

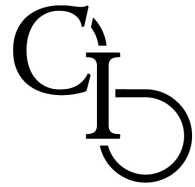
"This transformative book challenges the conventional wisdom of enforcing rules on children." —Ray Scott Percival, PhD,
author of *The Myth of the Closed Mind*

A wooden swing seat with yellow ropes is centered against a solid blue background. The ropes are knotted at the ends where they meet the seat. The title text is overlaid on the image.

THE SOVEREIGN CHILD

How a Forgotten Philosophy
Can Liberate Kids *and* Their Parents

Aaron Stupple
with Logan Chipkin



Conjecture Institute

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For my parents. Thank you.

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK IS INSPIRED BY A PHILOSOPHY OF PARENTING CALLED TAKING Children Seriously, a noncoercive parenting movement that was co-founded by Sarah Fitz-Claridge and David Deutsch and was prominent in the United Kingdom in the 1990s. At the time, Fitz-Claridge was pursuing the radical idea that it was possible to raise a child with zero coercion. She familiarized herself with various schools of thought on children and parenting but found that none of them fully measured up. Eventually, she happened upon an unlikely collaborator who lived in her city, Oxford physicist David Deutsch. Deutsch is a world-renowned thinker for, among other things, establishing the theoretical groundwork for quantum computing. In addition to physics, Deutsch was attracted to philosophy, and in particular the philosophy of Karl Popper. In subsequent years, Deutsch added to Popper's work in epistemology, personal identity, morality, and aesthetics, all of which are detailed in his two books, *The Fabric of Reality* and *The Beginning of Infinity*.

Deutsch's views on personhood aligned with Fitz-Claridge's intuitions about childhood freedom, and the two of them started a movement promoting a radically noncoercive approach to parenting. Fitz-Claridge went to conferences and met with parenting and schooling groups, and she organized a print journal called *Taking Children Seriously* that had thousands of paid subscribers at its peak. The movement lost steam in the 2000s, but the content of the journals remained online as a half-functioning web forum when I stumbled upon it in 2018, just in time for the birth of my

first child. Six years later, my wife and I have been applying this philosophy with all of our five kids. We consider ourselves enormously lucky to have encountered these ideas, and the purpose of this book is to share them with others.

WHAT IS TAKING CHILDREN SERIOUSLY?

The simplest way to describe Taking Children Seriously is to describe what it is not. Taking Children Seriously avoids the two questions that frame almost every other school of thought on parenting:

1. What are the necessary limitations, restrictions, or boundaries for kids? Where should the parent draw the line on what is allowed and disallowed?
2. How do parents enforce these lines, limits, and expectations? Should they use harsh words, positive reinforcement, time-outs, confiscations, bribes, or breathing techniques?

Taking Children Seriously steps away from all of this. It has no interest in what the best rules should be, or how to enforce them, because it has no interest in rules. When most people hear this, their first reaction is to assume Taking Children Seriously is a fancy version of complete permissiveness, a well-known and ancient parenting style otherwise known as neglect. Rest assured: Taking Children Seriously is not neglect.

So what is it? Instead of focusing on rules, Taking Children Seriously focuses on fostering understanding. Parenting is the process of supporting a child until they understand the world well enough that they can support

themselves. What is the best way to foster understanding? To provide freedom and security for a person's creativity to discover how the world works. Rules limit freedom, and hence understanding, and therefore impair the parenting project.

This book is inspired by the themes in *The Sovereign Individual* by James Dale Davidson and William Rees-Mogg. Unlike the self-sovereignty that Davidson and Rees-Mogg outline, which requires huge, society-wide innovation, the self-sovereignty we might unlock for children can take root in any home, anywhere, by anyone of any financial status. The sovereign child doesn't have to wait for anything except a curious parent.

Chapter 1 begins with freedom around food, then Chapters 2 and 3 move on to sleep and screens. Chapter 4 takes an extended look at the problems with enforcing rules in general. Chapter 5 presents problem-solving as the formal alternative to rules. Chapter 6 addresses the counterarguments. Chapter 7 presents various additional applications of the philosophy to daily life. Chapter 8 takes siblings seriously. Chapter 9 offers ideas for shifting from rules-based parenting to problem-solving-based parenting. Chapter 10 presents the philosophy of knowledge—the epistemology—that underlies the entire book. Readers who prefer to start with the foundations are encouraged to begin here. Chapter 11 closes the book with an expansive view of parenting in the ancient past and distant future.

