly without interrupting her conversation, picked up the knife and handed it back to the toddler.'

Can you imagine this happening in your house?

Or what about this? By the age of four, children from the Maniq in Thailand can easily skin and gut small animals.

These cultures are grounded in a child-rearing philosophy that strongly emphasises the child's innate capacity to figure things out. After spending many years in Inuit society in Arctic Canada, celebrated anthropologist Lee Guemple observed that the Inuits, 'do not presume to teach their children what they can as easily learn on their own.'

In case you're wondering, I'm not recommending you leave your child alone in the jungle with a machete, hoping a few kind monkeys will take care of them. But if we want to raise children who can thrive in our uncertain world, wouldn't

it help to hover over them a little less, to trust them a little more?

### **PRACTISE STRENGTHS-BASED PARENTING**

One of the best ways to empower children is to nurture their strengths – in trauma work this is known as ‘resourcing’. Strengths can include things like determination, creativity, patience or in fact all the fruits in this book. These strengths provide essential balance in a world where there is so much focus on what we can’t do and what is wrong with us.

In her book, *The Strength Switch*, psychologist Lea Waters recommends strengths-spotting – being very specific about your child’s strengths. So, for example, your child shows you her picture and instead of saying ‘Well done’, you say, ‘I noticed how focused you were when you were drawing.’ Like a flower in sunlight, the more regularly you spot strengths, the more they grow. Author and parenting expert Peggy O’Mara has this beautiful quote: ‘The way we talk to our children becomes their inner voice.’ If you shine a light on your kids’ strengths, over time these strengths will bloom into their inner voice.

For this approach to work, we grown-ups need to start with ourselves. Take a moment to write down five strengths you know you have and can feel confident about. If you struggle with this, what would your friends or loved ones say are your top five strengths? Be aware of the voice of your inner critic popping up here. Know that you have the power – you can tell that inner critic to step to one side.

Now, try doing the same with your children. Ask them what they think their five strengths might be and/or share what you think they are. If they are younger, you may need

to explain using examples from real life. You can also write down five strengths that you or your kids don't have confidence in yet but that you can work on growing together.

Waters recommends using coaching type questions, where you are not the expert but instead you ask empowering questions that help the child find their own answers. For example, perhaps your child is worried about something. Instead of rushing in to give advice and to fix it, you ask: 'What do you feel you need?' 'How can I help you with this?' To make it even more specifically about strengths, try: 'What strengths do you have that could help you with this?'

### Real risk vs perceived risk

The other day, I went to a four-year-old's birthday party. The parents had hired a bouncy castle. As we walked to the party, I thought to myself, 'This is going to be relaxing. The kids can have a great time bouncing while we adults kick back and drink wine.'

Unfortunately, the bouncy castle turned out to be less a place for fun and more of a treacherous minefield of potential broken bones or worse. Or, at least, that's the only explanation I can find for why the parents spent most of the afternoon on guard at the castle doors, constantly intervening in the children's play. I tried really hard to achieve my party goal (sit back drinking my wine) but I could see thought bubbles arising from the other parents' minds – 'What an irresponsible parent!' 'Hasn't he read about those bouncy castle tragedies?' So I reluctantly shuffled over to the gates of the dangerous castle and earnestly stood guard.

In the previous chapter, we looked at how we've been conditioned into a constant state of helpless anxiety by the 24/7

news cycle and the fear-based content filling our feeds. This fear makes us overprotective of our children – even when it comes to things that are supposed to be fun, like a bouncy castle. The facts are that in the past 21 years, on average one child a year dies while playing on a bouncy castle, worldwide. Most were due to faulty set up and strong winds. It is a tragedy that these children died. The truth, however, is that your child is much more likely to die from a bee sting or a dog attack. But the bouncy castle stories make for shocking headlines and so they get a lot of exposure. We read these horror stories and add bouncy castles to the long list of things we think of as dangerous for our children. And then we spend the day anxiously hovering over our bouncing children. (Meanwhile, in other parts of the world, four-year-old children are cutting their way through the jungle.)

