

YOUR ESSENTIAL GUIDE  
*to* RAISING GOOD HUMANS

*the 5*  
principles *of*  
parenting



Dr. Aliza Pressman

Host of the Raising Good Humans podcast  
*and* Co-founder of The Mount Sinai Parenting Center

## Praise for *The 5 Principles of Parenting*

“What Aliza does is come in and teach us how to individually handle how we raise children as well as ourselves. Her process is empowering and not based on just one person’s opinion. It seems impossible for one human to know so much research, and yet her hard work has paid off for all of us. She eschews judgment and helps us all quiet the inner voices of doubt and get into problem-solving mode. I simply don’t know what I would do without her wisdom. She is my go-to for how we all, including ourselves, *Raise Good Humans!*”

—**Drew Barrymore**

“Dr. Aliza Pressman’s excellent (and long anticipated) book, *The 5 Principles of Parenting*, reflects her warmth, humor, depth of knowledge, and no-nonsense approach to raising good humans (see what I did there?). In the first half, Dr. Pressman sets up the why of the science; the second half gives parents flexible, bite-size examples of the how. I finished this book feeling more competent, empowered, and calm; how often can you say that when thinking about parenting? Thank you, Aliza—I love this book!”

—**Jennifer Garner**

“Imagine receiving practical wisdom based on solid, cutting-edge science about how you can raise your kids to be thoughtful, emotionally balanced, compassionate, and engaged citizens of the world. That’s what you have here. Aliza Pressman’s magnificent guide... will be something to turn to again and again in the privilege and journey of being a parent. Enjoy!”

—**Daniel Siegel, MD, *New York Times* bestselling coauthor of *Parenting from the Inside Out*, *The Whole-Brain Child*, and *The Power of Showing Up* and author of *Brainstorm*, *Aware*, and *The Developing Mind***

“With deep compassion, simplicity, and insight, this book powerfully conveys the science behind raising good humans. It is filled with practical tools that any parent can start utilizing on their journey toward raising resilient children.”

—**Dr. Shefali Tsabary, bestselling author of *The Conscious Parent: Transforming Ourselves, Empowering Our Children***

“*The 5 Principles of Parenting* is the one book parents can turn to for every stage of development. Dr. Aliza Pressman masterfully translates the science into the practical realities of being a parent and provides clear strategies every parent can use.”

—**Lori Gottlieb, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone* and cohost of the *Dear Therapists* podcast**

“In a time when there’s a lot of noise and advice about parenting and child development, Dr. Aliza Pressman is a rare find. She is at once a credible expert, practical, accessible, and beloved. Respected by colleagues and parents alike, Dr. Pressman’s work is impactful and powerful, influencing how this generation of parents thinks about and cultivates their children’s development.”

—**Tina Payne Bryson, LCSW, PhD, coauthor of multiple bestsellers, including *The Whole-Brain Child* and *No-Drama Discipline***

“Here, at last, is the book parents have been waiting for! Dr. Aliza Pressman distills decades of developmental research into sound and practical guidance that addresses the real questions and concerns that all parents face. Brimming with warmth and wisdom and free from fads and fear, this book belongs in the hands of everyone who cares for or about children.”

—**Lisa Damour, PhD, author of *Untangled*, *Under Pressure*, and *The Emotional Lives of Teenagers***

“This book is a gift to parents.... Relax, build your relationships, enjoy your parenting.”

—**Alan Sroufe, professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota and author of *A Compelling Idea: How We Become the Persons We Are***

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YOUR ESSENTIAL GUIDE  
to RAISING GOOD HUMANS

*the 5*  
principles of  
parenting



Dr. Aliza Pressman

Simon Element  
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

*To Penelope and Vivian: You've taught me all the important things  
I know.*

*And now that you don't have to be perfect, you can be good.*

—John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*

## INTRODUCTION

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# Grounding Your Parenting in the Science of Child Development

*Trees exhale for us so that we can inhale them to stay alive.*

—MUNIA KHAN

### Welcome to *The 5 Principles of Parenting*

The research is conclusive. There are five principles we all need to get fluent in if we want to raise good humans. They are:

- ✦ Relationships
- ✦ Reflection
- ✦ Regulation
- ✦ Rules
- ✦ Repair

These are the Five *Rs* that lead to resilience—to humans who can weather life's storms and stay true to their values. Because *fluency* means being able to easily implement these principles in your day-to-day life, this book is organized in a way that will show you why these principles matter and will teach you how to engage with them in virtually any context.

