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Opening extract from

How Not to F*** Them Up !

Written by

Oliver James

Published by

Vermilion

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Praise for *How Not to F* Them Up* from mothers:**

'Thank you for making a difference in my daughter's life and for making me feel like there are other people like me … it has really helped me to feel more confident in my instincts for childcare … Thank you for giving me the confidence to say to the rest of my family "Thank you for your advice but I'm doing it my way."'

'Thank you for your recent book … I have found it so helpful and reassuring … There is so much pressure from society, and families, to get back to earning a lot and I have often felt looked down on because I am with a man who wants to spend time with his daughter, prioritising this over a huge mortgage or fancy cars. Your book has reassured me so much that we are doing the right thing.'

'By reading your book I have totally got all my confidence in my methods back and am so much happier to do my own thing, so thank you so much for this.'

'Thanks for writing a truly useful and inspiring books for parents. You inspired me to make my daughter my number one priority in my life and becoming a stay at home mum in spite of peer pressure.'

'Many thanks for writing a book which gives me validation and support that is so lacking in a society which is, as you point out, largely run by "Organisers" … We need more voices to speak out in the way you do. You have done a tremendous amount to counterbalance the macho un-child un-family friendly society we live in, for which I am grateful.'

'Not only did it give me a new found confidence in my parenting choices but it helped me cope with other peoples' differing parenting styles.'

'It confirmed that I feel I am doing the best for my children and very pleased I did not listen to certain members of my family on how to treat my baby.'

HOW NOT TO F*** THEM UP

The First Three Years

OLIVER JAMES

Vermilion
LONDON

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This book is a work of non-fiction. The names of people in the case studies have been changed solely to protect the privacy of others.

This be the Verse

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were soppy-stern
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.

Philip Larkin

This be Another Verse

They tuck you up, your mum and dad,
With heartfelt, steadfast, loving coos.
They fill you with the strengths they have,
And wipe the never-ending poos.

But they were tucked up in their turn
Spock flowing from permissive throats,
As mummies stuck it out at home
And daddies grafted hard for groats.

Woman hands on mental health to Man.
She puts her self upon the shelf
Or looks for someone else who can
Tune in to baby's needy self.

Oliver James

Introduction

When I was three months old, in 1953, my mother regularly parked me in a pram at the end of the garden. Relatives tell me that I was sometimes left unattended there, crying for long periods. I can believe this is true because my mum was hard-pressed. I was the third of four children and by the time my younger sister was born, there were four of us under the age of five: a big burden for any mother.

Although I cannot directly remember much, I believe that things did not improve when I started toddling. While my mum was probably pleased to have a son – all my siblings being female – I doubt this enabled her to be very responsive. I suspect she was mildly depressed for most of the time and I am sure that she was both tired and irritable. She was an erratic provider of discipline, frequently resorting to clips around the ear-hole. While my dad was an exceptionally maternal parent for a man of that era, and while he did work from home, he can only have been much in evidence during the evenings and weekends.

My most vivid early impressions are of my mother's drawn face with down-turned mouth. She would slump at the kitchen table, exhausted, and her mood was one of resignation, with an undertow of anger. The main moments of emotional relief were provided by her packet of Gold Leaf cigarettes. From the first inhalation, she would become animated,

as if this death-dealing habit had brought her to life (indeed, it is a little known fact that nicotine is a potent antidepressant*). For the duration of the cigarette, a light would be switched on, only to fade and die as the next set of burdens confronted her.

After a successful career as a psychiatric social worker, my mum qualified as a psychoanalyst. She was well thought of in that Woody Allen world, before she gave up work in her mid-thirties to care for her children. Her modern-day equivalent would probably have hired a nanny and continued with her career. So, I start with these reminiscences to raise two questions: how, if at all, did this early care affect what kind of person I became? Would I, as well as my mum, have been better off if she had returned to work?

In answer to the first question, I shall be brief, since I doubt you are seeking my autobiography.