Now let's look at a scarier example. I apologise in advance as I'm about to write about every parent's worst nightmare: abduction. The idea erupted into our public consciousness in the UK in 2007 when Madeleine McCann was taken while her parents dined in the restaurant just the other side of the swimming pool from their holiday apartment. As you have likely read, the adults were going back to check on the kids every half an hour. But when Madeleine's mother Kate did her check at 10pm, Madeleine was gone.

Madeleine's became the most heavily reported missing person case in modern history. Why? Because it tapped into our deepest fears. This is the ultimate way to capture our attention, especially when we feel it could have happened to us.

### Hooked on 'safety'

In their book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff explore how our well-meaning

attempts to protect children from physical harm have undergone a mission creep over time, as parents have become less and less tolerant to any risk. They call this 'safety-ism'. They pinpoint the beginning of safety-ism to an abduction in Florida in 1981, when a six-year-old boy named Adam Walsh was abducted outside a shopping mall. Adam's father, John Walsh, channelled his grief into a huge campaign. He made a movie about what had happened, called *Adam*, watched by 38 million people. He launched a true crime show, *America's Most Wanted*. And he developed a new concept that went viral: printing pictures of missing children on milk cartons, under a big, all-caps headline MISSING. Soon these MISSING ads were placed on grocery bags, billboards, pizza boxes and even utility bills.

What was the effect on the minds of American parents? 'Norms changed, fears grew and many parents came to believe that if they took their eyes off their children for an instant in any public venue, their kid might be snatched. It no longer felt safe to let kids roam around their neighbourhoods unsupervised.' A shocking story can press our protective parental buttons, trigger our deepest fears. And then we make a universal rule that allowing our child to do that thing – be left in a hotel room, climb a tree, use a knife, play unsupervised on a bouncy castle, go out without an adult – must be dangerous at all times and in all places.

In reality, it is extremely rare for a child to be abducted by a stranger. In the UK, according to the latest in-depth review into police figures, 50 children are abducted every year, the majority by a parent who doesn't have custody. And the vast majority of the children abducted by strangers come home.

Of course, we can and should minimise the risks our children face. We put them in car seats. We teach them to stop at the kerb. We book them swimming lessons. We give them scooter helmets. We make sure the bouncy castle is properly set up. For our teenagers, we support them to be streetwise, we

advise them on safe drinking, safe sex. But there is also a real risk when we overprotect our children. Evidence is building that over-involved and over-controlling ‘helicopter’ parenting is bad for our children’s mental health, triggering their learned helplessness. One 2014 US study found that college students with helicopter parents were significantly more likely to be depressed. The authors blamed this on the parents violating their children’s ‘basic psychological needs for autonomy and competence’. Add to this a recent finding that three-quarters of children in the UK spend less time outdoors than a prison inmate.

To put this into crucial perspective: your child is 140,000 times more likely to get a mental health problem than to be abducted, the same number of times more likely to self-harm, 38,000 times more likely to attempt suicide and eight times more likely to commit suicide. They are also 80 times more likely to die in a road accident and more likely even to be struck by lightning.

I don’t want you to read these stats and go and construct a lightning-proof bunker. The fact abduction happens at all is horrendous and terrifying. But broken bones can heal. Suicide can’t. I admit this is strongly worded but I want you to keep in mind the trade-offs between protecting your children from imagined harm and the very real risk of them developing serious mental health issues if they aren’t exposed to an appropriate level of risk and stress.

You don’t have to be ruled by fear. You have a choice.

## **Antifragile – the upside of risk**

A 2021 study showed that the average age parents in the UK will let their child go out to play unsupervised is 11 years old.

How much freedom did you have as a child? If you grew up in the 1970s or 80s, you probably had a lot more.