The first half of this book covers everything you'll need to know about the big-picture science of parenting, and the second half shows you how to apply that science to the most common dilemmas parents present to me in my practice as a developmental psychologist and guide.



You'll notice that we're not going to go through the principles one by one but, rather, take an approach of total immersion. By the end of this book, you'll find that you not only know exactly what these terms refer to but you'll also be able to use them with ease and eloquence.

## How I Got Here

My love affair with developmental psychology started before I became a mom.

What makes us become who we are, from our earliest moments and over time? How can parents and communities best shelter the newcomers? What can go wrong? How can we heal from mistakes? I found it fascinating that there was a whole field of study exploring the answers to these questions.

Twentieth-century Swiss philosopher and psychologist Jean Piaget spent much of his professional career watching and listening to children to discover the secrets of the mind. In a thought-leap considered radical at the time, he observed that children aren't just empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge, but also active builders of their own education—little scientists constantly creating and testing their theories of their worlds. This made so much sense to me. As parents, we do that, too! We're not just empty vessels in need of being filled up with expert know-how. We bring all our own histories and experiences to parenting. We're parent-scientists, constantly testing strategies to see if they make our lives in our unique families' experiences easier. Through ***Relationships***, self- and co-***Regulation, Reflection, Rules***, and ***Repairs***, we become active builders of our own family dynamics.

Each of our ideas of what makes for a good human is unique. There are literally *millions* of ways to be a good human. As such, there are *millions* of ways to be a good parent. Parenting asks us to interrogate and reflect on what *we* think “good” means.

Developmental psychology can help.

As a developmental psychologist engaged in the science of how we get to be who we are and how we change over time, I always draw from the research. But research is dynamic; all scientific studies are conducted in some context, and that context isn't your unique family. Your personal experience is valuable. Your

cultural and family traditions are meaningful. Some of your quirks are probably strengths unique to your situation.

Some parents read absolutely everything, and some reject “expert” advice across the board. But I’ve learned with all things in parenting: there’s a space between—and for me, that’s what this book is about. When we focus on our ***Relationships*** within our families, when we take time for ***Regulation*** and ***Reflection***, when we’re clear about ***Rules***, and when we make a habit of ***Repair*** after mistakes, we find that space between micromanagement and chaos.

Extreme ideas may seem comforting at times, like there’s some way to “win” at parenting if only you and your child conduct yourselves just right. Like, *Oh good, there’s a clear answer. All my worries about raising a good human can be put to rest.* I get that. The illusion of total certainty has incredible appeal. But as you may have already learned the hard way, extremes are unsustainable. The middle road might not seem as sexy or as black-and-white, but trust me—it’s an easier road to stay on.

So much of parenting can feel like a one-and-done challenge—if we don’t get attachment right with our newborns, we and they are doomed to lifetimes of feeling alienated. Not true! Research on attachment shows that attachment *relationships* are dynamic. And like all relationships, attachment relationships can be mended, shifted, and built upon. It’s called *repair*, and it’s one of my five principles of parenting. Not only can mistakes be met with repairs and do-overs, but these mistakes and repairs can actually strengthen our relationships. As you read this book, I want you to let your ears perk up whenever we come to one of these Five Rs: ***Relationships***, ***Regulation***, ***Reflection***, ***Rules***, and ***Repair***. The Five Rs lead to that elusive sixth *R* we’re all hoping and building toward: Resilience.

We don’t have to be perfect parents the moment our kids are born—or ever. The science shows us that our own learning curves are key to the whole process of raising good humans. So much of the expectation in parenting is that we’re going to raise our children to be good and well adjusted—that *their* development is the only outcome we should be invested in; but I’ve learned that our own parallel path of development as parents can be at least as meaningful. In raising our kids, we as the adults get beautiful opportunities to grow into our own maturity, into

our own hope, will, and wisdom. We do that by returning to these five principles that also lead to resilience: ***Relationships, Regulation, Reflection, Rules, and Repair***. Through all our doubts, and even our difficult moments as parents, through times when we might feel isolated or insufficient, we ourselves can use these principles and the practices I'll outline in this book to become more confident, more grounded, and more integrated—to embody the sense of being good humans like we want our kids to grow into.

In this book, I'll teach you a lot of specific practices that will make your life easier when dealing with everything from infant sleep issues to tween screentime drama, but you'll notice the principles remain pretty constant. That's because the strategies that work for navigating toddlerhood are the same ones you'll need to draw on when your kids are teens. These principles and practices will help you maintain and return to a calm sense of confidence—a place of regulation from which you'll be able to make intentional choices. These practices include both *Regulation* and *Reflection*, also known as mindfulness, through which you'll develop the habit of grounding into the space *between* extremes.