I believe that my early infantile deprivation (the first six months) left me with a rather weak sense of self, meaning that I was unsure of what I really felt, liable to become disconnected and distanced, prone to second-hand living (like writing books about other people's psychology).

I also believe that my mother's unresponsiveness and irritability when I was a toddler made me emotionally insecure. Anyone who was there will tell you I was often surly, aggressive and what is technically known as 'avoidant'. Having felt rejected by my mum, I feared rejection in relationships, expecting others to be hostile or neglectful. As an avoidant boy, I would get my rejection in first, liable to hit other children or to give them the cold shoulder, making the assumption that they would do this to me if given a chance.

These observations about myself are strongly supported by buckets of evidence. Many studies of infants and toddlers, presented in Chapters 4 and 5 of my book *They F**** You Up*, show that if no one much tunes into you and is responsive when you are an infant, you build up less of a sense of self*. If the care you get aged six months to three years is erratic or unresponsive, you are prone to emotional insecurity in

relationships*. As I also explain in *They F*** You Up* (Chapter 1), the evidence for the role of genes has been greatly exaggerated*. By contrast, the evidence that the quality of your early care hugely affects how you turn out is much more robust. The care sets your electrochemical thermostat, the baseline of patterns of brainwaves and chemicals, the prism through which you experience your world*.

So the first point I want to make is that *it really does matter enormously how you care for under-threes*.

Writing this, I can picture the tsunami of apprehension sweeping over the reader. Perhaps you are pregnant with your first child. Perhaps you already have three. The danger is that your response to yet another person – a male 'expert' at that (I am a child clinical psychologist and father of two) – warning that the early years are so formative is a terrible sense of foreboding about becoming a mother, or anxiety that you have already screwed up your child, perhaps soon followed by a sense of outrage. Well, let me put your mind at rest, right away.

What I hope to do in this book is to explain that the actual practicalities of the meeting of the needs of under-threes are not the problem. By this I do not mean it is a piece of cake or that the work is anything other than back-breaking, repetitive and incredibly demanding, emotionally, intellectually and physically. What I mean is that, when you stop to think about it, most people can change a nappy, or pick up a crying baby, or warm up milk for a bottle. The physical steps entailed, in themselves, are easy. The difficult bit is knowing which steps to take, when, and how to execute them on a particular occasion.

A big part of reducing this difficulty is to get yourself into the right frame of mind. That means creating a life for yourself that makes you calm and emotionally open, so you can be 'good enough' at meeting those needs when with the child and make satisfactory substitute arrangements when absent. The challenge presented by mothering under-threes is how to arrange matters so that you are not in a permanent bate or feeling overwhelmed, like my mum was.

What an under-three needs above all is to have a responsive and tuned-in carer. But that person does not have to be the biological mother all of the time. Which brings me to my second question regarding my own early childhood: would it have been better for all concerned if my mum had gone back to work?

The short answer is that I do not know if actual paid employment would have really improved her mood, but I am certain that she needed someone to help out. This being 1953, she might have felt like a terrible failure if she had returned to work, because very few mothers did so at that time. She might also have felt disappointed that she was unable to express her intense desire to nurture us. Her own childhood had been awfully difficult and she felt passionately that she wanted to give us the experience she never had. In all sorts of ways, she succeeded in doing this, but not until later in life. Unlike her father or her favourite brother, she did not commit suicide. Unlike her mother, she was not a cold woman who showed minimal interest in her offspring and who finished her life in a mental hospital. Hats off to my mum for having been in many ways a tremendously stimulating, amusing, wise parent to me in later life. But in trying to care full-time for four children aged under five, she messed up. It was too much for a person like her. Arranging matters in such a way that she was irritable and depressed created a lose-lose situation for her and for us.

So, if the starting point for this book is that it is hugely important to meet the needs of under-threes and that this in itself, on a practical level, is not difficult, my main other point is that each mother (yes, and her partner too, I will come to that presently) must work incredibly hard to understand what is going to be best for her, for the sake of her child. That is what I hope to provide for you: *a way to understand yourself so that you can get it right for you and your children*.