DISCLAIMER

Above all things, my parents wanted to raise happy kids, and they wanted our childhood to be better than theirs. They both came from close families, but they were bothered by some features of their upbringing and vowed to make improvements for us. They succeeded spectacularly, and I grew up proud of my family and our norms around freedom, autonomy, and

standards for character. I couldn't be more grateful. And yet here I am writing a book that criticizes staples of our upbringing like rules, chores, and discipline. I worry that my parents will conclude that I regard my childhood similarly to how they regard theirs. Absolutely not.

There is no final, best way to parent. But there is improvement, and that is what matters most. My parents were very intentional about making progress, and they often talked with my brother and me about the challenges of doing better for us than their parents did for them. Within their lineage, they probably tried the hardest to improve their kids' lives, not just materially, but psychologically. I love my grandparents, but I doubt they gave it much thought, and I doubt their ancestors did, either. My parents took a gigantic step forward.

This book is the opposite of an indictment of them or any other parent trying to make things better for their kids. Rather, it is inspired by them. It is an attempt to take another step forward. This book aims to honor that commitment and love, not to belittle or shame parents. Any indication of shaming that readers pick up is unintentional.

Effective criticism requires clarity and concision, and for that reason the arguments in this book are presented directly, without preamble acknowledging that they are just guesses, might be wrong, and are not meant to be hurtful. Instead, readers are asked to keep this disclaimer in the back of their minds and append it to any argument in this book that reads like a personal attack.

To my friends and family: If anyone sees themselves in my criticisms or examples, that is unintentional. The anecdotes about my kids are real. All of the references to parents, grandparents, and extended family and friends are hypothetical and not based on actual people. I couldn't be happier with or more grateful for my kids' relationships with their extended family.

Lastly, I am a practicing medical doctor, but nothing in this book should be considered medical or psychiatric advice.

Chapter One

EATING WHAT THEY WANT

EATING MAY BE THE MOST PERSONAL HUMAN EXPERIENCE. ITS CLOSEST RIVAL, breathing, lacks the richness and variety of all the many foods and ways to eat, enjoy, and *experience* them. Eating is a primal exercise of sovereignty—to control your own eating entails governing both your body and what goes into it—but also a vulnerability, since things that go inside you pose an incredible risk. It is constrained by and intertwined with the laws of chemistry and biology but is also profoundly subjective and nuanced. Tastes and eating preferences don't just mechanically develop the way a child's body does—they are cultivated and refined, they are bound up with almost every other aspect of life.

For children, eating is like walking and talking—kids will figure it out on their own without any “help” from the outside. To be sure, parents are obligated to *provide* food for kids, since they're incapable of acquiring it on their own. But the duty to provide food does not imply the right, let alone the injunction, to *control* food. Consider: We provide food for houseguests, but we don't try to control them with it. In fact, we do the opposite—we ask them what their preferences are and try to satisfy those, while also offering some new options that might intrigue them. And, as always, our guests are free to decline.

Controlling children's access to food is the norm today. "A good parent does not let their kid eat whatever they want." There are various rationales, but the general argument is that eating is only about nutrition and desire, and since kids don't understand anything about nutrition and the dangers of their own desires, parents need to manage it for them.

Parents don't just control their children's food, they control them *with* food. Since sweets are generally restricted, they become a default reward for any desired behavior, and their restriction a punishment for any undesired behavior.

Taking children seriously means not mediating their relationship with food. A parent simply cannot know how a child should eat, because they cannot know their hunger patterns and cravings or how different foods taste and feel to them.

Should parents really just let their kids eat whatever they want? The short answer is *yes*. Kids should have a wide range of foods to explore and learn about with no restrictions, limited only by what their parents are capable of providing. Outside well-known poisons or even borderline substances like alcohol, anything that adults eat should be on offer for kids. The reason kids should have free rein with regard to food is that they are building an understanding of how to eat in the same way that they are building an understanding of everything else in life: by exploration, discovery, and trial and error.

As adults, we have *reasons* for how and why we eat. Breakfast can be carefully orchestrated to support a workout, or scarfed down in the car so we don't get hungry at work. We can show off our favorite brunch spot, or casually order in from home. Eating accentuates an endless variety of contexts—holidays, potlucks, birthday parties, cookouts, school lunch, movie theater snacks, Halloween candy, religious observances. To reduce food to simplistic binaries—healthy or unhealthy, natural or unnatural, good or bad—is to misunderstand how the boundless *experiences* with food color one's life.

