

RAISING KIDS IN THE SWIPE-HAPPY ERA

滑世代的幸福教養課

66 childrearing strategies for life in the digital era

According to Wang Wen-Hua, a writer who has spent many years at the pedagogical frontline, being present is the most important thing a parent can do for their child – especially now we live in a “swipe-happy era” of ubiquitous screens. Parents need to learn along with their children how to treat our electronics as tools that can assist us in life, not control us – or be deployed as a means of control. In doing so we can help children to take responsibility for themselves, to foster a positive attitude through the formation of positive habits, and to establish powers of self-awareness and empathy. By involving them in life management and sharing the burdens of domesticity, we can help them develop the ability to solve problems.

Wang Wen-Hua has a knack for interpreting the language of children. In *Raising Kids in the Swipe-Happy Era* he presents many conversations between parent and child, in a brisk, readable style, encouraging us to reassess this most intimate of family bonds. These 66 illuminating case studies are organized around ten of the most common intergenerational problems of the digital age, and every chapter concludes with a list of key points to help the reader quickly grasp the main ideas.

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Wang Wen-Hua has a masters from the Institute of Children's Literature at Taitung University, and is now an elementary school teacher as well as the renowned author of almost a hundred best-selling books for children. With combined sales of over 200,000 copies, his works include the Golden Tripod Award winning *First Chair Cellist* and *School of Possibility's Mission to Love the Earth*.



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RAISING KIDS IN THE SWIPE-HAPPY ERA

By Wang Wen-Hua

Translated by Darryl Sterk

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What the Foolish Old Plumber Taught Me

An Extracurricular Art Class at the Café

Some parents take their kids to all kinds of Saturday morning art classes, because they're worried about their children falling behind before the race even begins.

Many mothers sat waiting for their kids in the new café that had just opened in the neighborhood. The café was pretty spacious, with plenty of room for the kids to do homework and read storybooks on one side, while their mothers chit-chatted on the other.

Somehow the mothers got to talking about art classes.

The first mother complained about the elementary school her kid was enrolled in, which interrupted his all-English kindergarten education. English learning should be the priority, she said, as she planned to send her child abroad. "I wish I could transfer him to a private school," she said, sipping her coffee.

The mother next to her agreed. Her son had just gotten his English tested at some cram school, the result finding that he was a second grader with the English ability of a fifth grader. As she spoke, she frowned, as if faced with the toughest decision of her life. "Goodness gracious, that cram school really costs an arm and a leg, and assigns a lot of homework. But what else can I do? It's an investment in his future. It's worth any sacrifice, right?"

"Come on, just English classes," the rich lady facing her said, offering reassurance. "My Wei-wei has English classes *and* cello lessons."

"Can a second grader even play a cello?"

"Of course," said the lady, her earrings tinkling, "There are smaller cellos for children. My Wei-wei's teacher studied in Austria," she said animatedly, her earrings jangling around now. "She says Wei-wei has a gift, and is ready for a master class. Wei-wei said he wanted to go. If he didn't keep pestering us, we wouldn't push him so hard..."

Suddenly, the first mother shrieked, "Good gracious! Ying-ying, hurry, pack up your things. You'll be late for your English lesson. It's time to go!"

The other mothers leapt to their feet, too. Some got their children ready for piano lessons, others for advanced math. They whirled out one by one, leaving the lively café suddenly quiet.

All of a sudden it was very quiet. All they'd left behind was unfinished cakes and drinks, and some colored pens on the floor.

A boy came to refill my water glass. This was the café-owner's son, a second grader.

"Sir," his voice was soft and sweet, "just let me know if you're thirsty." He had a pair of crescent moon eyes that shone big and bright when he smiled.

I thanked him, and then watched him help his mother clear up the coffee sets. He wiped the tables and returned to his seat in the corner. The elegant silhouette of a plumeria tree by the window kept him company while he did his homework and read his storybooks. The owner of the café finished her work and sat beside him to watch him work. She watched the tip of his pencil trace each stroke of each character and listened to him share his day.

I wonder if there are any extracurricular classes where a child could learn about housework and daily life.

I once attended a wedding ceremony where all the mothers talked about nothing but the children they had all brought with them.

The news of one child's exam triggered endless discussions around education reform and maternal angst. Angst expressed itself in polite smiles that concealed a competitive streak. If you said your child was taking piano lessons, I had to reply that mine was in violin. However, there was one mother who didn't talk much: Mrs Pearl. She spent most of the time playing with her two children, Little Pearl, a third grader, and her sister Baby Pearl, who was only five years old. They were the cutest little girls.

Then, the mothers changed their subject to aptitude testing and started giving Mrs Pearl advice. Some suggested she take her children to creative thinking class, while others thought that English should be the priority. "An All-English pre-school would be your best bet. You can't let 'em lose at the start of the race."

"Why don't we all have some more tea," Mrs Pearl said with a smile. "And some watermelon seeds."