## Visualize Yourself Grounded

As a little girl, I adored the weeping willow tree on our street. In the neighborhood park, we played under a giant oak, creating whole worlds of make-believe and magic. I loved wisteria vines, too. They seemed to climb into trees and weep like the willows but in pale purple blooms—cue the music from *Les Misérables* and you'll know what kind of kid I was.

I lived in the suburbs and then in the city, so most of the trees I came into contact with were human-planted beauties that lived mostly solitary lives of a few decades. It wasn't until later in life that I discovered the marvel of natural forests. The California redwoods awed me with their old-growth magnificence. In ancient forests, all these tree species can live for hundreds if not thousands of years, spending their first few decades sheltered under the care of their mothers. University of British Columbia ecologist Suzanne Simard has established that trees are truly social beings who through their *relationships* help each other out, sharing food and warning each other about pests and other threats via mycorrhizal

fungi networks that live in their roots. Simard calls the biggest, oldest trees in the forest the “mother trees,” and she’s found that they recognize their own kin and favor them, sending them more carbon below ground.

Creating a shady, sheltered environment where saplings can grow slowly helps ensure their long-term well-being by giving them plenty of time to strengthen their cells before they get tall. Sometimes, when I’m in need of grounding in the middle of a hectic day of family or work life, I take a breath and imagine myself a mother tree—a weeping willow, or a broad oak, or a giant redwood in an ancient forest, thousands of years old.

I inhale and exhale in tandem with other living things. I have sturdy roots, but I’m not so rigid that I’m going to snap. I can sway, flexible in the wind, and yet I stand steady. I’m able to shelter and feed my saplings as they grow as strong and resilient as I can support them to become.

This is a book about raising humans, not trees, but as we move from the world of forest ecology and delve ever more deeply into my field of developmental psychology and the science of parenting, I invite you to imagine yourself a mother tree. Stay with me here. Try visualizing your strong and sturdy roots that keep you firmly grounded. Notice in this visualization that you can still sway. You’re not so rigid that you’re going to crack when the winds pick up. You’ll live in your community, helping your neighbors and sharing food and news and—of course—you’ll favor your own children in many ways like trees do.

Science can seem heady at times, but it’s earthy, too. It’s steady—like an old tree. Developmental psychology feels that way to me, too. It honestly boggles my mind that we don’t learn about developmental psychology as a part of high school. It’s completely illuminating!

Some of the old “expert” philosophies and practices have been debunked, of course. I’m not sure how the advice to start potty training babies *at birth* ended up in a 1932 US government pamphlet for new moms, but we clearly now know that’s ridiculous. In a 1962 book, Dr. Walter Sackett recommended giving babies black coffee starting at six months old! Obviously, I don’t recommend that one, either.

More recently, in the 1980s and 1990s, Dr. William Sears, a pediatrician, and coauthor Martha Sears, a registered nurse, took one of the most important words

in developmental science—*attachment*—and applied it to *their parenting approach*, and they named it “attachment parenting.” This confused millions of readers, suggesting that a few particular parenting practices were a method to *obtain* secure attachment. This isn’t even remotely true, and potentially made a lot of mothers feel like failures. Attachment parenting, which is the Searses’ *philosophy*, has nothing to do with the formation of a secure attachment relationship, a well-researched concept that is predictive of future physical, mental, and developmental health (and a buffer for the impact of toxic stress).

All this is to say that we have to be willing to reject expert advice. We have to take every study in the context in which it was done and not blindly generalize it to every family out there. But as I continued to study developmental psychology, I found it fascinating that, despite the fact we often say the new science disputes the old or we’ve discovered some revolutionary new insight, much of what the twentieth-century OG psychologists theorized *has* been held up with scientific evidence. More recently, neuroscience has affirmed much of the older wisdom from the developmental sciences on resilience. Neuroscience has also found that mindfulness, visualization, and meditation—practices once considered unscientific—should be in *all* our developmental and parenting tool kits. When we breathe in, we inhale the air the trees have exhaled. When we breathe out, we exhale the carbon dioxide for the trees to send to their young. The most fundamental parenting practice is something we’ve been doing in tandem with the trees since our ancestors came down from their branches and started walking around with two feet on the ground.

So, breathe. Doing the best we can *more often than not* might not seem like a super-high bar for parenting, but I’m delighted to report what the scientific research has clearly shown: if we’ve got the essential information and we apply it more often than we don’t, *that’s good enough*.