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When I was aged five, I was allowed to play in the streets near our house in a suburb of Manchester with other kids, unsupervised. When I was six, I was allowed to explore the fields behind my house with my sisters, unsupervised. When I was seven, I was climbing a tree in the fields behind a friend's house unsupervised, I fell and cut my head open. My friend ran back to the house to get help. I needed stitches . . . but I was fine.

When I look back, the moments where I really learned and grew were during unsupervised play. Do you have similar memories? Are you, like me, glad your parents allowed you to explore and take risks?

For our children to thrive, they need exposure to certain environments and certain risks. This is what risk analyst Nassim Taleb calls being *antifragile*. Unlike china teacups, individuals or systems need exposure to stress and risk for them to grow stronger. Human children are antifragile. We are born with (almost) infinite potential but our potential will never grow unless we are allowed to explore and develop away from the protective gaze. There is always another risk your child is ready to take that will help them to grow. Our job as parents is to provide the environment which will allow them to take that risk.

### RISK ASSESSMENT

When you're assessing whether to allow your child or teenager to do something, weigh up the worst-case scenario against the longer-term mental health consequences of over-protection. Ask yourself: is there a way my child can take the risk? And what are the minimum safeguards required?

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For example, if your child is under 11 years old and wants to travel to school on their own, you can make sure they are with someone. (It's worth noting that in 1971, 80 per cent of seven- and eight-year-olds travelled to school without an adult.)

If they want to go and play in the fields behind your house, make sure they know the boundaries of where they can go and how to find their way home.

For more help and guidance, check out Free-Range Kids, a website dedicated to 'Fighting the belief that our children are in constant danger from creeps, kidnapping, germs, grades, flashers, frustration, failure, baby snatchers, bugs, bullies, men, sleepovers and/or the perils of a non-organic grape' [www.freerangekids.com](http://www.freerangekids.com). And LetGrow.org, which contains great resources on children's resilience and the need to give them more autonomy.

### ***KATIE: THE GOOD STUDENT***

Katie was sent to me when I was working as a therapist at a school in north London. She was 17. Her English teacher asked me to give her some one-to-one sessions, in the hope of reducing her acute anxiety. In our first session, I noticed Katie's face was tightly crinkled, like an empty crisp packet someone had scrunched up and thrown away. She told me that for two years whenever she felt really stressed she would pull out big chunks of her hair, a condition called trichotillomania. Katie's school and her parents desperately wanted her to be 'fixed' so she could get the incredible A-level results she was predicted. But, after two years getting help from mental health services, Katie was still tightly crinkled, still pulling out her hair.

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Remember from our opening section: our children's symptoms are unconscious attempts to heal conflicts in the world around them. If a child feels disempowered in their family, in their school, in their world, symptoms often develop as a way for them to re-establish some kind of power. And hair-pulling is an ancient response to feeling helpless that goes as far back as Aristotle in the fourth century BCE. In the Old Testament, the prophet Ezra discovers that the Israelites had been taking pagan wives after escaping Babylonian captivity and this is how he responds: 'When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled.' It's hard to make sense of the reactions of Ezra, or of Katie, unless you can imagine what it feels like to be so disempowered, so full of despair.

By the end of our third session, it had become clear that Katie's anxiety was largely coming from the unrealistic level of academic pressure her parents were putting on her. They were hovering over her, micro-managing her time, and not giving her any space to do her own thing. And Katie was scared to stand up to her parents and speak her truth – namely, that their ideal of academic success felt too much. I decided to help Katie realise that she did have a choice, that she could say no.

Katie was, understandably, afraid to do this. A child's biggest fear is being rejected by their parents. When parents reject a child, even if it's just by showing disapproval with 'that look', it can be as painful to them as an electric shock. Of course, sometimes we need to disapprove of our children's behaviour. But too much disapproval without encouragement can trigger a child's helplessness. Katie, like the dogs giving up in the electric shock experiment, had experienced so many moments of disapproval that she felt helpless. But her unconscious mind had found a new, more symbolic way to express her disempowerment – hair-pulling.

