

John Rosemond: 'Why Child Psychology Is Damaging'

Why this popular expert bases his parenting advice on the Bible and thinks psychology is satanic.

BY: Interview by Wendy Schuman

John Rosemond has worked as a psychologist with families, children, and [parents](#) since 1971. The author of 11 books, including the best-selling "Parent Power" and "Teenproofing," Rosemond is one of the most popular parenting speakers in the U.S., and his column is syndicated in some 225 newspapers nationwide. He spoke with Wendy Schuman, [Beliefnet's](#) [family](#) editor, about why he believes Grandma's wisdom and the Bible are the best sources for parents.

You're a psychologist, and yet you say psychology has had a damaging effect on parenting. Why?

In the 1960s we embraced a psychological paradigm of [parenting](#) that is 180 degrees removed from the biblical paradigm that prevailed in American prior to that time. And the evidence is clearly in that the psychological paradigm isn't working.

It's based on two fallacious ideas, one that high self-esteem is a good thing, and that we should help our children acquire it. It's shocking to today's parents to hear someone say that high self-esteem is not a good thing, but the research finds that high self-esteem is associated with pathological behavior. People with high self-esteem tend to have very low respect for others. Before we embraced the psychological paradigm in the 1960s, humility and modesty were ideals in American culture, and they are completely removed from the high self-esteem ethic.

The second false idea that that behavior modification works as well on human beings as it does on lower forms of life, animals like rats and dogs, which is really subtle evolutionary propaganda, the notion that the same principles that govern the behavior of an animal also govern the behavior of God's most special creation.

These two ideas have created the [parenting](#) problems that today's parents are struggling with. This is the source of their problems.

Doesn't having self-esteem make you more self-confident?

There's no evidence whatsoever that people who are humble and modest lack the belief that they are capable of rising to life's challenges adequately. But there is lots of evidence that people with high self-esteem do not assess their own abilities accurately and are likely to take very unnecessary risks.

I will turn to an audience of parents and ask, "Would you rather have a 16-year-old who's just obtained a driver's license have high self-esteem or be humble and modest?"

If you simply address people's common sense, people go, "Oh wow, I'd rather have a humble and modest 16-year-old."

You were a mainstream child development expert some years back. But now you are much more Christian in your approach. Why the change?

I started out as a mainstream person back in the mid-1970s when I first began writing my newspaper column and began to realize that the tenets of psychological parenting were not working, that they were not based on any good research, that they did not fit with common sense.

The real epiphany concerning all of this came about seven years ago. I became a follower of our Lord and a believer, a bona fide believer. Before that, I was a cultural Christian. I began really examining scripture and seeing that not only is the psychological paradigm not supported by good research and doesn't match common sense, but it's also anti-biblical. And that was really the nail in the coffin for me.

In your new book, *Parenting by the Book*, you say that psychological parenting is a manifestation of the serpent, or Satan's effort to undermine God. Do you mean that literally?

I mean that literally. I think that the serpent manifests itself in every generation, in every time. And that its purpose is always to convince the young people that the model set by their parents is an invalid model, that their parents have not told them the truth. And in this case, it was really my generation that was persuaded of this—that the way we were raised was psychologically harmful.

My generation—I'm 60 years old this month—was the first generation in any culture, in any time, to break with the parenting pattern established in the culture. It has been the ruination of parenting in America. And my job, as I see it—it's really a call—is to go around the country and recruit people back to an understanding of the biblical paradigm.

How can you tell that kids are worse off today than they were in the '50s?

Children today are doing things that a person raising children in, say, the '40s or the '50s could not have envisioned children doing. For example, there's an epidemic of children assaulting their parents physically when their parents don't do what they want them to do. And this is something that would have been unimaginable to a [parent](#) 50 or 60 years ago. It was unheard of for a child to be throwing tantrums in public places past the age of two-and-a-half or three. Today it's not unusual in a shopping center on any given day, to see a six or seven or eight-year-old throwing a wild tantrum because his parents won't buy him something that he wants.

These sorts of things are, to me, symptoms of something terribly wrong in our parenting practice in America. Not terribly wrong with parents, and I want to make that very clear. [But] the psychological paradigm is very complicated and generates a tremendous amount of stress, whereas the biblical paradigm is simple, it's direct, and it confirms common sense.