Think about good parenting as a 75 percent principle. You’re going to learn a lot in this book, and then I’ll invite you to actively throw out about 25 percent of my advice, because it won’t work for *your* family—or maybe you just don’t like it. Even within what works for your family, if you’re the parent you want to be 75 percent of the time (and that’s probably still a high bar!), that’s amazing. In our academic and work life, most of us don’t aim for Cs, but I’m here to tell you that

if you can implement 75 percent of the research-backed, practical guidance, you're golden.

Lehigh University researcher and attachment expert Susan S. Woodhouse studied racially and ethnically diverse low-income moms and their babies, and she found that when the primary caregiver was responsive about half the time, that built a strong-enough sense of attachment to protect their kids from the psychological risks associated with life stresses. They needed to respond only about just over 50 percent of the time to reap these benefits.

### **Inhabit the Space Between**

These days I get media requests whenever a new study or parenting influencer comes out saying this or that, whether about pacifiers, or screen time, or behavior modification. Often, I can't tell the journalists what they want to hear. I won't say that an extra hour in front of the television will ruin a kid's life, any more than I'd say giving them a cup of coffee is a good idea. Extremes make for clickable headlines. Extremes promise safety because they feel so certain. But it's a false sense of safety. The science is clear: humans don't thrive at extremes.

Here are the nonnegotiables in parenting I feel pretty confident all psychologists agree on:

- ✦ Take care of the mental health of the primary caregiver.
- ✦ Do not engage in physical or emotional abuse.
- ✦ Do not neglect a child.
- ✦ Commit to habits of consistent sleep, movement, and nourishment.
- ✦ Establish clear **Rules** that enable emotional and physical safety.
- ✦ Be sensitive (which we will define) to your child's needs (which are not the same thing as their "wants").

### **Remember That Good Enough Is Good Enough**

As with the beginning of all important projects, I invite you to get started by setting an intention—in this case, an intention for your own growth as a parent.

Put your hand on your heart, take a deep breath, and say, “*More often than not*, I’m the parent [or mother or caregiver or father or mama or papa or zaza] I want to be.” When setting an intention, it’s also super helpful to name the barrier you expect to encounter (such as “I have a short temper when I’m tired”), and then come up with a plan to handle that barrier when it arises (like, “I will take a moment to breathe before I speak or act.”)

The fact that you’re here, reading this book, means you’re engaged and are open to growth, and that’s tremendous.

You’re doing great.

PART ONE

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# THE FOREST THROUGH THE TREES

*Getting at What Matters*



## Clearing Away the Noise

### *Beginning from a Place of BALANCE*

*Before you speak ask yourself if what you are going to say is true, is kind, is necessary, is helpful. If the answer is no, maybe what you are about to say should be left unsaid.*

—BERNARD MELTZER

Eleanor wanted the day to go perfectly. Her daughter, Camille, had practiced for her part in the school play for months. Eleanor planned everything from the meals they would share before the play to the flowers she would give her daughter afterward. Everything was set to go as painlessly as possible, but onstage, Camille froze and forgot her lines. That night, she cried into the perfect flowers. When Eleanor called me, she was devastated, feeling like the whole experience had been a failure. But I had another take. I asked Eleanor to consider the fact that this had been a great parenting success. Camille was able to cry with her mother—Eleanor was a safe person, and Camille was having an appropriate response to her disappointment.

*We would all love for our children to lead easy lives with little pain, lots of laughter, and meaningful contributions—but that's not possible every day.* Real life brings with it inevitable challenges. We don't need to make childhood feel like adulthood right out of the gate, but we can help our kids ease into the realities of living in an imperfect world.

Part of the anxiety of parenting is knowing there's so much in this world we can't control. (Breathe that in and then exhale: *There's so much I can't control.*) But here's the heartening part: We *can* control our behavior as parents *more often*

*than not*, and the science shows us that our parenting is the single greatest environmental influence on our children's well-being. (Breathe that in and then exhale: *There's so much I can control.*)

I don't say this to freak you out. When I learned that parents had such a relatively powerful impact on their kids, I was in grad school and not yet pregnant, and I thought, *Duh*. When I had my first baby, I thought, *This is so overwhelming. How am I going to pull this off?*

As I've grown into motherhood, I've come to see this profound impact as empowering. As parents, we're significantly more influential than screen time, our children's peers, or which schools they attend. If we focus on what we can control—ourselves—that's something manageable. As you do the regulation exercises in this book, you'll get better and better at it all, but there will always be room for mistakes and repair.