This understanding starts with the approach you take (or in the case of pregnant mothers, will take) to nurturing your child, illustrated extensively through the stories of mothers of under-threes I have

interviewed especially for this book. In my experience, mothers rarely find anything as helpful as talking with each other, such as with friends they have made in antenatal classes. I would ask you to think of the characters in this book as being like that.

Solid scientific research, mostly based on the theories and studies of a British psychoanalyst and psychologist called Joan Raphael-Leff*, reveals that mothers of small children tend to fall into three groups, in terms of their approach to mothering and the basic feeling they have about under-threes. The book is divided into three parts, each dealing with one of them.

1. The Organiser

She tends to see it as necessary for the baby to adapt to her and the needs of the family. She loves her baby as much as any other kind of mother but her attitude is that mother knows best. To her, the baby is a creature without a proper understanding of the human world, a bundle of hungry needs that require regulation to make them predictable. Insufficiently controlled, the baby can quickly become indulged, selfish and naughty. The Organiser sees it as her job to help the baby take control of its unruly passions and bodily processes. That is an important part of how she shows maternal love. Hence, she tends to see it as vital for the baby to acquire a feeding and sleeping routine, soonest. She is happy for others to care for the baby and regards a routine as very helpful for this. As quickly as she can after the birth, she wants to get back her 'normal', pre-pregnant life.

About a quarter of British mums have this approach*. They are the ones who are most likely to have a full-time paid job*.

2. The Hugger

The opposite of the Organiser, she places the needs of the baby ahead of everything. She is the sort of mum who may have the baby sleeping with her in the bed at night, who tends to feed on demand (when the

baby indicates it is hungry rather than imposing a routine) and who regards herself as uniquely able to meet the baby's needs. She luxuriates in motherhood, happy to put her life on hold for at least three years per child. She adores being with her under-threes.

She is least likely of the three kinds to have a paid job, although some do work, even full-time. About one quarter of British mothers are Huggers.

3. The Fleximum

She combines both Hugging and Organising, cutting and pasting the pattern of care according to what the practical situation requires. She is aware of the needs of the baby and is led by them but, unlike the Hugger, she does not lose sight of her own needs. She may have the baby in the bed if it is ill, yet also seek to establish a sleep routine. She may try imposing a feeding regime, only to drop it if it is not working. Above all, she is concerned to create a 'win-win' situation, where both her own and her baby's needs are met.

About half of mothers are like this. Many have a part-time job, though some are at home or at work full-time.

You probably recognise yourself in one of these portraits, but it is vital you read all three parts of the book, in the order in which they unfold, rather than just jumping to the one which you think applies to you. About half of you will be Fleximums and since they are mostly a mixture of the other two kinds, you need to understand them. If you are an Organiser or Hugger, you can learn a lot about your approach by understanding the others.

As you will see, there are potential problems for mothers whatever their approach. Huggers can sometimes find it difficult to allow the child to become independent. Organisers may find the early months particularly trying. Fleximums can trick themselves into believing they have created win-win arrangements (in which both their needs

and the baby's are being met) where in reality, one or other is losing out.

My main objective is to help you define which approach suits you best and then how to make the most of it, minimising problems. Much depends on what kind of person you are and what your circumstances require, at a particular moment in time. While arranging things so that you are reasonably happy does not guarantee you will meet your child's needs, it certainly increases the likelihood thereof. Whatever your approach, there tends to be a constant trade-off between your need to stay buoyant and your baby's needs.

Mothers vary in how precisely they adopt an approach. Those who fit one of the three groups in most respects I describe as 'classic' or 'essential'. They would conform to many of the characteristics in the descriptions provided above.

A minority I characterise as 'extreme', meaning that they take the approach very seriously and push it to the limit. An extreme Hugger, for example, might breastfeed the child until it is three and still have it sleeping in the parental bed at that age. An extreme Organiser might use day care from when the baby is three months old and strictly adhere to 'controlled crying' (leaving the baby to soothe itself) from soon after birth. An extreme Fleximum might switch patterns several times, with several children.

