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R. BRADLEY SNYDER

the

5 SIMPLE TRUTHS of raising kids

how to deal with modern problems facing your tweens and teens
Advance Praise for
The 5 Simple Truths of Raising Kids

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“In this wonderful book, Brad stands up for today’s kids, debunks all the claims that they’re somehow worse than the last generation, and offers sound, research-based advice on how parents and communities can do a better job raising them. Having worked for many years with all kinds of kids—from the privileged and the achieving to the abused and disabled—Brad has an easy familiarity with how kids think. He channels their emotions into his chapters.”

—Neil Howe is a renowned authority on generations and social change in America. An acclaimed author and speaker, he is the nation’s leading thinker on today’s generations.

“The 5 Simple Truths of Raising Kids will immediately change your relationship with your tween or teen—and I promise it will be a change for the better! R. Bradley Snyder gives deep insight and practical guidance for what we all know is the most difficult and ultimately most important phase of parenting. Vulnerable teens seem to push parents and adults away, but they still need us. Snyder’s easy to read book tells us how we can shift our perspective to remain a key player in our kids’ lives. He answers all the questions parents ask me about teens, including the toughest ones about TV, driving, texting, sex, and drugs. Now I have the answers!

For parents, teachers, community leaders, and any adult who cares about the next generation of our citizens, The 5 Simple Truths of Raising Kids is an urgent “must-read!”

—Carol J. Evans, President, Working Mother Media, and Author, This is How We Do It: The Working Mothers’ Manifesto

Published Demos Health
“Every week my inbox is flooded with parenting books to review all with a common theme—our kids are in a desperate state and need immediate intervention. R. Bradley Snyder’s book, *The 5 Simple Truths of Raising Kids* takes away the dread and replaces it with hopefulness and humor.

The good news? Our tweens and teens are in pretty good shape (arguably in a better spot than my peers in Generation X). Snyder cuts through the hyperbole of modern statistics and gives parents tangible takeaways.

I’m better prepared for the tween years that I’m facing, having been able to discern fact from sensational headline. This doesn’t mean parents have a free ride, but it does mean we’re not in a cataclysmic situation. With care and attention, Snyder gives parents the tools they need to guide their kids through these years.”

—Nicole Feliciano, Editor & Founder of MomTrends.com, a parenting lifestyle website

“Unlike many parenting books, this one makes you feel better about being a parent: better grounded in your own experience of growing up, better versed in current research on children, better prepared to respond positively and effectively to the worrisome things kids do. Brad’s calm and authoritative style effectively defuses the anxiety parents so often feel when faced with hot-button issues like bullying and the siren song of television and social media. He reminds us that the needs of children, and the stages of development through which they pass, have not changed. Whether the context is food or video games, parents and children together can identify the central issue, and apply Brad’s five simple truths to figure out what to do.”

—George C. Brackett, Former Director, Technology in Education Program, Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Founder, Codman Academy Charter Public School, Boston

“I had the opportunity to work with Brad conducting many kid-focused studies at Cartoon Network. I’ve seen him walk into a room full of kinetic nine-year-olds, and quiet them into rapt attention using only his calm, inquisitive voice. It was chilling, actually. He’s like a kid whisperer. Brad’s humanity is infectious, and his dedication to his work is inspiring. I can think of no better mentor to parents needing reassurance that kids are good, and everything is going to be okay.”

—Art Roche, creative executive for digital media and family entertainment

Published Demos Health
“R. Bradley Snyder has spent the last 25 years working with, and for, young people. The list of organizations that depend upon his understanding of ‘tweens and teens’ is wide-ranging and impressive, from parole boards to TV networks, communications and marketing gurus, school-boards, and parents among them all.

Now his The 5 Simple Truths of Raising Kids offers his understanding and insight to anyone seeking advice on dealing with the generation too often regarded as ‘aliens.’

They’re not, says Snyder. Rather ‘kids are kids,’ a statement more significant than the words themselves. Think of the ‘problem with teens’ you see lamented in the popular press. Nearly every one of those problems—social network addiction, teenage crime, sex drugs and rock and roll, etc., etc.—is overstated, says Snyder. The solution? The simple (if little recognized) act of true parenting.

His reassuring guide to parenting is well-argued and filled with pertinent examples offered in clear, direct prose. You’ll learn from his book, and enjoy the lessons. Like Spock two generations ago, Snyder’s worth your attention. Well done!”

—Richard Peck, Author of Something for Joey

“In an age where we’re constantly sounding the alarm, it’s a pleasure to get sound advice from a guy who’s done his homework—and a relief to know, in these days of helicopter parents and tiger moms, that I have a fighting chance as a parent.”

