



My Misadventures in Gentle Parenting

No timeouts. No limits. Total chaos.

BY KAYLA HUSZAR
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALLISON SETO



SEPTEMBER 29, 2025

It started the way it always did: “Can we just look?” My four-year-old son and I were in a toy store near our home in Regina. It was the summer of 2019, and I was pregnant, exhausted and overwhelmed, trying to keep a thousand tabs open in my brain: groceries, laundry, walking the dog, scheduling doctor’s appointments. If I’m being honest, I hoped browsing in the store would buy a few moments of peace during yet another hot, chaotic day.

So I said yes, he could look, temporarily indulging in the fiction that we could browse and walk out empty-handed. Moments after stepping inside, I realized I’d made a tactical error. Sure enough, my son was soon dragging me to a specific aisle, where he grabbed a box containing a plastic dinosaur with sound effects and fins and a retractable tail—a must-have for our growing collection of reptilian toys. The price tag? Nearly \$50 for something that would collect dust in the toy bin in a month. “I really, really want this,” he said, eyes wide, voice pleading. I knew if I said no, a fight was inevitable. He asked again, almost desperate. I opened my mouth.

This is where the gentle-parenting approach I’d spent four years practising was supposed to come into play. Gentle parenting is all about empathy and emotional support, and it comes with scripts and steps. So I dutifully followed them, in spite of my fatigue and my suspicion that my son was going to have a meltdown regardless. I narrated his feelings back to him so he felt heard (“I know you really want this toy”). I gave him a hug and suggested an alternative (“Do you want me to take a photo of it for your wish list?”). I used non-judgmental language.

In the end, it didn’t matter. He insisted that this was the toy he needed above all others. He begged. He pleaded. He refused to leave and started to get loud. To defuse the growing tantrum, which was drawing stares from employees and other moms, I caved. I bought the toy. Crisis averted. But I knew another was coming, if not that day or the next, then soon.

I'd always tried to be the perfect model of the enlightened, progressive gentle parent. When I became a mom at 28, I vowed that my son would feel safe and secure expressing his feelings, so he could grow up confident in himself, in his relationships and in the world around him.

In the past decade, this has become the defining philosophy of millennial parents. It's everywhere: mom blogs, parenting groups, playgrounds and especially on social media, where viral posts from an army of momfluencers have made it a movement. The hashtag #gentleparenting has racked up countless views on TikTok and appears in more than one million Instagram posts. One of the most prominent voices is @biglittlefeelings, which promotes gentle-parenting strategies to 3.5 million Instagram followers. I followed these kinds of accounts, soothed by their calming language and success-story testimonials. I performed my role perfectly—until it broke me.

Related: [Living With My Ex](#)

As my son got older, and my husband and I had another child, gentle parenting became harder: the constant negotiation over every conflict, the

mental strain of always trying to say the right thing in the heat of the moment, the endless suppression of frustration. In that toy store, faced with another brewing meltdown and the certainty that I would be the bad guy no matter how I handled the situation, my scripts seemed worthless. I felt powerless and guilty. I thought I was failing.

I know today that my experience was a common one. As a social worker and a therapist focused on parenting, I see exhausted mothers all the time in my practice, overwhelmed by the pressures of gentle parenting. An American study recently found that a third of surveyed parents who identified as “gentle” reported feelings of burnout and uncertainty. And, all too often, parents cope with that exhaustion by giving in. When that happens, gentle parenting becomes what critics call permissive parenting, in which the child’s whims dictate family life and adults tiptoe around their volatile moods.

ADVERTISEMENT

That’s what happened to us. I softened every no and negotiated every boundary until my son learned he could wear me down. He pushed, I bent. I began to worry what it meant for a generation of kids never to hear “no” in a meaningful way, to grow up expecting the world to adjust to their desires at every turn.

That was never what gentle parenting was supposed to be. It began as a response to the strict, often emotionally distant parenting styles many

people my age grew up with—myself included—which discouraged self-expression. It was meant to break the toxic parenting cycles passed down from older generations. But at some point, the method became a mandate—and for me, at least, an impossible standard to meet.





Today, Huszar and her family are seeking equilibrium in parenting styles, blending some of the benefits of gentle parenting with a more traditional, authoritative approach.