Katie agreed to role play some of the difficult conversations. We took turns being Katie, her teacher and her parents. Eventually, she felt confident enough to go off and have these conversations for real. She managed to negotiate with her teachers and her parents to reduce the amount of homework she was getting and to take the pressure off her academic results.

Two weeks later, there was a knock on the door of my counselling room. It was Katie's teacher. She said, 'What have you been doing with Katie? She seems so different, so relaxed. And her hair-pulling has almost completely disappeared.'

## Empowerment

Just as we are born vulnerable, we are also born with a drive to mastery. Have you watched an infant learning to walk? I remember watching Rose falling over and repeatedly hurting herself, then repeatedly getting up again. Why didn't she just give up? There was an unshakeable drive to mastery inside of her that just had to figure this out.

Inside your child, there is a natural intelligence that wants them to survive at the very least and at best, it wants them to realise their potential. Some people call this intelligence, spirit or soul, or if you feel uncomfortable with those terms, you can call it will or life force or whatever works for you. When we hover over our children, when we swoop in to rescue them from any suffering, we block this natural intelligence. To empower our children, to bring out this deep intelligence from within, we need to trust in it, to trust in our children a little more.

This deep intelligence often works in harmony with the same deep intelligence in the parent. In his book *Nurturing Natures*, Graham Music describes the foetus in the womb as

like a ‘cosmonaut in charge of a spacecraft’. The most striking example of this comes from research done over the last three decades that has shown how the foetus sends stem cells into the mother and so can heal parts of the mother’s body that are damaged. This is called feto-maternal chimerism, ‘chimera’ being a mythical creature that has a lion’s head, a goat’s body and a snake’s tail. Even more striking is that long after the baby is born, these foetal cells continue to have a positive effect on the mother’s body.

Our children are stronger than we realise. They have a power within – the foetus sending stem cells into the mother to heal her; the toddler learning to walk, no matter how many times they fall down. Inside your child is a natural impulse to evolve, to figure things out, to realise their fullest potential.

What I did with Katie, what I try to do with the children I work with, is not rocket science. I trust the deeper intelligence that’s guiding them. I try my best to respect it, to respect them. I ask them empowering questions and I listen with a quiet mind and an open heart to their answers. I help them to express thoughts and feelings that they haven’t felt safe to express. I give them a voice. I help them to recognise that they have agency, that they can access their own inner strength. This is empowerment.

### **These four principles will help you to empower the children in your care**

#### **1. This child is stronger than I realise**

Find a way to trust your child, even just a tiny bit more than you do now. Notice your reactions when they are trying to do something and they get frustrated or anxious. Maybe it’s putting on their shoes, doing their homework, going to play without your supervision, getting ready for their first date. See if you can trust a

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little more in their capacity to figure this out without you needing to swoop in and rescue them.

Practise letting them take small risks that are on the edge of your comfort zone. You will probably notice (as I do) a powerful Rescuer energy brewing up when you do this, so you'll need to tolerate these feelings. If you're unsure about a risk, ask yourself: what is the worst thing that can happen here?

Look for signs of your child's resilience and reflect them back. A few years ago, I was working with a 14-year-old girl, Priscilla, who was self-harming. The standard techniques that I suggested just didn't work (to be honest, the standard, googleable techniques rarely do work, in my experience). So, instead of focusing on the cuts on her arms, I began to pay attention to even the smallest signs of her resilience, such as how she was getting up every morning and taking care of herself by having a shower and eating breakfast. The more I focused on her strengths, the more she began to trust in herself, until eventually she developed her own solutions to stop self-harming – and guess what? They worked much better than the standard techniques you can find online.

### **2. There are lots of good people in the world**

It's easy to fall into the trap of believing that headlines are a true representation of a world full of paedophiles and murderers. Balance out this fear-based perspective by actively looking for the goodness in people. There are way more people who are essentially good than there are people who are evil.