—Amy Silverman, Managing Editor, Phoenix New Times, author of award-winning stories about juvenile justice and mental health. Co-teacher, Mothers Who Write workshop, blogger, girlinapartyhat.com

“The 5 Simple Truths of Raising Kids offers insightful lessons about how parents can enjoy their children more, while being better prepared for the challenges of parenting in contemporary society. Snyder uses his experience, research, and clear vision to write a book that all parents should read.”

—Aaron Kupchik, Ph.D., Author of Homeroom Security: School Discipline in an Age of Fear

“In this book, Brad stands in front as a defender for our kids. They need one. In this day and age where we, as a public, seem to be okay with our children being demonized and blamed for what we consider to be their surprising lack of attention, their lower moral values and somehow irresponsible embrace of technology, Brad cuts through the misinformation and rhetoric to share with us a clear picture of what our kids’ essential needs are, who our kids really are, and why they do the things they do. Without being preachy, he reminds us of our responsibility as parents, teachers, and communities and that, guess what, raising kids is hard. We have to pay attention, we have to practice what we preach, we have to be consistent. And at the end of the day, if we do these things, we will have cultivated a next generation who is smart, independent, generous, forward thinking and responsible and really, what’s more important than that?”

—Terry Kalagian, Independent Producer/Consultant

Publishing Demos Health
“Brad Snyder knows kids. And just as importantly, he knows how to articulate his knowledge of how kids think in a way that takes the mystery out of how they think and behave. In my years of working in children’s television, Brad’s ability to explain in a clear, concise way what motivates today’s youth was always the quickest path toward understanding how best to communicate to kids.

One of the recurring themes Brad presents, that ‘kids are kids,’ effectively demystifies a generation that has grown up with technology and influences my generation and others never had to wrestle with. Knowing that at a base level being a kid hasn’t changed in many ways levels the playing field with memories of adults own time as a youth. That Brad goes on to expertly explain how these new technologies and influences factor into how young people today learn and interact with the world around them is like having a Rosetta Stone in many ways: Brad’s book helps adults find common ground with young people, then explains how our differences aren’t as mysterious or frightening as we once thought. Because, again, kids are kids.

Brad’s book gives kids credit for being thoughtful, curious, and social human beings without demonizing their natural motivations and behaviors. And these core beliefs lay a foundation where adults can build effective two-way communication with the young people they hope to understand better.

 Brad’s frequent illustrative references from popular culture made reading and processing this book a pleasure, and while there is frequent scientific data backing up his learning, I never felt like I was being lectured at. Brad’s conversational tone is warm and informative; he’s the kind of expert you’d love to talk to over dinner. And as such, I think the lessons he’s learned resonate more deeply.”

—Steve Patrick, Children’s Television Producer

“Brad Snyder’s fresh perspective makes for a page-turning guide that’s both practical and inspiring. I recognized the kids in my life on every page, and found brand new understanding of familiar patterns. Every parent and mentor should read this book.”

—Molly Chase, Host of the Saturday Morning Submarine Adventure Show at HUGE Theater in Minneapolis, MN
The 5 Simple Truths of Raising Kids
The 5 Simple Truths of Raising Kids

How to Deal with Modern Problems Facing Your Tweens and Teens

R. Bradley Snyder
For my parents,
Russell and Mary Ann Snyder
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Foreword

Often the most helpful and insightful pieces of advice seem to be the simplest ones. I found this out while preparing for the birth of my first child. I was nervous about being a parent, as are most first-time parents. I began to read some articles online and leaf through a few of the many books written to help prepare first-time parents, which only made me even more anxious. I learned that there is so much to think about as a parent from day one. Of course, there are the safety basics, such as sterilizing baby equipment, putting the baby down to sleep on her back, and so on. I also learned that how I acted might shape my child’s self-esteem, learning readiness, life satisfaction, SAT scores, approach to romantic relationships, and on and on—the list, and anxiety that came from it—were overwhelming. But then I found Dr. Spock’s classic book, Baby and Child Care (a revised and updated edition). Certainly, Dr. Spock and the pediatricians who have revised the book since his death have packed several very useful facts and pieces of specific advice into the text, but I took from that text one very simple overall lesson: Love your child, be kind, caring and responsible, and follow common sense. Put more simply: Don’t worry so much. To me, this was a godsend, as it freed me from thinking about all the ways that I am likely to make parenting mistakes, reduced my anxiety, and let my excitement and joy of impending parenthood take over. The advice is simple, and for me it was much more helpful than the more complex warnings about all the hazards facing my unborn child.

In this book, Brad Snyder follows a similar path by reminding us that parenting need not be as complicated as many so-called experts and parents seem to make it. Why? Because kids aren’t as different from us, or as violent, as mature, or likely to be victimized by strangers, as most people think. Society tends to exaggerate the dangers that kids pose to us and the dangers that they face. The result is that we treat
them like criminals at young ages while protecting them from any possible threat in a way that can stifle their growth. We worry so much about kids, both as victims and perpetrators, that we get in the way of their progress.

