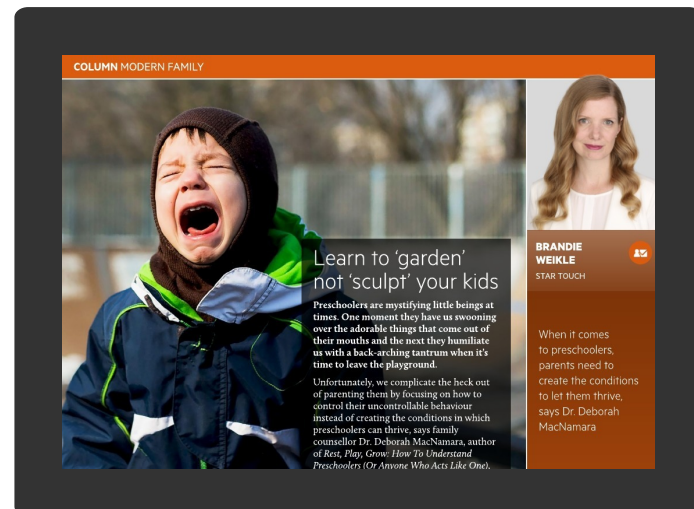


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FAMILY - Screen 4

COLUMN: MODERN FAMILY

## LEARN TO 'GARDEN' NOT 'SCULPT' YOUR KIDS

When it comes to preschoolers, parents need to create the conditions to let them thrive, says Dr. Deborah MacNamara

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Preschoolers are mystifying little beings at times. One moment they have us swooning over the adorable things that come out of their mouths and the next they humiliate us with a back-arching tantrum when it's time to leave the playground.

Unfortunately, we complicate the heck out of parenting them by focusing on how to control their uncontrollable behaviour instead of creating the conditions in which preschoolers can thrive, says family counsellor Dr. Deborah MacNamara, author of *Rest, Play, Grow: How To Understand Preschoolers (Or Anyone Who Acts Like One)*, which comes out April 30.

Based on the research and teachings of Dr. Gordon Neufeld, one of the world's most esteemed child development experts, the book stresses the importance of laying a back-to-basics groundwork on which our little ones can get to know themselves and the world. I spoke to MacNamara about the book. Here's some of what she had to say:

Why is the book called *Rest, Play, Grow*?

If you had to distil to the essence what the developmental road map is, it would be how to provide rest — this type of relational rest, the type of attachments — in order to answer their hunger for contact and closeness, which is the most primary need of our young children. Rest then releases them to play, which is where they become their own unique, separate people where their potentials are really realized. The combination of rest and play leads to growth, which is all about maturity and the ultimate goal of raising a child — to help them launch as a separate, adaptive, social being.

What do you mean by “relational rest?”

Think about how a body grows: a body grows when it's asleep. But we grow as people — we grow psychologically — when we're at rest in our relationships. Meaning that we can take for granted that our needs for contact and closeness, for significance, for love, that those things are taken care of. Because if our children don't have that then they'll be primarily occupied with seeking out an answer to their attachment needs.

You point out that at the heart of Neufeld's work is making sense of the conditions required for the realization of human potential. How so?

The idea here is that parenting isn't a skill to be learned. It isn't a technique so much as it is about the conditions for growth. If you look at it from the position of being a sculptor vs. a gardener, we're really the gardener. It's about how we preserve and protect attachment and keep our relationships strong. Throughout the book I address a number of different types of challenging problems that parents have with young children — the bedtime battles, the separation anxiety, resistance and oppositions and tantrums — looking at how you keep the relationship in mind.

Why is it important for us to understand behaviour in the context of growth?

Because I think on the surface we focus on how to change the behaviour when true growth is actually about is the maturation of their emotional system, being able to express their inner world into language around these big emotions that come up within them — things like alarm, frustration, disappointment, sadness. You can get a child to stop doing a lot of stuff but it doesn't mean that they're more mature as a result. Fear presses down on lots of stuff. You can be told to say "please" or "thank you," but it doesn't necessarily mean that you understand yourself or the world more.

So what's a better way to teach a preschooler to say please and thanks without just fear of getting in trouble if they don't?

If we have a birthday party coming up, I might say to my children, "You're likely going to get some gifts. If you have a thank you in you and you're appreciative of those gifts, then make sure to give your thank yous." It's the same thing with a "sorry." You can ask your child before you command a sorry, "Do you have a 'sorry' in you?" Sometimes my children would say, "No, I don't have one right now." But I would go back to them later and say, "You're obviously playing with your sibling again. Have you said your 'sorries?'" You don't want a caring performance — you want a caring spirit.

What are some common misconceptions about preschoolers?

That they think twice. That because we told them once or a hundred times that somehow their behaviour is personal. It's not. We think that they can focus on a lot more things than they can at a time. They really can only do one thing at a time. That they have their own form of logic — it just has to make sense to them. That to them sharing really is not caring, and that this does not make them flawed. This is developmental in design. In order to be with other people they have to know who they are themselves. It's a huge period of identity formation; it's not personal that they have a lack of consideration for others.

What do you think preschoolers wish their parents could understand about them?

That they just want to be loved and taken care of. And just to let them play. They really need us not to hold their immature ways against them. And that they'll get there.