

Amy Morin

**13 Things Mentally Strong
Parents Don't Do: Raising Self-
Assured Children and Training
Their Brains for a Life of
Happiness, Meaning, and
Success**

Made by Blinkist



These key insights in blinks were written by a team of experts at Blinkist. We screen the world of nonfiction to choose the very best books. Then, we read them deeply and transform them into this concise format that brings you the most inspiring ideas from the text.

Maybe these blinks will inspire you to dig deeper, or maybe they're enough to start you thinking and then on to something new. However you read blinks, we hope they help you become an even brighter you.

What's in it for me? Fortify your own mental strength to raise kids who'll be ready to take on all of life's challenges.

Frederick Douglass once said, “It’s easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” So while they’re under your roof, how can you ensure that you’re teaching your kids the right skills and values? What do your children need most in order to become self-reliant, responsible, happy adults?

All parents want their children to have the best possible future. But you might be surprised to learn that positive emotional and behavioral development is just as integral to success as, say, academic achievement. Though there’s no shortage of “how-to” parenting books, Amy Morin argues that it’s just as important to know what unhealthy habits *not* to teach children. As a foster mother and family therapy expert, she’s discovered through experience that parents need to work on their own behaviors in order to raise mentally strong children.

These blinks draw deeply on both research and Morin’s own clients to show how common parenting practices can actually be detrimental to your child’s growth – and what you should do instead.

In these blinks, you’ll learn

- why guilt can lead to poor parenting choices;
- how a *praise-criticism-praise* sandwich can motivate your child to do his best; and
- how to write a family mission statement that encompasses your values.

Mentally strong parents promote responsibility and perseverance over a victim mentality.

Everywhere you look, there's advice about helping your child stay physically fit. But what about other important kinds of fitness, like mental or emotional well-being? There's little in life that benefits a person as much as learning to be *mentally strong*. A mentally strong child is more likely to turn setbacks into opportunities and face hardship without feeling sorry for himself.

So what's the best way to raise a mentally strong child? By practicing good, healthy habits yourself – which makes you capable of passing them on to your child.

For example, it's natural to want to defend your child when they've been wronged. The age of social media has led many parents to encourage feelings of victimhood in response to every slight. Mentally strong parents refuse to do this. You want your child to be empowered to handle life's challenges rather than always seeing himself as the victim of circumstance.

Take the example of Cody, a 14-year-old who was prescribed ADHD medication. His teachers reported that he was calmer and more attentive as a result, but his grades didn't improve. His parents' response? To demand that he be assigned less work than his peers.

Cody's workload wasn't the problem, however. He had developed what researchers call *learned helplessness* – he believed that his ADHD made him fundamentally incapable, and his parents had reinforced this idea. Once they started treating him like he was equipped to handle his responsibilities, he began to put in effort, and his grades soon turned around.

Mentally strong parents don't let their children avoid responsibility, either. Instead of letting your child blame others for his problems, hold him accountable and let him face the consequences of his actions. If you don't, how is he supposed to learn to cope with the inevitable injustices he'll face in life?

You can also help your child at home. Assign him household responsibilities, for one – research shows that kids who have to do chores from an early age become more successful, empathetic, and self-reliant adults. Let him handle problems by himself, too. According to sociologist Steven Horwitz, children need to practice resolving conflict on their own during unstructured playtime. If they always rely on adults to intervene, they're more likely to blame others.

Finally, teach your child to choose *true* thoughts over *BLUE* ones. BLUE thoughts are ones in which you Blame everyone else, Look for the bad news, fall prey to Unhappy guessing (that is, assuming the worst), and are Exaggeratedly negative. True thoughts, on the other hand, involve accepting responsibility, pointing out the good, taking action, and looking for exceptions.

Don't parent with a strategy of avoidance. Instead, teach your kids healthy ways to deal with guilt and fear.

If you've ever worried that you're not a good enough parent, you're not alone! A whopping 94 percent of mothers surveyed by BabyCenter report feelings of "mommy guilt." But for both mothers and fathers, too much anxiety about being a "bad" parent can lead to a big mistake: making parenting decisions with guilt as your guide.

Guilt can encourage parents to give in to their child's demands, for example, which allows them to avoid feeling guilty in the moment. Take Joe's case: his son Micah was a 100 pounds overweight when his pediatrician threatened to call Child Protective Services. While Joe felt guilty about enabling Micah's unhealthy eating habits, he had a harder time coping with the more immediate guilt he felt when Micah begged and cried after being denied junk food.