A proportion of mothers change their overall approach. They may start out with one approach for a year, only to move to another when it does not seem to be working with that particular child. Or they may use one approach with their first child and adopt a different one with another. So even if you think of yourself as a confirmed Hugger or Organiser today, you may find yourself changing tack at some point in the future.

One of the hottest issues that both affects and reflects a mother's approach is her attitude to doing paid work during the early years. A conflict has broken out, dubbed the Mommy Wars by Americans. At its simplest, the warring parties divide into those doing paid work and

those who stay at home. But a more nuanced division is between those who feel the care should be led by the child's needs, versus those who feel the child must adapt to the parent.

The evidence shows that, in general, all mothers are liable to feel that the wider society disapproves of their approach. Organisers who use routines are all too aware that lots of other mothers accuse them of being neglectful and cold-hearted. Huggers may feel socially deviant and accused of being over-indulgent, creating bad habits. A mother of either kind can feel torn between the verdict of her social world and what she believes is best.

My ambition is to declare a truce. With any luck, by the end of this book you will feel this is a bogus conflict which need not sap your limited supplies of emotional energy.

It is perfectly clear that mothers who stay at home when they long for the stimulation of work are at greater risk of depression. Likewise, a proportion of mothers find babies and toddlers, quite frankly, boring company, and can feel isolated and frustrated if they stay at home full-time. Many such mothers are Organisers and some are Fleximums. Since depression in mothers greatly reduces the chances of the needs of under-threes being met, it is imperative that such mothers do not feel trapped at home.

On the other hand, in general, it is a fact that offspring of working mothers do not do as well academically as those of non-working ones, and are more at risk of emotional problems*. A big part of the reason for this may be the inadequacy of the substitute care. Where the substitute is adequate, there is no reason why a working mother should increase problems for the child.

So from a scientific point of view, looked at in terms of the best interests of the under-three, there is no basis for saying it is better or worse for them to have a working mother. It all depends on what kind of woman she is and if she does work, what sort of substitute arrangements are made.

Whereas most parenting books offer strong injunctions about 'the best' and 'the right' specific childcare practices, that is not the primary purpose of this book. Instead, I explore how a number of varying aspects of your life can help and hinder you in the task of meeting the needs of your under-three. If staying at home and attempting to Hug would result in you becoming depressed, and you are someone who needs to work full-time, then I am in favour of you doing that. If you want to be at home and Hug, but money is tight and you are unsure what to do, you should find this book very helpful in working out the best solution. This is partly achieved by understanding three aspects of your past and present circumstances.

1. Your Own Particular Childhood

Your past hugely influences what approach you take, especially the way your own mother cared for you. About half of mothers do what their mothers did, the other half do something different*. You may be reacting against her strictness or her permissiveness, for example. Or, there is good evidence that if you had warm, sensitive and stimulating mothering when small, you are liable to provide the same to your children*. Mothers who were studied as children were followed up when they in turn became mothers. Sure enough, if they had been well loved, they were more liable to be loving. Studies of monkeys show the same*. The amount and kind of contact a monkey had with her mother precisely predicts the kind and amount she goes on to bestow. This is not caused by genes. The amount of contact with a particular daughter can be compared with the average for all her sisters. When they become mothers, the daughter's care precisely duplicates her particular dosage of love, compared to the average: it is the unique care she received that determines how she cares.

Whether you were emotionally deprived or had your needs very well met will greatly affect how you yourself mother. I hope by the end of the book you will see that understanding this can make a big

difference. Instead of merely repeating the mistakes of the past or unthinkingly reacting against them, it can put you in a position of choice, behind the steering wheel on the journey of parenting your children.

In my own case, I believe that understanding my deprived early years enabled me to appreciate better what my children needed. It also helped me to appreciate the difficulties my mother faced and the possible solutions. It has not made me a perfect parent but, hopefully, I have done a better job than I might otherwise have managed.

