



Our November Family Film screening, *Captain Fantastic*, made me look deeply into what parenting means today and why it has become such difficult task. Part of the answer is the perspective we take and my conclusion is that we need to shift away from the nuclear family and towards "tribal" parenting.

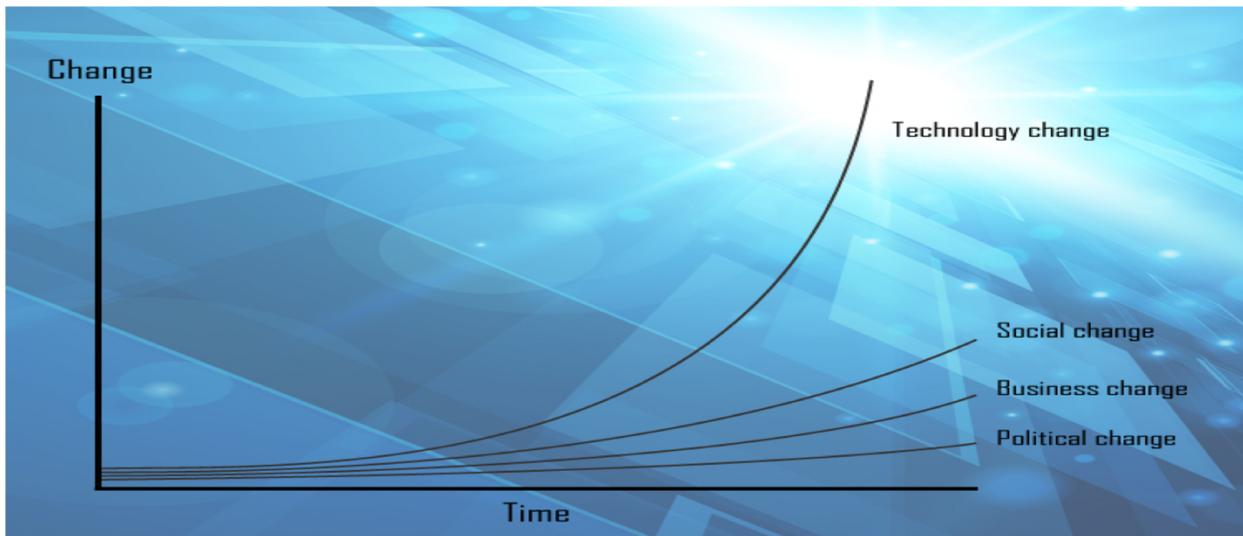
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Ben Hewitt, author of *Home Grown*, writes in a [recent essay](#) that *modern parents too often do a poor job of distinguishing between responsibility and control*. What responsibilities do we have as parents? How much control are we entitled to exert? Hewitt's book is a beautifully written account of one family's unschooling journey in rural Vermont. It is – as a [goodreads review](#) summarizes - *a kind of love letter to nature and the rhythms of life more than it is a book about unschooling - but that is precisely the point: For Hewitt and his family, life, nature, and education are intimately intertwined and inseparable.*

Hewitt is to a certain extent the real life character on which director Matt Ross modelled his 2016 movie *Captain Fantastic*, which features *Lord of the Rings* star Viggo Mortensen as a father who raises his six children in the forests of (presumably) Washington State far away from any contact with civilization. *Captain Fantastic* is a modern family tale based on the Greek philosopher [Diogenes of Sinope](#) (414-323 BC) who argued that *civilization is regressive and insisted that morality implies a return to the simplicity of nature, because wisdom and happiness belongs to the man who is independent of society*. The film captures in an outstanding work of art the American education crisis and the nationwide if not global

discussion about pros and contras of homeschooling. Ross succeeds to highlight some core truths about our societies with a narrative of extreme exaggeration similar to the 2006 film Idocracy, but on the very other end of the intellectual spectrum.

How far would and should parents go when they want to wrest control over their children’s education away from mainstream civilization’s iron grip? What control is there anyway to be exerted? Public education systems have been since their inception roughly at the beginning of the industrial revolution and the birth of nation states some 250 years ago an extended arm of governments and are as such part of the slowest moving variable in society. In an era which is defined by **exponential technological change** it is no surprise that a natural conflict between the political and the social layer of a society arises. While most parents are driven by meaning, politicians make decisions mainly based on power considerations. Parents mostly make decentralized decisions based on what they think is best for their unique and beloved children. Politicians make centralized decisions based on what they consider best for an economic system which is to guarantee that they stay in charge. Hewitt seems to say that parents see in the latter role models and focus on control rather than responsibility.