So, how should parents manage their guilt? Well, that depends on whether or not it's warranted. If it is, that's probably a sign that you should change your behavior. Joe learned to tolerate the short-term guilt that came with setting limits on Micah's diet, knowing that the long-term remorse he'd feel if he let Micah's health deteriorate would be much worse.

But if guilt isn't warranted, don't catastrophize! Just because you can't afford to buy your child the latest cool pair of sneakers doesn't mean he'll become a social misfit. And remember to forgive yourself. You're a role model for your child – you don't want him to learn self-condemnation from you.

Unfortunately, many parents try to combat guilt and worry by parenting out of fear. Take April, one of the author's clients, whose brother had drowned as a child. When she had kids of her own, she kept them away from water at all costs – which meant they never learned how to swim. One day, at a friend's house, April's 7-year-old wandered away and ended up in the neighbor's pool. The neighbor rescued him, but April was traumatized all over again. Eventually she realized that to *truly* ensure her children's safety, she needed to teach them how to swim.

As your child gets older and enters her teens, encourage her to step outside of her comfort zone. Don't coddle her; let her learn self-reliance. Research has found that overprotective parenting has resulted in an increase in “boomerang kids” – twentysomethings who move back in with their parents because they aren't equipped for the transition to adulthood.

The lesson here is that your energy is better spent teaching your kids the skills they need to flourish, rather than trying to protect them from the outside world.

Set strong boundaries so your child doesn't think the world revolves around her or that she holds power over you.

Many parents put their child at the center of their universe. But in doing so, are you inadvertently giving her the idea that she's the center of the *entire* universe?

You want your child to believe in herself, but being convinced she's exceptional can lead to a sense of entitlement. The dangers of this? A diminished capacity for empathy, perpetual dissatisfaction, and a belief that she shouldn't have to try hard to get what she wants.

There are many reasons why a child might develop a superiority complex. Some parents simply overdo it, showering their children with affection to overcompensate for a lack of it in their own childhoods. Others feel extra attention can be a bulwark against the threats of bullying, eating disorders, or social media.

Take Carol and Tom. They doted on their daughter Brittany and gave her everything she wanted. They let Brittany decide where they went and what they did. But when Carol and Tom discovered Brittany was considered a "mean girl" at school, they realized they'd made a mistake. They'd intended to teach their daughter the importance of being nice to others by being nice to her; instead, she'd ended up self-centered and lacking in empathy.

If you're concerned about your child's ego, it's time to introduce humility. Rather than praising her *results* by saying "You're the fastest runner ever!" praise her *effort* with something like "Your training really paid off!" You can

introduce gratitude through a daily ritual, too; maybe have everyone say what they're grateful for at the dinner table.

Feelings of awe can also offer a new sense of perspective. Researchers from the University of California, Berkeley discovered that giving your child opportunities to experience awe – like witnessing a natural wonder or visiting a dinosaur exhibit – reminds her that she's in the presence of something greater than herself.

Furthermore, to truly empower your child, it's important to establish a clear hierarchy within your household. This means setting terms without wavering, following through with consequences, offering rewards instead of bribes, and presenting a united front with your partner.

This is necessary because too much power isn't good for a child's development; the whole reason she pushes boundaries is to be assured that you have things under control! When you demonstrate mental fortitude, your child will learn how to trust herself and make good decisions.

Don't expect perfection or intervene every time your child makes a mistake.

Do you believe in the old adage, “A diamond is a chunk of coal that did well under pressure?” Many parents who expect perfection view their children as extensions of themselves. They hope that, by pushing their children to succeed where they failed, they can heal their own wounds.

But doing this can have a detrimental effect on your child's mental health. He can develop *socially prescribed perfectionism*, the belief that others won't love him if he makes a mistake. To an extreme, this can have deadly consequences: a 2013 study published in the *Archives of Suicide Research* revealed that 70 percent of boys aged 12-25 who took their own lives had placed an inordinate amount of pressure on themselves.

Regardless of your child's gender, piling on pressure clearly isn't healthy. What can you do instead? To prevent slip-ups from destroying his sense of self-worth, encourage your child to strive for excellence, not perfection. Don't criticize too much; instead, offer a *praise-criticism-praise sandwich*. Something like, “Good job cleaning your room! I noticed that you didn't fold your t-shirts before putting them away, but you made the bed very well.”

Parents who push too hard for perfection end up micromanaging and overstepping their boundaries. As a result, these so-called helicopter parents risk their kids failing to learn how to bounce back from mistakes.

