

CHAPTER 1 - My story

While we try to teach our children all about life, our children teach us what life is all about.

- Angela Schwindt

If you've picked up this book, chances are you want to become a better parent. Maybe you're facing challenges in your daily life and searching for solutions. You might feel overwhelmed by too many responsibilities, comparing yourself and your children to others, or simply not enjoying the journey. Trust me, I've been there at various points in my parenting adventure.

Let's face it—parenting is the hardest job in the world! There's no pay, only exorbitant costs. And there's no complete manual on how to raise our beautiful, unique children. This book isn't a manual either. It's a collection of information and strategies meant to benefit you, your family, and your children. It's packed with insights from 30 years in education and research, and two decades of personal parenting experience.

But here's the thing—everyone's journey is different. That's why no one-size-fits-all manual for parenting exists. What I want you to know is that just by picking up this book, you're already a great parent. As you read through "Sink or Swim," be gentle with yourself. You're doing the best you can right now, and that's enough. Remember, there's no such thing as a perfect parent.

Right now, you just want things to be better. You want to be calmer, more connected with your children, and confident that you're doing your best for these amazing beings you brought into the world.

Let's Get Personal

I decided to start this book by sharing my story. I've been a teacher for over 30 years, working with many children in various capacities. I've faced personal tragedies, struggles, and triumphs. I want you to know me, flaws and all. No one is perfect, and my hope is that my stories of struggle and success will help you.

I've felt called to write this book for many years. The idea first came to me in 2008, but it's taken me a long time to gain the confidence to share my personal challenges and put my knowledge and experience out there. Now, it's time. The world is ready for change, and I believe one of the most effective ways to make a difference is by focusing on raising our amazing, talented children and supporting their parents.

When we become parents, everyone is excited for us. Bringing new life into the world is an incredible experience filled with joy. I know not everyone feels this way due to their life circumstances, but let's assume for the sake of argument that most parents feel good when they find out they're having a baby. They spend a lot of time preparing—setting up the

nursery, buying baby gear, reading about childbirth, and choosing their preferred birthing method.

But here's the thing: much like a couple planning a wedding focuses on the big day rather than the marriage, parents often focus more on childbirth and the baby's arrival than on the life they'll have with their child. What kind of parents do they want to be? It's important to discuss expectations regarding values, communication, physical and mental health, technology, education, and more. No one tells you that once your baby is born, your heart is now walking around outside your body. It can stir up a lot of emotions about your life and your own upbringing.

Losing Myself

I used to overthink every decision I made. Every single one. My negative experiences and emotions from the past haunted me. I almost drove myself crazy. Every choice about my kids felt monumental, from what they ate to which daycare I picked. How much sleep were they getting? Which toys should I buy or avoid? I tried to control everything.

Looking back, I realize this stemmed from feeling disconnected from myself. Becoming an orphan at 25, losing control over my life situations, left me feeling abandoned and scared. I was terrified of not having enough support or financial security for my kids, so I worked harder every day. I wanted the best for them. But what I didn't grasp then was that I needed to want the best for myself first before I could truly give my best to them.

It took me a while to realize this. I was drowning in daily responsibilities, especially as a single parent for 15 years. Like many of you, I didn't have time to take care of myself. You might feel the same, especially with young children. You may think it's selfish to focus on yourself because you want to devote your whole being to your children. I get it—I did the same!

I neglected myself. As a result, I couldn't give my best to my children. I did the best I could with what I knew and felt at the time. If I could do it over, I'd cherish myself and take care of my needs. I'd take dance classes, spend more time with friends, and pursue my hobbies. But I can't change the past, so I choose to forgive and not judge myself.

Now, I take care of myself and feel good. I find joy in my life every day, and I want you to feel the same. You can't do that if you have unresolved emotions or if you're lost in your role as a parent.

The Only Constant is Change

Parenting is constantly evolving. A family is a living system, shifting as children grow from toddlers to teenagers and eventually into adulthood. Over time, our daily involvement lessens. We transition to roles of guidance, moral support, and shared experiences. If your children are young, it might feel like this day will never come. But trust me, it happens faster than you think.

Early on, I was so wrapped up in motherhood that when my children were ready to be more independent, I struggled with the change. I tried to control and "mother" them even when they didn't want or need it. When my daughter chose to live with her father, I felt a profound sense of loss and grief. I didn't know who I was without that role. I didn't know what I enjoyed or even what I wanted to eat.

This may sound extreme, but I'm sharing my difficult moments with you. I want to be vulnerable because we all have dark days. I want your children to see the best parts of you. To give them our best, we need to practice self-care and self-compassion.

When my kids were young, I didn't realize how deprived I felt. I thought it was normal to lack time, companionship, and support. I believed I had to do everything myself and felt guilty when I took time for myself. I didn't understand that by taking better care of myself, I could give more to my children.