I was born in 1987 in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, and raised by a single mother who had to be both nurturing and strict. Growing up, I noticed unspoken rules about what was proper, what was too much and what might get me in trouble. The style of parenting I experienced was what childcare experts now call authoritarian—the because-I-said-so approach, common in so many homes at the time. Kids were expected to follow rules, no questions asked.

In that environment, emotions often felt inconvenient, or even a little embarrassing. I remember once when I was seven years old, alone and singing and dancing to a song I loved: “Daddy’s Money” by the country band Ricochet. I was happy and playful—until my mom suddenly interrupted: “What are you doing?” I froze. In that instant, it felt like maybe I wasn’t supposed to be that version of myself.

ADVERTISEMENT

Related: [The One and Done Family](#)

So I became good at being good. I learned to present the version of me I thought others wanted, especially in public. I believed my behaviour reflected on the adults around me, so I softened or shrank my feelings when they felt too big. By the time I left home, I had internalized the idea that women—including my mom—were constantly scrutinized for their behaviour, appearance and temperament. She probably felt the same way I do now: “Just don’t screw them up.”

It was the only parenting blueprint I had until I went to university to study for a degree in social work. There, I began learning about the long, conflicted history of parenting philosophies. In the first half of the 20th century, the kind of authoritarian parenting I grew up with was the standard—and it was often much more severe than I ever experienced. Some childcare experts warned against spoiling kids with hugs and kisses. Pediatricians suggested tying infants’ hands to their cribs to prevent thumb-sucking.

Then, in 1946, Benjamin Spock published *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* and put a torch to all that. In some ways, today’s gentle parenting is a logical extrapolation of Spock’s ideas. He still believed in the importance of boundaries and rules, but he prescribed emotional warmth and attentiveness to kids’ needs. He encouraged parents to trust their intuition rather than blindly follow expert advice, famously writing, “You know more than you think you do.” The approach was radical—and, like all new parenting philosophies that followed, it was attacked by critics for creating a generation of spoiled brats. Spock was even blamed for fuelling the youth counterculture movement of the 1960s.

In the ’80s, intensive parenting took over. This called for parents (usually mothers) to become deeply involved in every aspect of their kids’ lives. Critics dubbed it “[helicopter parenting](#),” marked by overprotectiveness and sky-high expectations. This segued naturally into attachment parenting, popularized by pediatrician William Sears and his wife, a nurse named

Martha Sears. They raised eight children and published a series of bestselling books promoting bed-sharing, breastfeeding on demand and baby-wearing as ways to foster a parent-child bond. The idea was that emotionally supported children will grow into kind, resilient adults.

ADVERTISEMENT

By the time I had my first son in 2015, I'd read all the books and spent countless hours poring over internet forums, Pinterest boards and parenting blogs. The advice I encountered was a patchwork of all the major parenting philosophies, from Dr. Spock on down. But one emerging philosophy dominated them all: gentle parenting. The term is usually credited to British author Sarah Ockwell-Smith. A mother of four, she began holding parenting workshops in her home in 2007. She's written 13 parenting books, including *The Gentle Parenting Book*, published in 2016. The core of her philosophy was prioritizing empathy: helping children regulate their own emotions by understanding why they feel the way they do.

Gentle parenting wasn't about ripping down boundaries or letting kids run riot or never saying "no." It was about allowing kids to experience their big feelings—even if it meant a tantrum—and helping them work through those feelings rather than stifle them. That, of course, dictates tremendous patience from parents. If your kid screams and cries about going to school, gentle parenting means that you don't give them a timeout, or shove them into their shoes and cart them off. You narrate their feelings back to them

and validate them until they've calmed down, no matter how long it takes. If they refuse to go to bed, you don't get angry. You tell them you know they're having fun, and it's too bad for it to end, but they need to get their rest.

It all made great sense to me. It seemed like everything I wanted for my son. I devoured Facebook videos from influencers, read the blogs and committed to gentle parenting in philosophy and practice. My husband was more hesitant. The idea felt foreign to him. And, frankly, it seemed impractical to spend 20 minutes coaxing a child through every meal or bedtime refusal. But I was so gung-ho that he went along with it.