What is Coca Cola?, one of Ben’s children asks when they have to leave their hideaway and eat in a motorway drive-in like a bunch of Rainman characters. *Poisoned water*, is his plain answer before he asks the entire family to leave the restaurant, because *there is no food on the menu*. We sympathize with Ben’s erudite frankness and know that what he teaches his children is the truth and nothing but the truth. But then the narrative takes a different direction and we realize that there is something wrong with this family that celebrates Noam Chomsky as their personal Jesus.

It is this shift which makes Captain Fantastic an ideal movie to **discuss different parenting styles**. Textbooks differentiate four such styles: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and rejecting-neglecting. There is a general consensus that the authoritative parenting style is what we should aim for: a reciprocal and highly responsive relationship between parent and child. It is as simple as this: highly demanding and highly supportive parents rear successful children. The discussion whether academic or tabloid misses though mostly a different systemic aspect about parenting: the **changing organizational nature of our societies** in general and of the family system in particular.

When we talk nowadays about parenting, we do not question the nature of this relationship and presume that it has always been the way we perceive it today: an intimate bond between child and parent or even more focused between child and a single parent. During the 1960–2016 period, the percentage of children living with only their mother nearly tripled from 8 to 23 percent and the percentage of children living with only their father increased from 1 to 4 percent. Parenting has become in particular since WWII an individualized affair although it was for most of humankind’s existence a collective experience. The resulting shift from collective to individual or what I like to call **nuclear family parenting** pushes modern mothers and fathers along the demand and support axis towards an objective of exaggerated expectations and exhausting support.

Parenting Styles	Supportive Parent is accepting and child-centered	Unsupportive Parent is rejecting and parent-centered
Demanding Parent expects much of child	Authoritative Parenting Relationship is reciprocal, responsive; high in bidirectional communication	Authoritarian Parenting Relationship is controlling, power-assertive; high in unidirectional communication
Undemanding Parent expects little of child	Permissive Parenting Relationship is indulgent; low in control attempts	Rejecting-Neglecting Parenting Relationship is rejecting or neglecting; uninvolved

We have all heard before that low expectations are a good recipe for a life without much frustration. *The higher you aim for the lower you can fall*. Isn’t that the true gist of the Greek

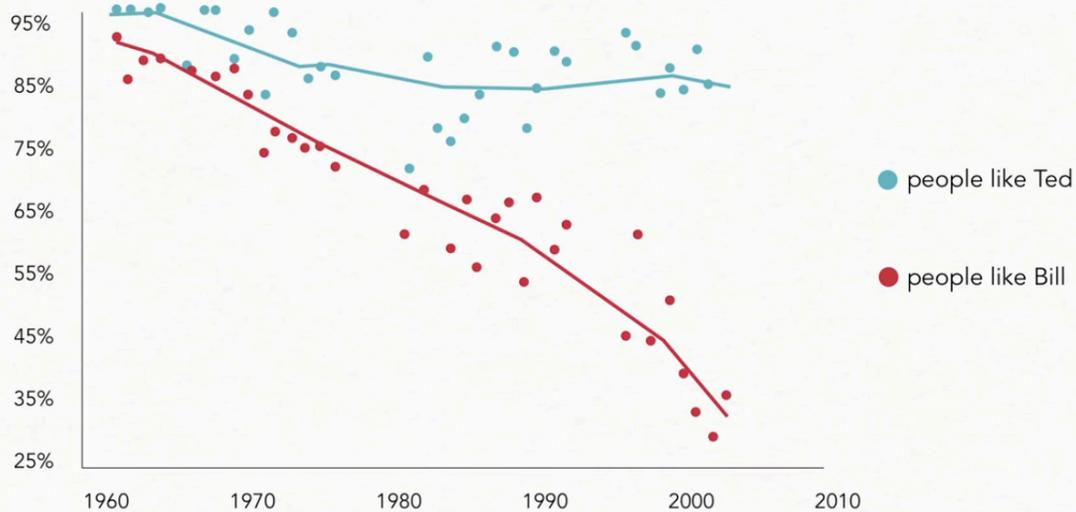


fable about the inventor Daedalus and his son Icarus? Don't fly too high or the sun will melt the wax which keeps your wings glued together. Why are we then aiming for a maximum load of frustration when it comes to our own offspring? On the other hand, people who lack dreams or lofty goals might settle for the mediocre or just tag along with others, never really exploring the horizon on their own.

