



# It's a Jungle

A Parent's Guide to  
Emotions and Behaviour

by

Dr Brenda Heyworth

Illustrated by Chris Kennett

The 'It's a Jungle' strategies are provided as general information about parenting and should not be relied upon as being in the manner of a medical consultation or advice. If you have particular concerns about your children's health and wellbeing, please visit your local doctor or health professional.

It's a Jungle Pty Ltd  
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Sunshine Coast MC, Queensland, Australia 4560

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# INTRODUCTION

I remember being a kid...

...play, play and lots of fun but there were also times when it seemed so unfair. 'Parents have it easy,' I grumbled. 'They don't have to go to bed at 7.30. It's hard being a kid!'

Thirty years later and I'm a parent. Wow doesn't that change things?! Now I see it from the other side of the story. Parenting has all those wonderful moments like hugs and laughter but there are also all those complicated dilemmas. Should I be more strict or less? Do I do it for her or let her make her own mistakes? Surely he can clean his own room by now, can't he? I still believe being a child is hard but now I'm convinced being a parent is *even harder*.

Like most people, I had some warning that having children would change my life. Someone told me I'd be ready to be a parent if I could put a nappy on a wriggling squid or take a goat to the supermarket and pay for everything it eats. I laughed at the time, thinking it was a joke, but it turned out to be true.

When I became a mother, I knew I had no experience at raising a child and I wanted to learn how. As adults we learn new skills by watching, reading, getting advice or enduring trial and error. With parenting I found the whole process confusing.

One book told me to *Do it this way* while a friend's advice was to *Do the opposite*. Not sure who to follow, I read another book only to find yet more conflicting advice. In the end, I stumbled through with trial and error. If advice made sense, I gave it a try to see if it worked. Some experiments were disasters and some



worked out okay. If a technique showed a bit of promise, I'd add in a bit of common sense or a minor variation and off we'd go.

If you've picked up this book it means you understand just how complicated parenting can be. You know the stakes are high and you want to get it right. You're trying to learn more, but raising a child is not like anything else that we learn to do. There's no clear method that's accepted as the best way. If you ask for instructions from three different people, they'll give you three different opinions. You'll even get advice from people you didn't ask like that lady glaring at you in the supermarket while your child throws his tantrum.

## So which advice do you follow?

I'm a mother and a child psychiatrist. As a mother, I've done my share of trial and error. I've also studied medicine, the mind and emotions. Professionally, I've met thousands of children and parents who have come for support and advice and, over time, I've noticed a pattern. Children struggle with their *emotions* and then parents struggle with their *behaviour*. It's all about **BIG EMOTIONS**.

Children need to learn how to cope with their emotional world but their emotions are swirling so wildly that they can't work it out by themselves. It's our job, as parents, to teach them how. It's a tough job but an important one. Our working conditions may include getting yelled at and insulted because our children's instincts are to 'come out fighting'. That's the **LAW OF THE JUNGLE** but it's not how the real world works. Children have a lot to learn.

Consider this book like an instruction manual for parents. You might wonder why I don't just write a book of instructions for



children. It's my job as a child psychiatrist to help children understand their emotions, so why don't I just write it down for them? The simple answer is that it won't work. When it comes to emotions, children don't learn so well through *words*. They learn better through *experience*.

Have you ever given teenagers perfectly good advice, only to find that they ignored it and made their own mistakes anyway? When it comes to learning about emotions and behaviour, it's more powerful to learn from experience than from words.

Our children need to learn from experience about how to handle their emotions. This book will help you provide the framework for that to happen.

### **This book will help you to:**

- understand the link between emotions and behaviour
- recognise the jungle in your children
- stay out of the jungle yourself
- teach your children the ways of a civilised world

It might even give you a chuckle when you start to recognise the jungle in other adults...maybe even your boss!

**ONCE YOU RECOGNISE THE JUNGLE  
IT LOSES POWER !**

You've picked up this book because you want things to change.

# **LET'S GET STARTED!**



## 1

## CALL OF THE WILD

Watch a baby sleeping and they seem so peaceful. It's hard to imagine that this beautiful baby will one day hit the 'terrible twos' or 'terrible teens' and transform into a wild and unruly creature, when the peace will be shattered by tantrums and defiance.

We love our children, nurture them and watch them grow. They start out sweet but then we start to suspect a wild streak. We see hints of it with the huffing and stomping then watch as the wild streak grows stronger. If you've ever seen your child throw an enthusiastic tantrum, you might wonder whether you're raising a child or wild monkey. But aren't they all little monkeys on the inside?

Some children's behaviour can be pretty wild. It can be triggered by something as simple as not getting what they want and it can escalate to such an extreme that they are screaming, hurling furniture and kicking a hole in the wall.