As parents, we worry about countless things. Did I eat well during pregnancy? Should I breastfeed or use formula? Is my child getting enough rest? Am I spending enough time with them? Am I working too much? Am I helping my partner enough? What should I be teaching my children?

If you're asking yourself these questions, you're already a good parent. Remember that. However, these questions can also make us feel inadequate or unworthy of parenting our precious children.

First Steps

I tended to 25+ children each day, but I never thought I'd have kids of my own. When I had my first child at 30, after over a decade working with children, I thought I knew what I was doing. I read all the books and felt confident and excited. But when my son was born, I realized I didn't know jack shit. I wasn't prepared for the old wounds that would resurface or the guilt that hit me the moment he was born.

Who was I to deserve this perfect little angel and be responsible for his every need? I didn't even know how to take care of my own emotional needs. How was I going to take care of his? I felt immense pressure to be the perfect mom. Without my parents' support, I had no one to turn to when things got tough. I muddled through and did my best to nurture him. Looking back, I wouldn't trade that special time with him for anything. We were often alone as his father worked away for weeks at a time, and I constantly felt guilty, like I wasn't doing enough.

These feelings returned when my marriage ended. My kids were one and a half and three years old. I'm not perfect and have made my share of mistakes. I felt guilty and like a failure. Divorce was unheard of in my family. You were supposed to put up and shut up, no matter how you felt. Sound familiar? This attitude was ingrained in me.

But my life experience was different. I had been seeing a counselor after my parents' deaths, and my husband and I were seeing a marriage counselor to try to save our

marriage. The sessions weren't going well. Communication was our biggest issue. My husband couldn't understand what I was saying. The counselor gave us an exercise: I would express my needs, and my husband would repeat back what I said. He couldn't do it.

What I needed was to feel valued. My love language was quality time with him and the kids. I felt alone and needed support. I didn't know then that I could provide that for myself. The counselor asked him to mark on a calendar when he'd be home and when he could spend time with us or give me a break. He chose just four days out of 60. I was stunned and heartbroken. This was how much he valued us?

This was a turning point for me. I realized this wasn't the life I wanted for myself or my children. I shared this with my personal counselor.

"You watched your mother live a lie, and your father live a lie," she said. "Are you going to do the same?"

"Hell no!" I replied.

I had seen what living a lie did to my parents. They both died of cancer at young ages. I decided I was worthy of love. I could give my children enough love for both of us and also give that love to myself. I'd rather be alone than live with someone who didn't value us.

Please know that the kids' father loves them deeply. He provided for them financially, but he couldn't offer the emotional support we needed. After we separated, he saw them a few times a year. He gave his 100%, but his 100% wasn't enough for me. I released my anger toward him when I realized he was doing his best. It just wasn't enough for what I envisioned for our family. For me, my children's wellbeing came before anything else. This is how I lived my life.

Finding the Reset Button

We'll get into how my "all-in" parenting style wasn't the best approach later. I became so immersed in raising my children that I lost sight of myself. I was completely absorbed in motherhood and am still finding my way back to who I am.

Did I feel guilty about leaving my marriage? Absolutely. But I knew it was the best path for me and my children. My needs weren't being met, and we weren't functioning as a family. It was all on me. It was easier to be alone with it all on me than to expect support from someone and feel resentful when it didn't come. I realize now that I was coming from a place of hurt and abandonment, related to my past experiences.

We all feel guilty about not doing the right thing or reacting in ways that might hurt our children. We all screw up. None of us is perfect. What matters is taking the next logical step that feels right for us. Leaving the marriage turned out to be a good move for me and my children. I bought a small house in my hometown in Cape Breton, surrounded by friends with children the same age and neighbors who knew my deceased parents. It was a

safe, supportive community with social connections and opportunities for employment and business.

Sitting in those feelings of guilt isn't good for you or your family. We must let go of past guilt. Each day is a new day, a chance to begin again. Believe it, because it's true! It's also important to teach this message to your children. If you have a negative reaction to your child's behavior, do you replay it in your mind the next day? Are you dreading a scenario where they'll act the same way again?

If you are, stop it! Bite your tongue. You get what you focus on, whether you want it or not. If you're constantly talking about the problem, you won't be able to see the solutions. If you see your child as something to be fixed instead of the amazing, unique human they are, you won't connect with them deeply.

Every day is a new day, a chance to start fresh, to create a new story. Focus on what's going well in your life and your child's. Each day, give them a clean slate to be their best. Give yourself a clean slate too. To help your child be their best, you need to see their strengths, and they need to see yours. Focus on your strengths and your child's strengths. We all have them!

Moving Beyond Shame

Difficult emotions are sticky. They're wired into our subconscious, waiting to resurface. In the right circumstances and in small doses, they can be helpful—they have survival value. Like guilt, shame may be buried deep within us from childhood, work behavior, past relationships, family connections, and so on. Guilt and shame are closely connected emotions.