A good example of this is what we currently do to protect children in public schools. Fears about school crime are high, and in response we have created a slew of policies intended to make schools safer. It is now normal for schools across the United States, especially high schools, to have surveillance cameras, random searches by drug-sniffing dogs, locked gates around the perimeter, zero tolerance, and armed police officers stationed full time at the school. Yet school crime, along with youth crime in general, is much lower now than it was twenty years ago. What’s more, there is no good evidence that these law-and-order policies have any effect on school crime, and some evidence that they might actually make schools more dangerous (they can cause youth to resent the school and as a result misbehave in school more often). These policies also increase dropout rates, they cause enrolled students to miss class time unnecessarily, they increase racial and ethnic disparities in educational outcomes, and they’re very expensive to implement. In other words, we are so worried about the safety of our children when they are at school—despite the fact that most schools are very safe, and safer than the schools that their parents attended—that we have created all sorts of policies that seem to do kids more harm than good.

We can and should do better, both as parents and as citizens who elect the politicians responsible for policy-making. Therein lays the importance of this book, since Snyder gives us the coaching we need in order to do better. He tells us how and why kids aren’t as bad as they sometimes seem, and how they’re more like we were at their age than we at first realize. Armed with this knowledge, we are in a better position to care for them. We can let kids be kids, while we do a better job of creating a safe, nurturing environment that allows them to learn from both their mistakes and their successes.

In addition to calming our fears, Snyder also offers a basic, easily digested primer on childhood development. He explains a bit about what makes kids tick: what motivates them, how they think, what influence adults have on kids, and why they roll their eyes at us so much. With this understanding in mind, he then tackles several topics
that are particularly worrisome to many parents: texting, video games, social media sites, television, and bullying. Though kids’ uses of these technologies can make them seem distant and different from what we were like as kids, not as much has changed as at first appears. In his calming, Dr. Spock—like manner, Snyder eases fears by reminding us that 1) kids are good, and 2) being a loving, caring, responsible adult is still the most important thing we can do to help kids.

This message is even more powerful, more important, because it runs against the grain of the literature on kids. Looking at some of the currently popular books on kids and parenting, we see that as parents we do a whole lot wrong. Some of us are helicopter parents, suffocating our kids; others teach our children a sense of entitlement that leaves them ill prepared for the actual trials and hardships of adult life; still others allow our children so much time on social media sites that they tune us out. And then we have the mean girls, overscheduled kids with no time to be kids, and an obesity epidemic to boot. Some of these claims have validity, and others don’t. But they all focus on the negatives of our actions as parents and the negative aspects of contemporary kids’ behaviors. In the process they raise our level of anxiety rather than calm us down, so that we might be able to see the good in our children and enjoy their qualities while helping them grow and learn.

My advice is to read The 5 Simple Truths of Raising Kids with an open mind. You may find that some of your beliefs about kids simply don’t hold water when considering the evidence, and you may learn a bit about what parenting approaches are most helpful to kids. But most of all, you may learn to enjoy your kids more. At the very least, I hope you enjoy reading this well-written, insightful book.

Aaron Kupchik, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice
University of Delaware
Author of Homeroom Security: School Discipline in an Age of Fear,
and Judging Juveniles: Prosecuting Adolescents in Adult
and Juvenile Courts
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I am grateful for Amy Silverman’s encouragement to start this book. I am grateful for Robert Kempe’s counsel when early attempts to publish this failed and because he introduced me to Noreen Henson. I am grateful for Noreen Henson’s enthusiasm for the project and for all of the support I have received from Demos Health Publishing. I am grateful for all of my clients who have allowed me opportunities to study kids, and especially for Cartoon Network and the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators. I am grateful for my colleagues, Yasmine Asföor and Chad Burggraf, for their professional assistance. I am grateful for the love and humility afforded by my family, especially my father-in-law Richard Peck, my mother-in-law Donna Peck, my sister Cindy Interdonato, and my aunt Barbara Roberts. I am grateful for my amazing wife, friend, confidant, and collaborator, the brilliant and beautiful Laura Peck. Finally, I am grateful for my daughter, Ella Snyder-Peck, about whom none of what I write applies.
The 5 Simple Truths of Raising Kids
Introduction to the 5 Simple Truths of Raising Kids
In an episode of The Simpsons from the show’s fifth season, a self-help guru named Brad Goodman comes to Springfield. During his seminar, he says the following:

Right now, I want each of you to try something interesting. There’s no trick to it. It’s just a simple trick! Now, close your eyes for a moment and really listen to that inner voice inside, your inner child. Listen! What’s he saying?