2. The Mental Acrobatics by Which You Justify Your Decision to Do Paid Work or Stay at Home

New research shows that most modern mothers feel a tremendous conflict between two cornerstones of their identity*: mother and worker. There is a constant battle to rationalise their decisions about this conflict to themselves and others. I present examples of ways of doing this that lead to trouble and others that produce authentic win-win arrangements, in which the child's needs are met as well as the mother's.

3. Your Partner (If You Have One)

If you are a Hugger and your partner is an Organiser, sparks may fly. Equally, that can happen if you both have the same approach: the partner might want to give you advice on how to do it better. I provide a wide variety of examples of different kinds of set-ups, showing how they can sabotage or help in the ultimate goal of meeting the needs of the under-three. Practical implications for how to make the best of your particular relationship follow.

While this is not a prescriptive book, I certainly will use all the available scientific evidence to offer a great many practical ideas regarding how to look after children and organise your life, tailored to each type

of mother. These are mostly spread throughout the text, but also condensed into a chapter at the end of each Part offering 'Practical Top Tips'. Primarily, I will be trying to help you to understand yourself better and then to apply that knowledge in deciding how best to meet the needs of your under-three. The interviews with mothers will hopefully help with this.

While the first chapter has no such stories, all but the Practical Top Tips chapters are largely composed of them, to illustrate my points.

Because the practical information is spread throughout the book, I have provided a Practical Top Tips Index at the end of this introduction (see page 14). Hence, if you wish immediately to find the section devoted to breastfeeding or to toddler temper tantrums, you know where to look.

Before you get stuck in, you need to be aware of one or two pieces of literary housekeeping which will help to make the book intelligible.

My Use of Language

I do not make a politically correct pretence that many readers of this book are male. Most of you, surely, are women and I will be addressing you as mothers. I am glad to say that an increasing number of men are taking on that role and good for them – there are plenty of men who can do the job very well, possibly as many men as women, at least after the first few months. So, men, please include yourselves when I write 'mother'; the role can be thought of as gender neutral. But if truth be told, only 3% of British three-month-olds are cared for primarily by men, rising to 7% at 12 months*, so the vast majority of what follows applies to women more than it does to men, especially where it concerns the enormous conflict and confusion that most women feel between their 'mother' and their 'worker' identities when they start having children. I only wish more men felt the same conflict. It would be a huge advance if all fathers felt the same degree of responsibility as mothers do for arranging and carrying out the care of under-threes.

Finally, regarding terminology, when I talk about working mothers, I am acutely aware that those with no paid employment do work. It is purely to avoid tiresome repetition and for succinctness that I will use the word 'work' to refer to paid work, not in any way to diminish the long hours worked by mothers who have no paid employment.

The Interviewees

Key details in all the stories have been altered, to confer anonymity. I contacted the mothers through various sources on the internet. I interviewed more than 50, selecting those which precisely illustrate key issues.

You may notice that none of the stories in this book concerns women in low-income households. The vast majority of my informants are middle-class, in terms of wealth. There are two reasons for this.

The first is pragmatic. An honest author of most parenting books should not pretend that it is likely to be read by many people who are living in poverty. Market research suggests that such women are unlikely to be spending scarce money on my thoughts or borrowing the book from a library. The second is that the whole point of the book is to explore how you can make the best choices for you and your child. If you have a low income, your choices are severely circumscribed. My concern here is to help mothers who are wrestling with the full range of alternatives, and that means those who are in a household with at least the national average income.

The Scientific Basis of the Book

For those unfamiliar with notes, it is worth explaining how I use them. Wherever I cite a statistic or a study, there is an asterisk in the text indicating that there is a note with the reference.

There is also a set of very brief summaries of scientific issues at the end of the book. Each one is numbered and a bracketed number appears in the main text letting you know when a particular issue has

such a summary appended. For example, (R4) means Review 4, a summary of the Mommy Wars debate, with references to relevant texts and scientific papers. It appears in the section at the end of the book entitled Mothering: The Evidence.

With this house husbandry out of the way, off you go: I hope what you are about to read will make you better able to meet the needs of your under-three and, at the same time, your own.