Could you give me an example of the psychological versus the biblical approach to the same problem?

Take toilet-training. The psychobabble prevalent today would have it that if you attempt to toilet-train a child below the age of two, that this is going to be premature and is going to cause the child psychological problems. So parents today are waiting for the child to demonstrate that he is ready to be toilet-trained. The average age of toilet-training has increased from about 22 months to almost age three today. And parents are having tremendous problems trying to toilet train three-year-old children.

When I ask women in their 80s “How did you toilet-train your child,” they look at me strangely and say, “I just told my child what I wanted him to do.” And when I ask, “Well, how long did this take?” they usually say two or three days. Today’s parents are struggling with this for two or three months, micromanaging the issue, following the child around the house going, “Do you feel like you need to use the toilet? Can we go sit on the potty now? I’ll read you a [book](#), I’ll give you some cookies and milk,” and things of this sort. This is not making your expectations clear. This is not “letting your yes be yes and your no be no,” as it says in the Bible.

What’s wrong, though, with being child-centered?

Well, there are three seasons to active parenting, and parents today get stuck in the first one, the “servant” phase. This season begins at birth and lasts for about two years. You serve a child who cannot serve himself. You put the child at the center of your attention, and you orbit around the child. The old-fashioned parent understood that while this was necessary, it had to come to an end, or else you were in danger of raising a child who would believe that the world revolved around him.

Between the child’s second and third birthdays, the old-fashioned parent removed the child from the center of attention and placed themselves at the center of the child’s attention. By age three, the parent and the child enter season two, the season of disciplining of the child through leadership. This lasts until the child is 13.

In “season three” parent and child enter the season of mentoring, during which the parent functions as a mentor. And that is for the purpose of helping the child develop the skills to successfully emancipate between 18 and 20. The fact that children today aren’t emancipating until their mid to late 20s is an indication that we’re doing something wrong.

The cultural messages to parents today freeze the development of the parent at season one, the servant phase. The new ideal in American parenting is the more you do for your child--regardless of your child’s age--the better a parent you are. In many ways it freezes the psychological, emotional development of the child at toddler hood. And so, you see [older kids] still exhibiting toddler behaviors. Tantrums, defiance, high level of

distractibility. All of the symptoms that we associate with attention deficit disorder (ADD) are, in fact, behaviors that are typical of toddlers.

Probably the most unfortunate aspect of what I call post-modern psychological parenting is the effect on the parents. Because the child remains at the center of attention in the family, the parents end up having more active [relationships](#) with the child than they have with each other. In Genesis 2:24 where it says that the man and the woman will become one flesh. The Bible says that we're not supposed to become one flesh with our children, we're supposed to become one flesh with our spouses.

There is nothing more comforting to a child than to know that his parents are in an active relationship with one another. And one of the unfortunate results of putting the husband/wife relationship on the shelf during the child-rearing years is, I believe, that the divorce rate in America spikes tremendously after the last child has been emancipated.

What people need to realize is that mother and father are temporary roles in your life. Husband and wife are supposed to be permanent.

You've talked about your son who had behavior problems in third grade. What happened?

For the first nine years of our parenthood, my wife Willie and I embraced psychological parenting. And when Eric was in the third grade--the problems didn't begin the third grade, they had been developing since the time he was one-and-a-half or two and just came to a head in the third grade. In January his teacher told us he shouldn't have been promoted to the third grade, she had no intention of promoting him to the fourth, that he was reading a year and a half below grade level, and, most importantly, he was the worst-behaved child she had seen in 20 years of teaching.

This was an eye-opener for us, and we went back home and started talking. It was Willie, really, who dashed the much-needed cold water into this parenting expert's face. She said, "You know, you came home from graduate school bringing all these new ideas, and none of them were in keeping with the way that you and I had been raised." She said, "Don't you think the fact that we never saw children who behave as badly as our own son when we were growing up should tell us that these ideas you were bringing home--they're worthless?"

And it was that that really opened my eyes and began to turn me around. Within a couple of weeks, we just decided we're going to toss out the new and embrace the old. At the time, I had no idea that this was in keeping with a biblical model. We just were intent upon recreating the families that we had grown up in.