In writing a book entitled The 5 Simple Truths of Raising Kids, I cannot help but feel like I am saying, “There’s no trick to parenting. It’s just a simple trick!”

For many years, companies like Cartoon Network and Marvel Comics and nonprofit and government entities like the U.S. Justice Department have hired me to interview, survey and otherwise study kids to find out what they like and what they dislike, what they fear and what they hope for, and generally what they do and why they do it.

As you might imagine, I’ve learned some things about kids. Some of what I’ve learned comes from surveying and interviewing over 100,000 children and adolescents, some of what I’ve learned comes from working in and running direct service programs in Phoenix, Boston and New York City, and some of what I’ve learned comes from my own observations.
I’ve always known that this information is valuable to companies that market to or make products for kids. After all, they pay for the findings. Likewise, I have witnessed governments and nonprofits use the information to increase the impact or efficiency of their youth-serving programs. However, more and more parents are coming to me and asking me to speak at their churches, schools and community centers, asking me to help them understand their kids. OK, some ask me to “fix” their kids, but I know what they mean. These parents often have a difficult time believing what I tell them. I think it’s because what I’ve learned about the current generation of young people flies in the face of what glossy magazines and television morning shows would have us believe.

The entirety of my research and professional experience distills down to these 5 simple truths:

• Kids are kids
• Kids are good
• Kids need parents
• Kids need adults
• Kids need communities

Really, the only thing simple about these truths is that they are easy to remember and very few of the words have more than one syllable. One of the truths may seem redundant, at least two of the truths contradict everything that’s been on The Today Show for the last five years, and one is frustratingly obvious. This is why I did not want to call the book The 5 Simple Truths of Raising Kids. I wanted to call the book The 5 Super Awesome Principles That Will Blow Your Mind, Cause You to Question Everything You Believe About Kids, and Conceivably Change Your Political Views, but Noreen, my Editor, said that it was too long and came too close to plagiarizing John Cusack’s character, Gib, in The Sure Thing.

The book is divided into two halves. In the first half, I address each truth individually. I present theory, research and statistics to demonstrate the validity of each truth, and I explain the implications of each truth. Where possible, I use examples from my work and from the research world to illustrate the legitimacy and power of each principle.
Chapter 1  Introduction to the 5 Simple Truths of Raising Kids

Why I Say “Kids”

Much of this book focuses on what the industry calls “tweens.” The term was coined to describe young people between childhood and adolescence. The age range typically is set at 8 to 12 years old. Whether or not tweens actually exist is worthy of debate, but the term is useful, particularly because it is used so much in popular media.

This book also discusses “teens,” a term typically used to describe 13- to 19-year-olds. When I describe teens, I am employing a slightly stricter definition. I use teens to describe middle school and high school students. When they reach college age, all bets are off as far as I am concerned.

I use “kids” to describe them all, tweens and teens alike. I know the term falls in and out of favor with educators and other professionals. I know that some people may find it pejorative. However, it has face validity. When you hear somebody refer to “that Roberts kid,” for example, you know they are not talking about a preschooler or a young child. In your mind’s eye you picture somebody the age of Bart Simpson or Joanie, Ritchie Cunningham’s “kid sister” from the television series Happy Days. In other words, you picture a 10- to 13-year-old an individual towards the middle of the tween-to-teen continuum. Besides, tweens and teens refer to each other as “kids.”

The first half of the book is by far the denser of the two. There are many numbers and charts, and several experts are mentioned by name. I apologize for this. If you want, you can take me at my word that the 5 simple truths are valid and skip to the second half of the book, but experience tells me that you might need more convincing.

The second half of the book uses the 5 simple truths to address kids’ behaviors as they relate to five fairly contemporary phenomena:

- Television
- Videogames
- Social networks
The 5 Simple Truths of Raising Kids

- Texting
- Bullying

These chapters address popular perceptions about each phenomenon. I explore how kids are behaving in each of these domains and, using the 5 simple truths, I offer explanations for their behaviors. In each chapter, I also use the 5 simple truths to create strategies for promoting the types of successful behaviors that you, as an adult who cares about kids, want for those kids in your life.

There is one other thing you should know. Throughout the book I talk about adults and kids that I have met who have impacted how I think about these issues. They are all real. For adults, I use their real names. For kids, I change their names and alter certain details to hide their identities.

Later in The Simpsons episode that I mentioned, Lisa complains about the message of self-help guru Brad Goodman. She says, “This is madness. He’s just peddling a bunch of easy answers.” If, after reading this book, you still believe that my tricks are nothing more than simple tricks, I hope you will reply as Carl did to Lisa. Is this a bunch of easy answers? “And how!”