Little Pearl, sitting beside her mother, picked up some paper and made two boxes. "For the shells," she said.

The sound of firecrackers heralded the arrival of a fresh-cooked lunch. The meal was served. Little Pearl stood up to set the table, without her mother asking her to do so. After the appetizers arrived, our children got busy helping themselves to the dishes, while Little Pearl lowered her voice, asked her baby sister which dish she wanted, and filled her bowl before she filled her own. When the fish was served, she also turned to help the little boy next to her, removing the bones for him and making sure he didn't just gobble it down. Finally, when a big bowl of wholesome chicken broth came steaming to the table, she asked for two soup bowls, poured the soup in, and told them to wait until it cooled.

It was all so effortless; she had clearly gotten in the habit at home. Her mother told us it was a family tradition: "It is the elder sister's obligation to take care of her little sister." Moreover, when they ate at home, everyone was supposed to wait until the one in the kitchen (Mrs Pearl) was seated before digging in. Another responsibility.

"That's the way I was taught, by my own mother, when I was little." Mrs Pearl took it as a matter of course, while the rest of us looked at her in astonishment. We were reflecting on our own daughters, who were too busy with schoolwork to think of anyone else.

"What about her little sister?" asked someone. "She can't just sit there and let her elder sister serve her forever, can she?"

“She should learn to show respect to her elder sister,” answered Mrs Pearl. “The little ones, who are lucky to have brothers and sisters to take care of them, should always remember to respect them when they grow up.”

Talk about education starting at home! I still don’t know why it sounded so surprising and inspirational to me that day, because I knew at the time it was just traditional morals.

If you give your children a chance to learn to be responsible for taking care of the people around them, and to respect those who take care of them, they will grow up with the ability to be caring. I don’t think this is something an extracurricular class can teach a child.

7 ways to teach empathy

1. Don’t rush to judgment. Listen to your children patiently, because listening is always the first step to empathy.

2. Empathy is more about knowing yourself than observing others.

3. The more we understand our children’s feelings, the more they can learn to accept others’.

4. Role play is a great way for your children to learn how to walk in other people’s shoes.

5. Broaden your children’s horizons and minds by letting them volunteer for community service or go to nature camp.

6. When your children fight, let them calm themselves down, listen to the other person, and try to find a way to resolve the conflict themselves.

7. Believe that your children can usually find their own solutions.

Fire the cell phone babysitter

A few days ago, I had a reunion with some friends, who all brought their children with them. While the adults were busy talking, the children, who were mostly strangers to each other, were bored. Though the restaurant had basic play facilities, they weren’t really suitable for pre-schoolers.

This was the time for the mothers to show their child-rearing chops. Mother A hadn’t brought anything, so her two daughters sat there looking dazed, watching us talk, picking their noses, and giving each other a blank look from time to time.

Mother B had two boys, who sat there for less than five minutes before they got into a fight. The mother was pretty down-to-earth. She scolded them both, and then pulled out her ultimate weapon: two smartphones. She thrust them into their hands, one for each, which shut them up immediately. For the rest of day, they played with their phones while we chatted.

Mother C brought a huge bag. As we caught up, she pulled out some storybooks, and gave one to each of her children, leaving them mesmerized in golden fantasy realms. When they got tired of books, she pulled out some crayons and unfolded some paper napkins, which successfully kept the little artists busy. After they finished, there were brand-new *objets d’art*, masterpieces to bring home.

More amazingly, she even had some board games in her bag. When she took the games out, Mother A’s daughters, who were still sitting there with their mouths hanging open, suddenly stood up and gathered around. Mother C’s children must have played these board

games a lot, as they did a great job of explaining the rules and helping the girls play. The games went smoothly, and under the leadership of Mother C's children, everyone had a lot of fun.

Except the two boys, who were still too engrossed in their smartphones to notice the sweet laughter of the other children.

Mother C's bag worked like magic. I bet when she was getting ready to go out, she must have spent some time thinking about how long she would be away from home, and what the children might need while the adults were eating and talking. She must have asked her children which books and games they wanted to bring with them.

This goes to show that even when you take your kids, you can still enjoy a pleasant day out, as long as you are well-prepared. However, even if you're not, don't be too afraid of boredom: a bored little kid might notice something interesting or think of something fun to do while staring into space.

The worst scenario would be to resort to the cell phone babysitter – or the computer babysitter, or the tablet babysitter. If you let them play with such devices at the restaurant today, they will ask for their devices tomorrow, while you're driving them around or even when they're playing at home.

Conclusion

With a cell phone babysitter in the restaurant, their taste buds will miss a chance for a workout. With a cell phone babysitter in the car, they won't appreciate the passing landscape. With a cell phone babysitter at home, your relationships with your kids can hardly be close and intimate.

We used to think that the television was the greatest threat to close family relationships. Today it's a torrent of cell phones and gadgets.

So next time you're thinking about giving your child your cell phone, ask yourself: are you really ready for the consequences?