Shame often arises when you become a parent. Brené Brown, a renowned researcher and author who has extensively studied these negative emotions, defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.”

Brown's work emphasizes the significant impact shame can have on our lives and relationships. She highlights the importance of vulnerability and empathy in overcoming this difficult emotion. By sharing our feelings of shame with trusted individuals, we can begin to break free from the cycle of shame and move toward a more authentic and connected life.

We all have regrets, but shame serves no purpose. It's a process, but there's a way to acknowledge this emotion, forgive yourself, and move forward. One day, you'll wake up free of that shame.

Starting Fresh

My healing began when I focused on my children and the work I loved, particularly when I started a licensed childcare program at my children's elementary school. I was substitute teaching and had no one to look after my children after school. Learning how to start a business—including navigating all the licensing regulations, and finding qualified staff and equipment—was a big challenge. The program began with 20 children, including my own two, and it was amazing.

It was incredible to walk in each day and see 30 children in one room, all actively engaged in activities they enjoyed. We had an art area, construction area, science area, library, snack area, music area, and a dramatic play area. The environment was so different from the classroom I was used to. Teachers from the school would visit and be blown away by the quiet hum of engagement and learning. The children got along well and were intrinsically motivated to explore and learn.

I remember a group of six-year-olds wanting to do research projects about animals. Many of them couldn't even read, but that didn't matter to them. We provided books, paper, and special report covers for their research. They were thrilled and worked hard for hours. The teachers couldn't believe it!

The philosophy of licensed childcare in Nova Scotia is to provide children with a variety of materials and experiences, then carefully observe what they are interested in, and add materials and experiences to enhance their interests and thereby their learning.

A group of older students started making crafts and wanted to open a store to sell them. This turned into a fun project for the whole center. All the children wanted to open stores! We set up a "mall" in our playroom and created "money" for everyone to spend. It was so much fun, and so much learning occurred that week. I loved providing quality care for families in the area. The program is still running, under the care of my amazing director, now serving over 70 families.

I also started a second business, Kindermusik, that made my heart full. I was able to spend more time with my own children while enjoying working with other parents and children. Singing and dancing with parents and babies couldn't have been more healing. I left each class with my face hurting from smiling so much! The joy in the room was contagious. My daughter would join me when she was seven or eight years old, and the babies loved her. We called her the "baby whisperer."

Another aspect of this business that I was passionate about was teaching parents about early child brain development. The activities we performed weren't just for fun; they were based on research and the science of early child brain development. Today, I still love Kindermusik for their groundbreaking curriculum.

Spiral of Healing

Think of this process as a spiral of healing. You feel low for a while, then you move out of it and feel good. Then something happens, and you find yourself back in a low place again, only to rise out of it once more. Healing is not a linear process. It's like the old saying: two steps forward, one step back.

Guilt and shame will always be part of our human existence. It's up to us to notice these feelings and work through them so they don't define us. We don't want to pass these feelings on to our children. None of us want our children to feel guilt and shame, but these emotions are part of life. Your children will feel these emotions at some points in their lives. It's up to us to show them how to work through these difficult emotions.

We are all doing the best we can with what we know at the time. This is all I ask of you. Be aware when these feelings arise. Allow them to surface. Love yourself through them. Your children will always benefit when you love yourself. You don't have to hold on to these feelings. You can release them and move forward.

Grief is also part of life. It's a unique emotion that comes from a sense of loss—losing someone or something important to you. Young children cry easily; it's a natural way to express sadness, let it go, and come out the other side. We can learn from them.

Have you experienced grief? Large or small, it changes who you are. Feelings of grief don't only come from the loss of a loved one. We can feel grief at the loss of a friendship, a pet, or when moving to a new city and feeling alone. We can feel grief when our children reach new stages in their lives, like starting kindergarten or moving away to college. It's our feelings about the way things used to be. Know that the only constant in life is change. It's up to us to acknowledge and be aware of our emotions to work through them in a healthy way.

Doing My Best

Grief has been a running theme in my life. I felt it powerfully and early on. When I was 21, my mother was diagnosed with cancer at 47 and given three months to live. She had a miracle with her treatment and lived a good quality of life for two and a half years. The grief was with me every day because I knew what was to come. Every weekend, I made a long drive to spend time with her and help my father take care of her. The beautiful moments I spent with her I will cherish forever. Those moments helped me process my grief.

Then, 18 months after my mother passed away, my father was diagnosed with terminal cancer. My life flipped upside down again. I had barely had enough time to deal with my mother's death, and here I was reliving the same situation with my father. I was devastated and scared to death. I knew this meant I would be totally alone in the world. My father had a difficult illness and lived for six months. I left my teaching job and moved back to my hometown to look after him and deal with our family home and his estate.