Within three months, his third-grade teacher was saying she had seen what was an educational miracle, that he was now reading at grade level. And we provided him no

tutoring, we stopped helping him with his homework completely. I told him, “If we have to help you get to the fourth grade, Eric, you shouldn’t be there. So, you’re going to have to do your homework completely on your own.” And he taught himself to read. He was just highly motivated. And I said, “If you don’t start behaving properly, you’re going to be held back.” We had been micromanaging everything in his life up until that point in time. We stepped back, put the proverbial ball in his court, and lo and behold, he picked it up and he ran with it. The teacher was saying in three months that he was the most well-behaved child in the class.

Three months prior to that, according to the diagnostic standards, he had--and I put the word in quotes--attention deficit disorder, oppositional defiance disorder, and early-onset bipolar disorder. Three months later, as a consequence simply of us embracing traditional biblically based parenting, he had been cured.

What are the most important biblical principles in parenting?

Well, the most important is parenting as one flesh, husband and wife being the dominant roles in the family. The second is Proverbs 22:06: Train the child in the way that he should go, so that when he is older he will not depart from it. That means that you should have a long-range view of parenting, that your parenting should be constantly attuned or aimed at a vision of the adult you want your child to be when your child is 30 years old.

The third most important, in my estimation, is “letting your yes be yes and your no be no.” It’s in Matthew 5:37. Isn’t this simple? It’s simply demonstrating to your children that your yes means yes and your no means no. God’s plan for raising children is not at all complicated.

Not all baby boomers had such great parents. Some were abusive or neglectful. Do you think you might be idealizing the parents of the ‘50s? Is it possible that the psychology of the ‘60s and ‘70s was a reaction to that?

It isn’t a matter of idealizing the parents of the 1950s or before, it’s a matter of saying that the biblical paradigm is a much more functional for us to be following. And it is what God wants us to follow. It is his plan for raising his children.

Self-Esteem v. Self-Respect
Margaret L. Snyder
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When American students are compared to students of other countries the only category in which they come out on top is...self-esteem. In other words, they don't know nearly as much as they think they do. If you went to school more than 25 or 30 years ago, you probably never heard about self-esteem at the time. Nobody was worried about your self-esteem. They were too busy educating you.

In the process they, along with your parents, were teaching you self-respect. Before you learned to respect yourself, even before you had learned to read, you had already learned to respect others, especially those older than you, such as your parents, their friends and your teachers.

Having learned respect, you were able to have respect for yourself as well. You could respect yourself because you had been taught certain behaviors that were worthy of respect. Such as kindness, honesty, a sense of duty or faithfulness, and following rules. Children raised to feel good about themselves "just because" or even just because God made them, tend to continue to regard themselves as the center of the universe and due special treatment whenever they feel like it because, after all, they are so special. Somehow the idea that everyone else is just as special and God made them too just isn't part of the message.

A child who aspires to be kind, honest and dutiful, even though he or she often fails, is a happier child than one who is told to look in the mirror to see the most special person in the world. Everyone around them is happier too.

Psychologist Dr. John Rosemond and his wife realized early in his career that a three-year-old tyrant was running their home. Dr. Rosemond had the courage to face the fact that most of what he had learned about child rearing was so much wishful thinking. He has been on a campaign ever since-for about the past thirty years-to urge parents to stop paying attention to child-rearing "experts" and go back to the way their parents had raised them.

Of course, this worked for him only for a while, because the self-esteem movement has been with us for so long that those raising children today are the second generation of the self-esteem society. They don't even have the example of their own parents to draw on.

In any case, Rosemond, in several excellent books and a syndicated column, points out that human beings enter the world with plenty of self-esteem. In fact, they literally think they ARE the universe, not just the center of it. Child rearing used to consist of lovingly but firmly removing children from the center of the universe, and teaching kindness, consideration, and respect. Persons so raised have self-respect.

Self-respect is greatly to be preferred over self-esteem. Self-respect is part of a world-view that includes respect for others and a sense of responsibility and of duty, whereas self-esteem is unconnected to any socially beneficial attitudes. Self-esteem is what we find in people who are self-absorbed and unprepared to share the world with others on anything like an equal basis. It should surprise no one that the segment of society that exhibits the most anti-social behavior also has the highest self-esteem: young black males. What they and the rest of our children and young people need is self-respect.

Margaret L. Snyder teaches Spanish at a college in Eastern Pennsylvania and recently took to writing about current affairs.

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