Given the central role food plays in daily life, rules around eating can be particularly damaging. It is common, perhaps even the norm, for otherwise well-adjusted adults, having been raised with food rules, to have guilt, shame, and insecurity about eating. It is hard to imagine something more damaging to a life well lived than anxiety around eating.

The best argument I've heard for controlling food comes from the fear of kids becoming overweight. Eating may be deeply embedded in biology, but modern food is different. It is carefully designed to be inexpensive and taste good, with lots of sugar and additives that provide quick bursts of calories in place of slower-burning, heartier foods that were present in the ancestral environment that our bodies evolved in and for. So, without a parent's watchful eye, kids will eat junk food all day and get fat all too easily.

This concern is understandable. But it's not a good reason to enforce rules around food.

First, like every other understandable concern, identifying the problem is not the same as identifying the solution. Food rules often backfire: Rules might produce the exact eating compulsions and disorders that they are intended to prevent. As with rules around drugs and other dangerous substances, no strategy around food can guarantee that a kid won't become overweight. On the contrary, some strategies—in particular, those that entail rule enforcement—are *guaranteed* to cause suffering, confusion, and/or psychological damage.

Second, since weight gain is an unavoidable risk of modern life, the safest approach is for the child to develop a robust understanding of all aspects of food (cultural, biological, and personal) by engaging *directly* with the problem situation. An experience that is mediated by someone else prevents such discovery. Consider: Not being overweight because your parents forbid you from overeating is worlds apart from understanding your own desires and cravings and tailoring them to suit your other preferences for how to live your life, including body size and appearance.

A crucial guard against risk is to have a trusted and knowledgeable person available for questions. This lifeline can only work if this person has

the child's best interests at heart, *and only if the child believes this*. Ideally, all judgment, expectations, and moralizing are absent. If a kid finds themselves struggling with food issues, a parent should be there to help by offering knowledge, guidance, and any other kind of support they might need. Fear of punishment, shame, or even more rules only push the kid to find potentially dangerous work-arounds, like eating disorders, or to cope with their issues via psychological torment, like hiding food.

Third, a robust understanding is not only critical to safety but also to living well. With respect to food, this means eating in a way that supports other interests and preferences, including one's *own* conception of health, relationships, ambitions, and avocations. I know foodies who will travel internationally just to eat exotic dishes, and I know people who consume mostly meal replacement drinks in a bottle so they can minimize the time spent preparing and consuming food. Each of these suits their particular lifestyles, which they've developed over years of exploring the world—and that exploration begins in childhood. None of them would be well served by someone forcefully intervening and telling them the “right” way to eat, whether now or back when they were children.

The would-be intervener might—*might*—be able to guess what a child's tastes and preferences are in the moment, but they definitely can't know how those tastes and preferences will evolve. If a parent forces their own preferences into the process, this will clash in some way with the child's developing desires, cravings, needs, and interests.

There is nothing wrong with exposing a child to your preferences. Quite the opposite. The key is allowing them to reject your preferences. If they aren't allowed to opt out, then your preference necessarily disrupts their understanding of the world. If vegetables are unwanted, then being forced to eat them would cause resentment toward the person doing the forcing. Vegetables wouldn't only be about their taste and texture and how they make the kid feel, but they'd also be about the person who forced it and guesses about that person's expectations and anxieties. Forcing always introduces

confusion, extra layers of problems to solve, or both. Hardly a recipe for learning about food or anything else.

What would *I* do about my kid's weight? First of all, I'd wait until it appears as a problem before addressing it. Eating a second ice cream cone won't immediately make a kid overweight. Neither will a third or even a fourth. In fact, it might make the kid sick to their stomach and teach them about satiety far better than a parent's speech could. Put differently, overeating might provide its own signal for why not to overeat. By waiting for obesity to present itself, related discoveries about overeating are made available that would otherwise be blocked off by food rules.

The truth is that there is a lot of time to wait and see if a pattern of eating is causing a problem. My five-year-old son has been eating ice cream almost exclusively for the past few months, and, if anything, he's on the thin side. Before ice cream, his staple was Oreo cookies, but he seems to have grown tired of them. He eats ice cream as a meal, and he goes many hours between servings, not because we limit him, but presumably because he only likes to eat a limited amount at a time. Over the course of a day, he consumes a typical amount of calories. Contrary to popular opinion, free rein simply does not guarantee excessive eating of sweets or any other kind of food.