And, in the beginning, it was easy. When my son was a toddler, I had little conversations with him about his feelings. "You're feeling sad because of X, Y or Z," I would say to him. Sometimes just naming the emotion was enough to calm him. The tears would dry and he would move on. These experiences were validating. He felt his disappointment, worked through it and came out the other side, better equipped to deal with the feeling in the future. This was what it was all about!

ADVERTISEMENT

But as he got older, and the situations we faced grew more complex, the scripts stopped working. One day, when my son was two, I picked him up from daycare after a long and draining day at work. He refused to leave. I crouched down, trying everything I'd learned: stating his feelings, calmly

empathizing, narrating his emotions. None of it worked. He just got more defiant and more upset—and a lot louder. I knew he was tired, but so was I. Mortified as he kicked and screamed, I gave up on the gentle-parenting handbook and decided to take him home whether he liked it or not. I wrestled him into his snowsuit and boots, burning with shame as the other parents and daycare workers looked on. I couldn't shake the feeling that they thought I was a terrible mother. My own son didn't want to go home with me.

As I tried to follow the gentle-parenting guidelines to the letter, my husband became, by default, the disciplinarian. If I spent 20 minutes trying to coax my son to put on his shoes, careful not to sound too demanding, my exasperated husband would eventually step in with “Put your shoes on right *now*.” He became the bad cop to my pushover. The dynamic put us both on edge and the sense of constant failure fed into my own spiral. I wasn’t ready to admit it, of course. I spent evenings online, googling about how to handle every little thing, reading the forums and blogs to correct what went wrong.

In 2019, I gave birth to our second son. Months later, the pandemic hit. My oldest was already not responding to the gentle-parenting scripts, and being stuck indoors all day made everything worse. Like many parents stuck in lockdown, with routines and schedules in limbo, I let more things slide, then more, then more. Eventually, he wouldn’t do anything we asked. It didn’t matter whether I was calm, or if I raised my voice. He wouldn’t listen. And why should he? “No” didn’t mean anything.

In the summer of 2021, the lockdowns lifted. I planned to take the kids out to a public pool for the first time in more than a year. But as we got ready, my oldest became overwhelmed. He was trying to open a combination lock for the pool locker, but he couldn’t figure it out. In his frustration, he threw it straight at me. He missed, but I was shaken. I know he didn’t really understand the consequences of whipping a heavy hunk of

metal at me. But the fact that my own child had tried to hurt me was disturbing.

ADVERTISEMENT

Still, I collected myself and calmly warned him that if he did it again, we wouldn't go to the pool. And then he threw it again anyway. I gave the script a second try, but he was too worked up and I was too drained. So again, I caved. We went to the pool. We'd all been waiting so long in pandemic isolation, and it seemed cruel to deprive the kids of something they'd anticipated for so long.

In retrospect, the pool incident was the moment I knew, deep down, that gentle parenting wasn't working. But I still wasn't able to admit it. I felt like I was failing at something that worked for everyone else, especially those experts, bloggers and posters on parenting forums. It turns out I wasn't alone, though. In 2024, a study published in the peer-reviewed journal *PLOS One* found that while some gentle-parenting adherents in the U.S. were satisfied with the approach, many felt exactly as I did. "The pressures to fulfill exacting parenting standards," wrote the authors, "coupled with the information overload on social media about the right or wrong ways to care for children, has left many parents questioning their moment-to-moment interactions with their family."

The study also noted that there is no science or empirical evidence behind gentle parenting, nor any systematic study to determine if those who follow

the gentle-parenting philosophy actually fare better than anyone else—or whether their kids do. What it did say was that many parents were burning out.

As time went by, my husband stopped going along with the gentle-parenting approach altogether. When the children threw tantrums, or refused to get in the car, he fell back on his instincts: firm boundaries, timeouts, consequences without negotiation. But it was a year after the pool incident that I finally reached my limit. In the summer of 2022, my mother-in-law was visiting us and we decided to take the kids to a nearby park. My eldest wanted to ride his bike, but we said no; we were planning a relaxed family walk. As usual, I tried to reason with him, to no avail. My husband stepped into his now-familiar bad-cop role. When I turned to my mother-in-law, sheepishly trying to explain how difficult it all was, she shrugged. “You’re trying too hard,” she said. “Try less.”