The long-term consequences of that can be much worse than the mistakes themselves. An inability to acknowledge and deal with slip-ups can lead to difficulty transitioning into adulthood, discomfort making decisions without input, and problems taking care of emotional and physical needs. Children

with helicopter parents are more likely to develop depression, take psychiatric medication or recreational drugs, and have physical health issues.

Instead, help your child learn and grow from his mistakes by teaching him that what matters is how we overcome problems. Share stories of recovering from your own failures to show him that we're all works in progress. For example, "I thought the world would come crashing down around me when I didn't win the art contest. But in the end, I kept painting and got better."

Mentally strong parents don't shelter their child from pain.

When Julie and Michael – two of the author's family therapy clients – got a divorce, they worried it would be too difficult for their children to handle. So for years, they made sure that not much changed; Michael came over for dinner every Sunday and for all the holidays.

But when Julie eventually wanted to share her family life with a new partner, she realized she'd been prolonging the inevitable. Although she'd wanted a clean break with Michael, she had kept things in limbo for the sake of her children.

It's totally natural to want to protect your children from discomfort, especially if they've already endured some trauma or hardship in their lives. But not letting them experience pain sends the message that they're fragile. When they learn how to cope with the stresses of life – like parents separating – they build self-esteem and problem-solving skills. They realize that they are capable, competent, and resilient.

Meanwhile, kids who never learn how to manage pain may become adults who spend their whole lives trying to avoid it through unhealthy coping mechanisms.

While Julie thought she was doing the right thing by keeping the family unit more or less intact, in reality she needed to set boundaries with her ex-husband and stop shielding her kids from the pain of their separation.

So she stopped inviting her ex to Sunday dinner and didn't have him over for the holidays. Her kids were understandably pained, but they learned from it.

When you acknowledge and deal with pain, rather than minimize or deny it, it heightens your senses and makes you better able to recognize pleasure by contrast. You also become more empathetic and understanding of the world around you, making it easier to relate to people and forge social bonds. Finally, pain captures your attention and makes you very aware of what's happening in the present moment, affording you valuable insight into mindfulness.

*“You have to let your child
experience some pain in life if you
want him to become a truly happy
person.”*

Don't prevent your children from experiencing the whole spectrum of human emotions.

Many parents are uncomfortable with overt displays of negative feelings. They might change the subject or try to cheer their children up, rather than let them experience sadness or hurt.

But when they're learning to manage difficult emotions, children need validation and support – not distraction. If they can't tolerate feeling sad, they'll be less willing to take risks later on because of the fear of failure or rejection. So let your child build his mental and emotional muscles by fully experiencing a wide range of emotions. After all, he won't be able to avoid boredom, guilt, disappointment, or frustration his entire life.

You *can* coach him on how to deal with his emotions early on. Being able to resolve challenges without aggression, manipulation, or falling prey to unhealthy habits pays off in adulthood. According to researchers at Penn State, children who exhibit more prosocial skills – like getting along with others and sharing – at age 5 are more likely to finish college and have a full-time job at age 25. Meanwhile, kindergartners who struggle with these skills are less likely to finish school and are more at risk for substance abuse and legal issues.

So how can you introduce the concept of emotional intelligence to your family? Try talking about your own feelings, and ask your child to elaborate on his. To build an emotional vocabulary, encourage him to describe what he's feeling, rather than merely the specific action that made him upset. For example, "He was a total jerk!" might become "I'm embarrassed." Avoid using clichés like "I had butterflies in my stomach." Instead, use specific *feeling*

words, such as “nervous,” to help your child identify his emotions and take responsibility for them.

While it’s OK to feel upset, you can also teach your child *mood boosters* so that he doesn’t end up feeling stuck in his emotions. This will promote self-awareness – an essential aspect of managing emotions. Maybe have him write a list of things that make him feel happy, like going for a walk or playing with the dog. Together, you can brainstorm healthy ways for him to take control of his own mood, calm himself down, or cheer himself up.

*“Learning how to manage emotions
and endure unpleasant feelings are
skills that can be taught.”*

Mentally strong parents understand the difference between discipline and punishment.

Raising a child requires a lot of energy. When you're low on reserves, you may be tempted to fall back on the easiest, quickest measures to get your child to behave – things like yelling, punishment, or shaming.

But what's the cost of harsh punishment? Spanking, for example, has been proven to increase aggression, behavioral problems, and mental health issues. And children who are yelled at or publicly humiliated become sophisticated liars and poor decision-makers.