Parenting is described as an universal human experience, but it is also a socio-economic reality and as such a class struggle, which gives both parent and child largely different starting points. The dissolution of extended family ties during the last decades is accompanied by a concentration of wealth in the hands of a few as longitudinal studies e.g. by French economist [Thomas Piketty](#) and his team have shown. It is in other word not only emotionally but also economically again more challenging to raise children without the support of kinship and diminished social welfare systems.

Describing parenting as an socio-psychological phenomenon one needs to include the increasing wealth and poverty gap as a defining factor. While it has become for a few well off families a question of which parenting (life) style to apply, it is for a growing number of parents a daily challenge to make ends meet, financially and emotionally. Demographics e.g. as presented by economist [Andrew McAfee](#) shows that economic status and many social problems which directly affect parenting are intrinsically related. He describes the US society as having split into two – parenting - camps: families with Bill fathers who lack a university degree and struggle with low-paid manual jobs; and families with Ted fathers who have graduated from university and secured a well-paid job in the knowledge economy.

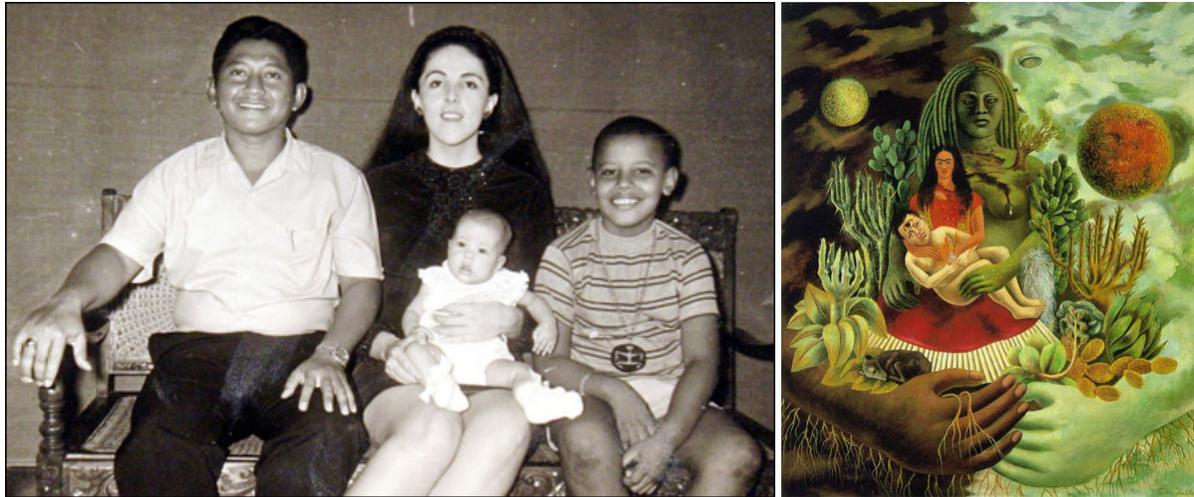
percentage of children living with both biological parents when the mother was age 40



Source: Charles Murray, Coming Apart

The Swiss psychoanalyst C. G. Jung once said that *the factor which has the single most impact on a child's character are the unlived dreams of the parent*, thereby pointing at the unconscious dynamic between parent and child. Parenting is thus much more than managing a responsibility, it is a bidirectional coding process which happens in a long sometimes quiet, sometimes furious dialogue between two, often more generations, one which aims at instilling constructive habits in children, but equally mirrors to the perceptive adult the habits she needs to change. It's both a risk to prolong suffering and an opportunity for mutual growth. Parenting defines generational karma.

And what does parenting mean for society at large? Is it only a responsibility which we have for our own offspring or does it extend beyond our intimate family systems and calls us to take up a parent role for larger parts of society or even humankind? Barack Obama wrote his Jungian memoirs [Dreams Of My Father](#) at age 33 and took up the responsibility to run an entire nation for a few years. Even though he remains a disputed politician his main legacy is the introduction of a health care system which enabled many Americans in need to see a doctor. He might have failed in other areas during his presidency, but he was a larger than life Captain Fantastic who made his society a bit more of a warm and welcoming place, moving many people closer to Jung's archetype dream of eternal love and a step further away from the nightmare of abysmal fear. Mexican artist Frida Kahlo captured this archetypal desire for love in her moving 1949 painting [The Love Embrace of the Universe](#).