ADVERTISEMENT

In that moment, all the doubts about gentle parenting that I’d had over the past seven years coalesced. Had all my validation and empathy truly helped my kids manage their emotions, or had it taught them that every impulse should be up for negotiation? Had my refusal to impose firmer boundaries deepened our connection, or eroded their ability to handle limits? And had I become a better parent—or simply invisible in my own family?

I realized I was worn out from doing what didn't come naturally. I didn't need to work through every tiny decision and disappointment with my children. Kids are fundamentally irrational creatures, after all. Affirming their feelings is important, but preschoolers aren't exactly known for making evidence-based decisions. I realized I'd given the kids too much control, which created a different sort of instability. There is a large body of research showing that too much autonomy can make kids anxious. They want boundaries, and they want them enforced. One memory sticks out for me: I once told my eldest son "no" repeatedly after he asked for something, only to eventually give in to his nagging. To my complete surprise, he looked at me, almost with disappointment, and said, "But you said no." He wasn't being bratty. He'd been testing whether the limit was real. The most loving thing I could have done was stick to the boundary I'd imposed.

Related: [Mothers Who Regret Having Children](#)

Things changed after the bike-ride fight. My husband and I still incorporated some gentle-parenting techniques, especially over low-stakes issues—a tantrum over ice cream, for example. But when it came to recurring key battles, we got tougher: brushing teeth, staying at the table during meals, understanding which parts of the house can be used as a jungle gym and which can't. We aligned on what mattered most and supported each other in holding the line. The strategy I eventually came to was this: kind but firm. If the kids keep jumping on the furniture after I ask them to stop, for example, there will be a consequence: not because I'm angry, but because I care. We found balance, somewhere between chaos and control.



Kayla Huszar, her husband and their two sons spent years struggling with gentle parenting. Huszar championed it, while her husband was skeptical of its usefulness and its demands on their time.

Two years ago, my family moved to Edmonton, where I now work as an expressive arts therapist. I use creative tools like art, music and poetry to help women explore their emotions. Like me, a good number of my clients are mothers, ranging from their twenties to their forties, and a big part of my work has become correcting misconceptions about gentle parenting. Many of my clients, often unintentionally or unconsciously, have allowed their kids to run the show.

ADVERTISEMENT

Even some of gentle parenting's early champions are backtracking. Clinical psychologist Rebecca Kennedy, dubbed the "millennial parenting whisperer" by *Time* magazine, rose to prominence during the pandemic for her gentle-parenting advice. But in a 2024 interview with *Forbes*, she acknowledged that many parents are facing difficulties in maintaining boundaries after being instructed to empathize with their kids at all costs. She now prefers the word "sturdy" to "gentle."

For me, the greatest insight of gentle parenting is that it treats children not as the automatons of the pre-Dr. Spock era but as full, complicated people. These days, I think of my parenting style as a pendulum. On one side, there's parent-centred parenting, where the adult's needs and authority come first. On the other, there's child-centred parenting, where the child's emotions and preferences take precedence. That's what gentle parenting too often becomes. In between is family-centred parenting, in which no person's needs are elevated, and decisions are made based on what's best for everyone. That means discussion and compromise, and taking everyone's wishes seriously. Sometimes my own kids surprise me with their insights. One of them might make a convincing case about screen time, for example, or changing our plans for the day. But my husband and I still hold veto power—if we need it. That's the tricky part of the pendulum: knowing when to be flexible and when to stand firm.

I hope, when my sons are older, that they'll remember how I changed gears: from intensive gentle parenting to something more improvised and spontaneous. I want them to remember that we had fun, that we rested, that we didn't worry all the time about the right way to do things. Most of all I hope they feel safe and loved, especially in the moments that matter most.

Recently, I asked my mother about my childhood. “How did you know what to do?” I asked. She told me she didn’t read parenting books or listen to experts. She did what was considered normal at the time, pulling from what felt good in her own childhood and trying to change what didn’t. It didn’t always land the way she hoped. But I know her approach always came from love and care. I also know I’ve probably hurt my own kids in little ways that won’t be obvious until they’re grown. That’s the thing with any parenting philosophy—it might seem like a fit for the moment, but its real test won’t come until years down the road. So I’ve stopped trying to parent from a script and, instead, I’m learning to trust myself. In the words of Dr. Spock: “You know more than you think you do.”

ADVERTISEMENT