## Understanding Regulation

Kristin came to our session ashamed and upset. She'd grown up in a household where she learned to equate masculinity with violence, and she'd made a vow not to pass that on to her boys. She didn't allow roughhousing, for one thing, and she didn't allow raised voices. When her four-year-old yelled something at his brother, panic shot through her body. She pounced on her son, screaming, "We don't yell!" Now, she cried to our parent group: "I can't believe I tried to teach my son nonaggression with more yelling!"

It makes sense that Kristin had a stress response triggered by her past. But that *unproductive* stress response—when we aren't able to self-regulate or are getting false alarms about the dangers at hand—can end up causing us to act and parent from a place of fear and panic. Often, when we feel guilty about how we handled a parenting situation, the root of the problem is our own inability to self-regulate in the heat of the moment. I reminded her that the occasional panic reaction in an otherwise loving household isn't going to hurt our kids. What would help her in the future would be if she could find another way to respond to that panic feeling in her body.

Self-regulation—and within that emotional regulation—is the human ability to respond to our experiences in ways that are socially acceptable and sufficiently flexible, but to also control or delay our reactions as needed.

My favorite way to think about self-regulation comes to us from psychologist Rollo May. In *The Courage to Create*, May wrote: “Human freedom involves our capacity to pause between stimulus and response and, in that pause, to choose the one response toward which we wish to throw our weight. The capacity to create ourselves, based upon this freedom, is inseparable from consciousness or self-awareness.”

Whenever we talk about self-regulation, we’re talking about activating that pause between stimulus and response *where we can create ourselves*, where we can be intentional and do the work of raising ourselves into the good parents we want to be. Being able to activate that pause *more often than not* creates a kind of freedom that allows us to walk through the world without worrying that we’re going to lose our cool every time someone bumps our elbow on the subway or borrows our favorite toy. Even for adults, self-regulation usually remains a work in progress—one that’s tested and strengthened in new ways by being around children. Kristin needed to remember that her reaction was understandable—and *completely forgivable*.

Children aren’t born with a fully developed capacity for self-regulation; they learn it as their brains develop. A primary way we all learn self-regulation is through a process called co-regulation, which we’ll more deeply explore later and that involves various types of responses, like a warm presence, an acknowledgment of distress, and a calming tone of voice, as well as modeling our own process of calming ourselves down.

When I think about how self-regulation works in a practical sense, I think about my new home alarm system.

I know only New Yorkers feel safer in New York than anywhere else, and since I’m a New Yorker, when I lived in the city, I didn’t have an alarm system. Then I moved to California and into a house with my girls—and I didn’t feel quite so safe. *Who would hear us scream for help if we didn’t live in an apartment building?* I decided I needed an alarm system.

When I walk in the door, there's a slow beeping sound that serves as a warning signal. If there were a burglar, the alarm would go off and the police would come. When I come home, the warning signal reminds me to punch in my passcode. Then the system is disarmed and all is well. I think of that beeping sound as the metaphor for my stress response. When I feel the panic shooting through my body in reaction to a relatively nonthreatening stimulus, I need to have the passcode of self-regulation. I need to hear the beeping sound and realize when there's no burglar. I'm not being chased. My kids aren't being threatened. There's nothing bad happening. It's just me coming home with some takeout. So, I punch in my passcode and disarm the system.

The trick to developing a self-regulation muscle as a person, and especially as a parent, is to figure out your own personal passcode. Over time, you'll get better and better at recognizing the signs that your body is about to start sounding the alarm, and you'll have that much more warning time to punch in the passcode. The signs might include things like racing thoughts, difficulty focusing, fast heartbeat, dry mouth, butterflies or nausea, cold hands, quick breath, or a need to pee.

Everyone is different. When your kids do something that sets off that panic response in you, or if they're going through a dysregulated time when they're upset or freaking out about something, the alarm needs to be disabled before anything else can happen. Instead of meeting them where they are in the freak-out, or responding to yelling with more yelling, punch in your passcode. This will put you back into a state of balance and make you available as the loving, adult parent the situation calls for.

What's extraordinary about co-regulation is that your child can literally borrow from your nervous system to help calm down or learn about a limit in a receptive state. This habit alone—of finding your passcode and learning to punch it in to get yourself into a regulated mode fairly quickly—will not only improve your parenting, allowing you to be the parent you want to be more often than not, but it will also have the biggest influence on your children's ability to self-regulate in the future. It may not pay off right away. Parenting is a long game. But it will ultimately pay off.