Ben has abandoned society and starts out as an extreme form of a wolf-father, the male pendant to the tiger-mother, i.e. a term which slipped into mainstream usage after Yale law professor Amy Chua published her acclaimed book Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother. She recounts in this autobiography how her Chinese immigrant parents raised her and her three sisters in an authoritative parenting style and turned all of their kids into high achievers. We know nowadays that there is a certain scientific truth to the authoritative parenting style. It is in particular psychologists like Angela Lee-Duckworth or Carol Dweck who have shown that perseverance, grit and a growth mindset are essential features in a child's character which define success in adulthood. It is the authoritative parenting style which fosters these, but at what cost? And could there be another way to turn out the best in a child?

Where to draw the **border between an authoritative and authoritarian parenting style**, one which breeds independent individuals and one which churns out disciplined, obedient offspring? Director Matt Ross zooms in on this thin red line, when Ben reveals himself about one third into the film as weapon fanatic and starts to sing a self-composed hymn to celebrate Noam Chomsky's birthday instead of Christmas. The family resembles then rather a retard sect than a sound child rearing environment. Now, what we watch is artistic exaggeration, but the true core is that an authoritative parenting style can easily slip into an authoritarian one. The simple reason is that both parenting styles push the child in extreme ways and under extreme conditions.

Amy Chua's praise for her parents and for her own parenting method could from this point of view be linked to the Stockholm syndrome: an abducted child will even bond with an abductor in case there is no other person to relate to. The human need for bonding supersedes in particular in children the need to individuate and break free from the shackles of family and civilization: We rather die in slavery than alone and deserted. The

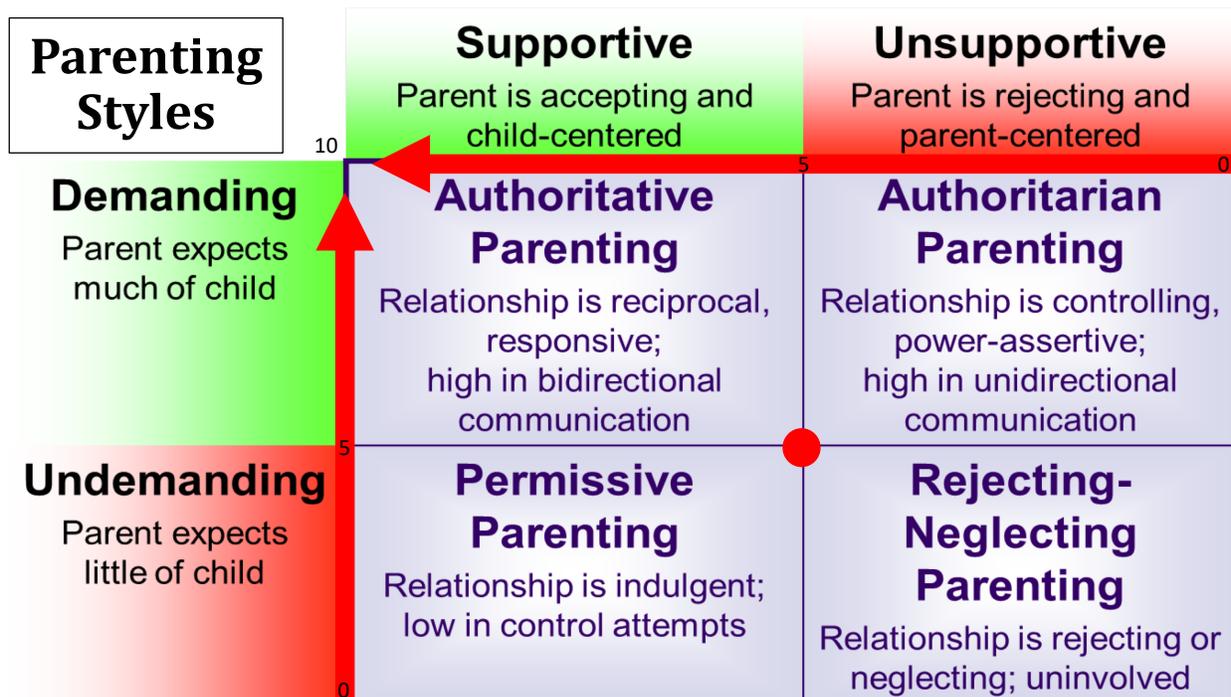
authoritative parenting style must also be viewed from a macro-economic point of view; and from there we recognize highly competitive knowledge economies and trust-deprived societies as the driving force behind authoritative parenting. Authoritative parents are fearful and vigilant. They have resorted to a militant training ordeal to protect their offspring in the unconscious belief that there is no other way forward.