Today, actively look for those moments when strangers are kind to one another. Not dramatic, save-the-world type of actions, just small moments like someone holding the door open or thanking the bus driver, or a

smile from a passer-by. This will help you regulate your fears. And your child will learn to trust the goodness of people a bit more too.

**3. Symptoms are unconscious attempts to heal the world**

If your child is struggling with some issue, whether it's eating, sleeping, schoolwork, anxiety or depression, instead of trying to 'fix' them, ask yourself these questions:

- What might my child's symptom be trying to communicate or heal in the world around them? (And be prepared, the 'world' might include you!)
- What blind spot in our family or in the world might my child's 'undesirable' behaviours be shining a light on?
- How might their emotions or behaviours be an attempt to regain some power in a situation where they feel powerless?
- How can I help them express this in a healthier way? (It may be just listening to them, or finding someone else to listen to them, or helping them to write or draw it out. You know what works best for your child.)

It's not easy to open to the possibility that our child's 'unwanted' behaviours may be giving voice to an uncomfortable truth about our family or about the world. But if you want your child to heal, if you want your child to grow up in a world where they don't feel permanently broken, then you have to be willing to hear this truth.

I've worked with many families where a child developed a symptom because their parents were in conflict or because there were some really uncomfortable, unspoken truths, like a dad with a drinking problem or a mum who had an affair. Whatever the uncomfortable truths in your family, please remember it's not your

fault but it is your responsibility. Can you imagine how much better your family and indeed the world might be if all of these unconscious communications were given a space, a voice; if all that energy expended in hair-pulling and other symptoms was channelled into making positive changes in the world?

If you do have a sense of some uncomfortable truth that your child might be sensing, like that canary in the coalmine, it is appropriate sometimes to name it to them. Just naming the issue can go a long way to relieving the symptoms and to helping the child feel like they are not broken. For example, you might say, 'I know that Mum and Dad have been arguing a lot recently and you might be worried that we don't love you . . .'

#### **4. With great power comes great responsibility**

Yes, Spiderman was right. Empowering our children only works if we can also teach them responsibility. And the only way to do this is by modelling it. If we say one thing and do another our children know.

Responsibility means the ability to choose how we respond to any situation. Jack Canfield's principle of '100 per cent responsibility' has been life-changing for me and many people I work with. Canfield says when things don't go our way, we tend to blame other people (aka Victim mode). But we should act as if we have 100 per cent responsibility for our life experience – whatever happens to us, we can choose how to respond. It's not always easy to realise we have a choice, especially if we have experienced complex trauma. But we do. The first choice you have is to act as if you are 100 per cent responsible. Notice which person or thing you have been blaming for a problem you are having. Now, see

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what happens if instead of blaming, you assume 100 per cent responsibility. Notice how this changes things. Most importantly for this chapter, you are 100 per cent responsible for empowering your children. Below are some practical ways to empower them.

- Give your children jobs to do in the house. If they make a mess, it's their job to clean it up. You don't have to be harsh or draconian. Just explain this is how things work – not just in this house, or school, but in the world. As soon as your child can work, support them to get a job.
- If you have a teenager, do you ever still treat them like a younger child? For example, if you wake them up in the morning, can you help them figure out how to do it? I can hear you thinking, 'If I don't get him up he will never go to school . . . he won't ever get up, he won't pass exams or get a job and then he will have a terrible life.' There is a section on natural consequences in Chapter 9 that will help you here.
- Instead of barking orders, ask your child empowering questions. 'What do you need to do next?' or 'What's one thing you could do that would be helpful in this situation?' If they make mistakes, get things wrong, your role is to help them take ownership of that mistake without blame or shame. Ask: 'What could you have done differently?'

This world so full of fear will keep pulling you and your children back into the triangle of disempowerment. But please remember this: every time you empower your child, even in the smallest of ways, these small acts build up a reservoir of self-trust within your child, a deep feeling that they can handle challenges in life, that they can figure things out.