By giving him free rein, he has learned how to feed himself—he gets the ice cream out of the freezer that sits below our fridge and spoons out his own serving. Everything about the food that he eats is mediated by *him*, uncomplicated by judgment, expectations, or rules.

If my kid did start to become overweight, I'm not sure I would do anything about it out of fear that he would think I disapprove of how he eats. Tension with meals and snacks adds up over time, and there's no guarantee that it would be worthwhile. I've seen parents nag their overweight kids to no discernible effect except misery and humiliation. Instead of doing something, I'd wait until my kid *himself* expressed dissatisfaction with his weight. Once my kid identified that he had a problem, by his lights, and made it clear that my support was welcome, only *then* would I help him problem-solve by exploring the problem situation and guessing possible

solutions. Every step of the way, I would take extra care to make it clear that I'm only here to help him manage his weight and eating issues the way he wants.

What about bad eating habits? What about addictions to foods designed to hook us to their sugary and fatty ingredients that evolution did not equip us to handle?

There are several reasons why this is not a good argument for restricting food. First, as I said before, there is the usual risk of backfire: Forbidden foods become extra tempting.

Second, rules confuse kids about how foods work. For instance, eating unlimited lollipops can teach you that doing so is kinda gross. It makes your tongue raw, your mouth sore, and your stomach upset. My kids have access to practically infinite lollipops, and they rarely finish even one. They are ages three to six, and they basically see lollipops the way I do: tasty at first, but not worth it after ten or twenty licks. But if I limited their lollipop consumption, they could never discover any of this.

Building on this, the third reason is that avoiding or overcoming bad habits requires *understanding*, not mandatory avoidance. For example, to avoid overeating cookies, you have to understand that cookies can be delightful with tea after dinner but don't satisfy hunger enough to substitute for a real meal. To discover this about cookies, you need to try them out.

Moreover, because I am not a gatekeeper or adversary with my kids, they are open to my suggestions about food. They don't think I'm trying to manipulate them when I tell them that *I* don't find cookies to be filling. My kids often take my insights seriously and change their eating choices accordingly. For instance, they tend to trust my suggestions that they eat more in preparation for a long car ride or finish a serving of yogurt that would otherwise spoil. Since these requests are tethered to the reality of food and not some arbitrary set of rules, and since they always have the option to refuse, they *build* up my kids' understanding rather than block it.

Lastly, it is inevitable that kids will encounter cheap processed food. Is it really better to shelter them from it, allowing just a few indulgences, merely

to delay the inevitable? Is a sudden exposure to the full range of junk food in their late teens a good way to teach restraint?

WHAT ABOUT MAKING SURE YOUR KIDS ARE HEALTHY?

Is it possible to let a kid eat whatever they want and have them grow up perfectly healthy, with frictionless relationships with food and with themselves, all the while making no sacrifices in terms of your relationship with your kid? Yes, if you can be the helpful problem solver rather than the adversarial gatekeeper, if you can patch over rough spots by, say, supplementing nutritional deficiencies with multivitamin gummies or figuring out a few “healthy” dishes that are made genuinely appealing. I’d rather try that than badger my kid about what they eat at every meal and snack opportunity, knowing full well that badgering might not even work.

HUNGER

A common objection is that parents must manage their kids’ hunger, otherwise life will be difficult for everyone. If kids just eat junk food, then they never get satiated and are always hungry and irritable. This perspective often hails the virtues of eating “real food,” which is vaguely defined as any food that is heartier, more traditional, more filling, and more nutritious than the admittedly tastier artificial foods on offer.

A major problem with this approach is that controlling a kid’s food can *cause* irritability. It can produce anxiety and moodiness, even for kids who

“eat well.” A key observation that drove me away from enforcing food rules was witnessing all of the strife generated by making kids “eat right.” It struck me as a losing strategy to battle with a toddler until they’ve eaten sufficient amounts of approved foods in a bid to avoid battles with irritable kids later on. Why not let them eat what they like and see if battles arise at all? If not, it’s a glorious win–win. Why not have sufficient amounts of junk food always on hand so that kids can eat whenever they’re hungry? If you’re concerned with nutrition, why not search extra hard for natural foods that they like, or processed foods that are somewhat hearty? One solution we’ve found is chocolate bars and Nutella, both of which are appealing, travel well, are easy for kids to manage themselves, and have enough fat to be relatively filling, especially when combined with other foods. We decided early on that we wouldn’t fight with our kids about food in order to forestall fights with our kids about hunger. Instead, we’d deal with hunger and the corresponding possible irritability when it arises.