Interestingly, authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles do affect almost all grown-ups. Psychologists have coined the term **parent-surrogate** to describe the role of a national government in relation to its adult citizens. The welfare state takes in this concept the role of the supportive mother while the police state equals the controlling father. The parent surrogate describes one of those relationships which are invisibly embedded in systems which are larger than anything our limited minds can fully understand. It goes beyond the family and corporation and shows that the Freudian civilization and its discontent might be explained through a perpetuation of childhood in modern consumption based societies.

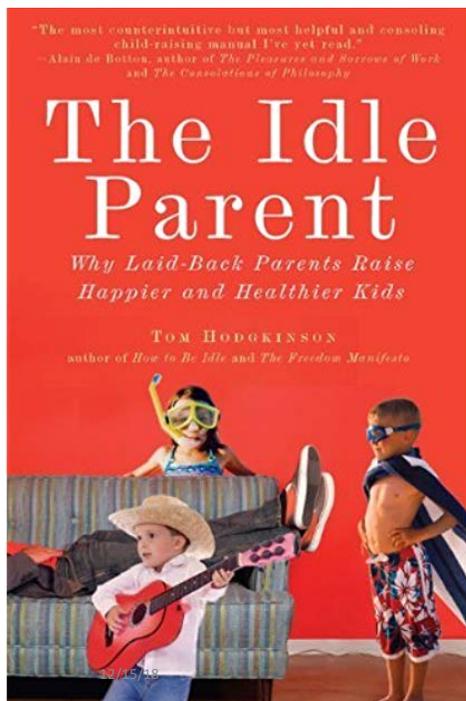
Psychiatrist Wielant Machleidt thinks that in particular people who migrate from one country to another need to go through a second adolescence. He calls this **cultural adolescence**, i.e. a phase which requires the individual to detach itself from the old parent surrogate to enter a bond with the new one. Carl G. Jung would have called the process of taking a step back from one's own cultural conditioning **individuation** and would have welcomed additional opportunities which help the individual to develop its self out of an undifferentiated collective unconscious. He would have probably prescribed some kind of fugitive experience to quite a number of his 21st century patients and wouldn't have recommended to form any bond with a new parent surrogate, but to stay independent, that is: truly grown up.

We realize at this point that we enter an ontological discussion about different concepts of self which we could circumscribe with the philosopher David R. Precht who asked Who Am I And If Yes, How Many? Is the purpose of education in general and parenting in particular to turn a child into a completely individualized and entirely independent self like proposed by Carl G. Jung or must it be wielded into a rather specific element of a large organizational structure as suggested by Confucius? Is education a means to unlock the human potential or a means to establish structure and order? As so often the answer is not an extreme *either or* but a balanced *and*. We are asked to strive for the best self and serve thereby the world at large.



I have tried to find my own parenting style in the above chart by applying two scaling questions. Am I a rather supportive (max 10) or rather unsupportive parent (min 0 points)? Am I a rather demanding (max 10) or rather undemanding parent (min 0 points)? I did this just as an exercise to get a better understanding for what these parenting styles actually stand for, and did in this process also compare my parenting style to my wife's. And, yes, of course we are different, she the Asian tiger-mother, me the European douchebag-father, but over and over again I felt that the sweet spot for parenting is somewhere in the middle of these stereotypes as it is with many other forms of psychological categories. Are you a choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic or melancholic person? You don't want to be any of them; the sweet spot is a balance between the four.

What struck me though as most significant is that the entire discussion about parenting styles forgets largely the child and society at large. It is as if the family system is decoupled from the rest of world and rather than asking what we want for the child along the lines of free, responsible, critical, emphatic and satisfied within the world it will call its home, it is the parent who becomes the focus of deliberation. It is this shift which is paradigmatic for our individualized and egocentric era; and once more it must be emphasized that the **changing organizational nature of our societies** in general and of the family system in particular needs to be blamed for this shift.