Grief, fear, and loneliness washed over me daily. I did my best to have a chipper attitude when caring for my father, but when I was alone, the cycle of grief kept spinning. I wish I could tell you that I healed after this or that I awakened spiritually somehow or realized this was my path in life. But sadly, no. I just did the best I could at the time.

In my twenties and childless, I chose to self-medicate with alcohol and marijuana. For about two years, I played out these behaviors. I now lovingly call this point in my life “whatever mode.” I was numb, disconnected. Deep down, I knew this wasn’t who I was or how I wanted to live my life, but it was all I could do at the time.

Our children feel grief as well. They may miss old friends or an old teacher who truly impacted them. The loss of a pet is usually difficult for children to understand. Everyone experiences grief differently, largely depending on their emotional intelligence and temperament. You are now aware of these things within yourself and your children. You are well-equipped to navigate these strong feelings that may arise.

You may find it difficult to relate to those who haven’t experienced grief. People surround you and offer condolences. It all seems surreal. Then, weeks later, everyone goes back to their regular lives, and you are left standing there forever changed, especially when you lose a very close loved one.

Grief is powerful. Let it wash through you. It is the love you felt for that person or relationship that you have lost. It’s natural to feel this. None of us will escape this feeling in our lifetime. Like guilt and shame, you need to be aware of it. Be gentle with yourself and let it flow through you and out of you. If you are struggling to keep up with your day-to-day responsibilities, you may want to get professional help, as I did with a variety of counselors. We are not meant to deal with these powerful feelings alone.

Community of Friends

After months of yard sales, I was lucky to be surrounded by a community of friends from Whitney Pier when I moved out of my parents’ home. They supported me in so many ways! We spent time laughing, barbecuing, listening to music, and having fun. I knew my life wasn’t going to be a continuous party, but at that time, it was exactly what I needed. This was long before I became a mother.

When moving day came, I swear half the community showed up! I made sure I had drinks and food for everyone. The boys packed the moving truck so full there wasn’t room to put a toothpick inside it by the end. Everything was done by 2 PM! I am so grateful for these friends and their support. Sometimes your family is the family you choose. We all need support; we are not meant to be alone.

The Stages of Grief

The stages of grief were first proposed by psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. In this model, individuals pass through the following experiences: denial, anger, bargaining, depression,

and acceptance. It's important to note that not everyone goes through all stages, and not everyone goes through them in a linear or predictable order. Also, grief can be triggered by various types of loss, not just death.

I am grateful to have made the connection between my sense of worthiness and my feelings of guilt, shame, and grief. I now see these feelings for what they are and understand how they affected the decisions I made later in life. Negative emotions like guilt, shame, and even worry are part of life. However, unless you have techniques to deal with them, they can suck the joy out of parenting and prevent you from being the best parent you can be.

This is what I want for you: I want you to unpack your negative feelings and work through them. Notice how they affect your behavior and decisions, especially in relation to your children. The best gift we can give our children is to heal ourselves. It is possible, I promise you. It is a process. You have to be gentle with yourself, just as gentle as you are with your precious newborn baby.

Conclusion

Throughout this book, I'll share more personal stories on what I believe are the most important parenting topics. We'll cover parenting styles, children's personalities, and brain development. We'll dive into emotional intelligence, social skills, and nutrition. There's a whole chapter on technology and its impact on families—what worked for me, and where I screwed up. I wasn't a perfect parent. My hope is that by sharing my stories, you'll feel better about your parenting journey and enjoy it more.

Much love,

Natalie

5 Key Points

1. **Parenting is tough, but you're already doing great:** Remember that parenting is challenging, and seeking resources like this book shows your dedication. There's no perfect manual, but by seeking help, you're already excelling as a parent.
2. **My personal experiences shaped my parenting:** I've had my share of struggles and triumphs, just like you. My journey as a teacher and single parent deeply influences my perspective on parenting.
3. **Self-care is essential for effective parenting:** Take care of yourself. Prioritizing your well-being isn't selfish—it's necessary for providing the best care for your children. My own journey of self-discovery and healing underscores this truth.
4. **Navigating tough emotions is part of the journey:** Acknowledge and work through emotions like guilt, shame, and grief. They're natural, but managing them is crucial for healthy parenting. I've learned this through my own experience.

5. **Healing is possible, and it starts with self-compassion:** Unpack your negative feelings and work through them. Self-compassion and forgiveness are key. Remember, your journey of healing will benefit both you and your children.

Did you like this first chapter?

I'd really like to know what you think. Can you please send any feedback you would like to offer to natalie@nataliemccabe.com? I would be most appreciative!

And if you would like some customized strategies for improving your parenting game, [click here to book a call with me](#) and let's see if you're a candidate for my one-on-one coaching program.

*Thanks,
Natalie*