I suspect that hunger is used as a rationalization for why kids are irritable and moody, when really they are chafing at rule enforcement in general. Any time a kid gets defensive, it’s easy to blame a lack of “real food” or a lack of sleep or too much screen time. Food rules become a useful tool for control in terms of other rules. In general, parental force causes its own problems whose proposed solution is even more force.

FOOD CULTURE IN A HOUSE WITH NO RULES

My basic approach to food with my kids is to treat them like I would houseguests who didn’t choose to visit. I prepare for them the food that my wife and I eat but also ask if there are different foods that they prefer. If so,

I'm sure to stock the house with those foods. After all, when vegetarians visit, we make vegetarian food. On the other hand, I wouldn't consider myself a slave to whatever they demand. I make an effort to prepare meals that they like, including wasting a bit of food and remaking meals that are rejected, but only to a point. Eventually, I'd throw in the towel and tell a picky eater that they're on their own—though I make sure to keep a store of foods that they tend to prefer.

All of the kid food in our house is stored at knee height in open cabinets and in the easy-to-open freezer so the kids can always see what's available. This includes cookies and ice cream as well as more wholesome foods like noodles and fruit. There is no secret location for candy and no embargo on juice.

If my kids want to skip a meal, I don't lecture them about eating now so they don't get hungry later. Instead, if we are taking a trip, we bring plenty of snacks in case they get hungry. I'll often put breakfast in front of my kids and ask them to eat it in preparation for a trip, but if they refuse, I take care not to give the impression that I'm displeased.

We don't make our kids come to the table for family dinner. That's not to say we don't care about shared meals—we certainly value this bonding experience. In fact, we value it so much that we don't want our kids to develop resentment about it. We want them to participate in shared meals for the same reasons *we* want to do it, and those take time for a small child to discover. We encourage them to join us, we try to make things like setting the table and preparing the food fun and special, and we let them bring their tablets or toys to the table. My two daughters almost always join in, but my son rarely does. He doesn't like a fuss and prefers to eat at his own kid table at a time of his choosing. I am confident that he enjoys our company and will eventually join in the family meal, and I'd much rather wait until he comes to this conclusion on his own.

One of the best consequences of giving kids free rein with food is that it eliminates a source of conflict among siblings. Our kids don't guard their treats from each other, nor do they taunt or tease each other when one of

them has a treat that the other doesn't. If they want more, they can always have more. There is never a complaint that something isn't fair because no one has limitations. Instead, my kids take joy in each other's delights and preferences. Any time I'm in the store with just my oldest, she loves to pick out the snacks that her brother and sister like. Another happy consequence is that I can eat whatever I want in front of them. I always feel bad eating sweets in front of kids who are restricted, so it's a relief not to have to hide my consumption in order to appear that I'm following the rules.

All that said, I think there's something else going on here. Even if parents weren't concerned about health, or diet, or getting enough energy, many would still seek to control food. There is a sense among parents that kids should have limits set on things they want, *because they want it and regardless of what that thing is*. I call this sense that it is wrong for a child to satisfy their wants the Greedy Child Fallacy. This idea is not usually spelled out so explicitly by parents, but it has evolved over centuries and manifests so frequently that we take it for granted.

Controlling the knobs on a kid's access to the thing they want can be used to control the child without resorting to more stigmatized methods such as physical and verbal abuse. Food is something that basically everyone wants, and so parents feel justified by the Greedy Child Fallacy to control their kids' relationship with food. But it's no more wrong for a kid to want to control his own food choices than it is for any other person.

The idea that children are inherently and destructively greedy is used to justify all manner of control. The parent isn't just right to deny access to things the child wants, but they have a *duty* to keep the child within some limitation or boundary, regardless of where that boundary is. After all, so the argument goes, children need to learn that you can't always get what you want. This "lesson" is often delivered with "tough love," despite the fact that it is irrational and not at all loving. An unsatisfied desire is a problem, and all problems have solutions. We adults spend our days seeking solutions to all of our problems, and we very often succeed. Imagine consigning ourselves to this or that shortcoming, because "we can't always get what we want."