The *worrying, over-attentive parent* is the negative protagonist in Hodgkinson's book. He suggest a positive antonym: *the idle parent*. The idle parent though, is not a selfish, ignorant slug; the idle parent must be understood as a complex lifestyle concept.

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Tom Hodgkinson wrote with [The Idle Parent – Why Laid Back Parents Raise Happier and Healthier Kids](#) in 2009 the probably best approximation to this balance between parenting styles. Some people don't seem to understand the humorist in Tom Hodgkinson and feel irritated because he e.g. writes that tipsy mothers sitting around a bonfire are great mothers. Those people miss his main message, which contains an universal truth for mankind: loneliness creates sadness. Loneliness seems to be a paradox to family life, but the modern nuclear family often creates for parents the experience of overwhelming loneliness and a sense of ineptitude to rear one's offspring. The modern nuclear family is simply not suit to provide the same complex caring and nourishment, which the tribes of our ancestors did. Parents who are torn apart between job and children often suffer, because they feel that they get neither right; and often don't find time to take care of themselves. The result is a downwards spiral both physically and mentally, not only for the parent but also for the child.

The *worrying, over-attentive parent* is the negative protagonist in Hodgkinson's book. He suggest a positive antonym: *the idle parent*. The idle parent though, is not a selfish, ignorant slug; the idle parent must be understood as a complex lifestyle concept. When reading Hodgkinson's detailed account and his many recommendations on how to be an idle parent, I could not help to be reminded of the central Taoist concept of wuwei | 无为, which sometimes is wrongly translated as *non-action*, but actually means *action in the right moment*. The idle parent acts not, because social paradigms of an ideal education force him to, the idle parent acts, when he feels that there is a true requirement to do so, i.e. guided by and atoned to the Tao. The idle parent is self-responsible. The idle parent does not listen to every whine of his child or to any government imposed top-down regulation on how to handle your offspring.

The idle parent is neither a wolf father nor a tiger mother. The idle parent can relate though to educational concepts of Montessori, Pestalozzi and Steiner, which all have one thing in common: the adult's responsibility to provide an environment, which facilitates individual growth. It is not their duty though to force-feed youth with unsolicited information. As Tom Hodgkinson's puts it: *in our quest to give our kids everything, we fail to give them the two things they need most: the space and time to grow up self-reliant, confident, happy, and free.*



While I truly enjoyed reading *The Idle Parent* it misses the issues which we have discussed earlier, i.e. the changing organizational nature of our societies and the shift in wealth distribution. Hodgkinson, himself of upper-middle class background, is one of these parents who are in the lucky situation to be able to make lifestyle choices most can't afford. He deserves the credits for having made sound choices for his family and one can't expect more, because it is our first responsibility to be a good parent. I am left though with a feeling of not having received a satisfactory answer to the task of parenting.

One of the reasons might be that Hodgkinson pitches *The Idle Parent* against the Tiger Mother. Having struggled with the latter myself during the last decade of raising two children in China, I have come to the conclusion that it pays off to accept different parenting styles for different situations and societies. What I want to say here is that societies go through similar "collective" development phases as individuals do, and while Western post-WWII societies or Chinese immigrants to the US needed perhaps a different parenting style than an affluent British family in 21st century London suburbs, we need to respect above all that there is the right intention and an awareness toward what the child really needs. Is it shelter, clean water, sanitation and food or beyond that attention, education, freedom and self-realization?



This aspect of parenting being a unique experience which requires us to uniquely answer both the needs of the child as well as our own needs as adults is beautifully described by

Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn in their essay [parenting with mindful awareness](#). **Mindful or integral parenting** might therefore be a better way of understanding the different needs of the child within the system of the family and the family within the system of the society. Mindfulness can bring us in tune with the needs of all members of the family and society at large; integral parenting makes us accept how others within their specific situation deal with the challenges of life. Both can contribute to a reduction of system blindness, one which ignores the connection between each child’s wellbeing and the state of the planet.

Myla and Jon Kabat-Zin: Rather than pitting our needs against those of our children, parenting mindfully involves cultivating an awareness in such moments of how our needs are interdependent. Our lives are undeniably connected. Our children’s wellbeing affects ours, and ours affects theirs. If they are not doing well, we suffer, and if we are not doing well, they suffer. This means that we have to continually work to be aware of our children’s needs as well as our own, emotional as well as physical, and, depending on their ages, to work at negotiations and compromises with them and within ourselves so that everybody gets something of what they need most. Turning into a 1000 hand Guanyin Buddha might help, too.