All these harsh methods have something in common: they focus on your child's mistakes. Healthy discipline, on the other hand, focuses on learning and improving. Establishing it teaches your child not to evade punishment, but to persevere towards a reward.

So where should you begin? With clear examples of positive authority figures. Try writing descriptions of the best bosses you've ever had, focusing on exactly what made them such good leaders – the fact that they had clear expectations, for example. Then apply those qualities to parenting. Clear expectations might translate to consistent rules and logical consequences. A specific, thoughtful reward system can also help.

Another thing mentally strong parents do is avoid quick fixes. Do you ever find yourself taking *problem-related shortcuts* – like giving in when your child whines or screams, or cleaning her messy room when she refuses? Or do you use *emotion-related shortcuts* to temporarily relieve stress – like taking the family to the park to put off dealing with the mess?

Unfortunately, both these tactics teach your child to take shortcuts when confronted with difficult circumstances.

Instead, show your child the importance of persistence. Help her set goals, for example, such as reading a certain number of books over summer vacation. According to Stanford researchers, kids with the self-control to wait for a large reward rather than receiving a small one right away had better outcomes later in life. These included superior SAT scores and a decreased likelihood of obesity or drug use 30 years later.

Of course, healthy discipline policies are harder work than punitive measures. So give yourself time to recharge your batteries by exercising or having coffee with a friend. Self-care will nourish and provide you with the energy you need to keep making the best choices for you and your child.

Mentally strong parents make sure their actions match their values.

As a parent, it's easy to get caught up in the many pressing things happening at any given moment. But the final thing mentally strong parents do is zoom out and consider the big picture: Is their child learning the right life lessons?

Take 15-year-old Kyle, a straight-A student. When he was caught cheating and got kicked out of a special program that allowed him to take college classes, his parents didn't understand what had gone wrong.

But Kyle believed his parents prized academic achievement above all else. They were constantly talking about applying to Ivy League schools and bragging about him to friends and family, which made Kyle think they prioritized reputation over character and grades over honesty. In therapy, his parents admitted that their values had been mixed up; they'd sent the message that failure was to be avoided at all costs. So, rather than admit that he couldn't handle the workload, Kyle opted to cheat.

Kyle's parents learned to step back and consider how they could align their behavior with the values they were hoping to teach. After all, children learn your values more from what you do than what you say.

Take learning to be *caring* – according to a 2014 Harvard University survey, most parents say that's their top priority for their kids. Yet that's not what teens ascertain; 80 percent believe their parents prioritize achievement over kindness.

Evidently, you can't instill values, or put them into practice, until you've clarified *what* they are. So how can you begin to do this?

One way is by creating a family mission statement. Start by gathering the adults of the household to discuss the values you want your children to learn. Then, organize a family meeting to ask questions such as “What makes us a family?” and “What kinds of things are we able to accomplish as a family?”

With everyone’s input, craft a short statement that captures what’s most important to your family. Post the mission statement somewhere prominent.

Finally, teach your values early by modeling and explaining altruistic motives when your child is a preschooler. Say, for example, “I’m making soup for the neighbor because she’s sick, and it’s important to do kind things for people.” This way, he’ll learn that mentally strong people use what they have to try to make the world a better place.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

Parenting is no walk in the park, but if you're prepared to work on your own habits, you'll be a positive role model and influence on your child. Keep an eye on your own motives and values; try not to parent out of fear, send mixed messages about what matters most, or take shortcuts. You can't protect your child from every hardship, but you can act as a guide as your child becomes acquainted with the full spectrum of human emotion.

Actionable advice:

Teach children how to “change the channel.”

Next time your child feels anxious, tell him to think about white bears for 30 seconds. Then tell him to think of anything except white bears for 30 seconds. Most kids will report that the white bears kept appearing in their thoughts. Then, give your child a simple task that requires his full attention, like sorting a deck of cards by suit in 30 seconds. When he's finished, ask if he thought about white bears. The answer will probably be “no.”

This can show him how changing his behavior can help him change his thoughts. Help him think of other healthy ways to “change the channel” in the future – like shooting hoops, or baking cupcakes.

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What to read next: *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do*, by Amy Morin

You've just discovered that in order to be a good coach for your child, you need to first attack your own unhealthy habits. So how can you continue working on yourself? You're in luck! Amy Morin wrote *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do* before she expanded the concept to parenting. Head over to our blinks on her first book to learn useful exercises and techniques to avoid certain behaviors, like worrying about pleasing everyone, and adopt others, like facing your fears.

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