Captain Fantastic rewards us with a happy ending. Ben decides to settle for a less extreme form of parenting. The family moves out of the woods and into a nice hobbit-like house in a rural setting, where they live with a bit of self-reliance farming while the children attend public school. All it takes are some moderate changes and being at peace with society at large. Running away from it, director Adam Ross seems to say, doesn’t solve anything. The film does as such only focus on the family, but not on the family as smallest unit of an entire society or the planet as a single superorganism. While we watch good looking Ben aka Viggo Mortensen in sexy dungarees during the last minutes of the film preparing breakfast and lunch bags for six children, we wonder if he enjoys doing this every day. We moreover

question how many families (which don't have a rich father in law) can buy a house in the serene countryside with a large plot of land to raise poultry and grow a decent vegetable garden.

Home Grown, The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother, The Idle Parent and Captain Fantastic offer parenting scenarios which are not accessible to the majority of humankind. They offer though important ideas which need to be discussed. They show us that a focus on parenting alone won't be enough to build societies which our children will enjoy living in and sustain a planet on which they can survive. Parenting is an entry point to transcend oneself and take up responsibility for values which are larger than ourselves like empathy, fairness, justice and hope.

Why do we generally think that Scandinavian societies are successful? Because they are wealthy and wealth is rather evenly distributed. Most of us would have considered the US a successful society in the 1950s, not many would do so today. Most of us would have considered 1970 China a failure, but many think it is a success today. The trajectories of both these large nations reveals that what might be labelled as a domestic success comes at the expense of others and the planet, what must be considered a domestic failure is the result of one's countryman's exploitation.

Unfair economics, both domestic and international, can only be resolved on a scale that matters by introducing a basic universal income and that's something beyond our limited possibilities. We can though think about ways to resolve the social dimension of the parenting challenge and team up with other families who have recognized the root problem and share similar ideas. **Tribal parenting**, one which shares the load of responsibilities, one which reduces demand intensity for the single child and support intensity for the single parent, but one which increases both for respective human tribe, is therefore a viable way forward.

This is not a trivial insight. If loneliness creates frustration and depression, then nuclear parenting is a social dead end, one which drives us into compensation behaviors, above all consumption. The family is not only the smallest entity in every society, it is also the driving engine of every economy. If we team up in parenting tribes, we automatically start to share not only stories, experiences and ideas, but also assets, tools and facilities. While nuclear parenting turns out to be a social and ecological dead end, tribal parenting is to a certain extent a GDP growth killer, but certainly a major boost to GWB, i.e. general wellbeing for you, me and the planet.

Parenting Styles	Supportive Parent is accepting and child-centered	Unsupportive Parent is rejecting and parent-centered
Demanding Parent expects much of child	Authoritative Parenting Relationship is reciprocal, responsive; high in bidirectional communication	Authoritarian Parenting Relationship is controlling, coercive; unidirectional communication
Undemanding Parent expects little of child	Permissive Parenting Relationship is indulgent; low control attempts	Rejecting-Neglecting Parenting Relationship is rejecting or neglecting; uninvolved

TRIBAL PARENTING

Further reading:

- Ben Hewitt On [A Case for Letting Children Be](#)
- [Home Grown](#) by Ben Hewitt
- [The Idle Parent](#) by Tom Hodgkinson
- Logan Laplante on [Hackschooling](#)
- Amy Chua and The [Battlehymn of the Tiger Mother](#)
- Psychologist Angela Lee-Duckworth on [Grit](#)
- Psychologist Carol Dweck on the [Growth Mindset](#)
- Psychiatrist Wielant Machleidt on the [Parent Surrogate](#)
- Guy Raz’s TED Radiohour on [Growing Up](#)
- Guy Raz’s TED Radiohour on [Turning Kids Into Grown-Ups](#)
- Philosopher Richard D. Precht on [Who Am I and If Yes How Many?](#)
- Philosopher Konrad P. Liessmann on [Education as Provocation](#)
- Economist Thomas Piketty on [Capital in the 21st Century](#)
- Economist Andrew McAfee on [What will future jobs look like?](#)
- Barak Obama’s memoir [Dreams of my Father](#)
- Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn on [parenting with mindful awareness](#) in Mindfulness Revolution