Of course this behaviour is not acceptable. It's destructive. It's hurtful and certainly isn't the way to deal with frustration, so why do children do this? Where do they get such bad behaviour?

I've seen parents who were so shocked by this wild behaviour that they worried it must surely be caused by some illness. They ask whether their child has a 'split personality' or even schizophrenia and I reassure them that this behaviour is not an illness. It's a natural human trait that lies deep within all of us. It's a child's *fighting behaviour* and is driven by primitive instinct. Survival instinct tells them to come out fighting so that's what



they do to the best of their abilities. This is the *Law of the Jungle*.

Some fighting behaviour is obvious, you can hear it from a block away, but some is more subtle. Pouting, arguing and pestering are not as dramatic as a loud, destructive tantrum but they, too, are forms of fighting behaviour. Different children will have different styles but they all do it at some stage. It's their answer to the call of the wild.

To understand what's really going on, we have to look past the behaviour to see what's underneath. Underneath fighting behaviour is emotion.

Each child has their own bundle of complex, conflicting emotions and are somehow supposed to make sense of them. Even in this modern day, emotions remain something of a mystery to us all. We can't say what they're made of and we can't point to where they are. We just know that they are there, coming from somewhere deep inside us.



A swirl of emotions is a powerful thing. It can spin us and hurl us in any direction. Children are born with the ability to *feel* emotions but without the skill to *steer* them. Their emotions are wild and unbridled and can run or fly in any direction at great speed. To grow up into happy, well adjusted individuals they have to

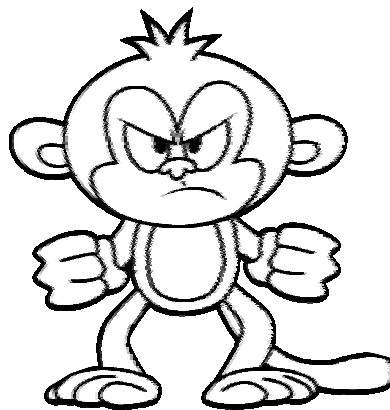
somehow learn about their emotions and how to manage them. It is one of the most important skills for them to learn but also one of the hardest. Emotions don't come with an instruction manual.

Emotions won't necessarily stay in a nice tidy bundle. They can swirl and swell to considerable size. When emotions get **BIG**, a child can be quickly overwhelmed, whether it's with frustration, anger, disappointment, guilt or embarrassment. Even pleasant emotions like excitement can overload them. The *emotion* isn't the problem. It's the *size*.

'the emotion isn't the problem  
it's the size'

Once overwhelmed, a child has no idea what to do and that's when instinct takes over. It's the call of the wild that says, '**IF IN DOUBT, COME OUT FIGHTING**'. It's the default setting for those times when they don't have any better idea.

Whatever form the fighting behaviour takes, the key is to recognise it for what it truly is. They've crossed a line and entered...



**THE JUNGLE!**



Powerful emotions can fling a child deep into the jungle. He enters the fight zone but didn't plan it that way. As far as he can tell, it just happened. The jungle's not a pleasant place to be. It's tangled and dark, so choked with vines that even the sunlight can't get through. It's a stressful and scary place.

If a child was already feeling overwhelmed with emotion, his trip to the jungle won't make it any better. He'd become even more overwhelmed but at least *in* the jungle he knows what to do. In the jungle, survival instinct activates his response for **FIGHT, FLIGHT or FREEZE**.

Maybe he'd prefer the *flight* option but it's hard to run away when he's already lost in the jungle. Whether he likes or not, his options are limited. It's not good to look scared and vulnerable in the jungle, so he hides those feelings on the inside and covers them up with a tough exterior. From the outside he looks primed and ready. He's got his fists up and he's ready for a *fight*.





## **What fighting behaviour have you seen?**

- Does your child argue with you about every little detail while she tries to wrap you up with your own words?
- If she doesn't like your answer, will she pout and cry until you feel sorry for her and change your mind?
- Do your sons argue and insult each other, until one of them finally explodes, turning anger into fisticuffs and screaming?
- Do they set emotional traps like, 'It's not fair! He's always been your favourite'?
- Does your teenager try to shock you with a choice swear word then stomp off and slam her bedroom door?
- Is your daughter perfectly behaved at school (like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth) then lets it all loose once she's home, screaming like a banshee?
- Does your ten year-old son shout at you loud enough to be heard from streets away, then throw your favourite vase at the floor before kicking a hole in the wall?
- Do they use the ultimate weapon, the most hurtful of all, 'I hate you! I wish you weren't my mother/father'?

**THAT'S JUNGLE!**

**They need to learn a better way!**



If survival instinct says *come out fighting*, then a child who's good at fighting has impressive survival skills. Good on him. He's doing his best to get by in a jungle world. It shows an impressive spirit and determination. Imagine what he could achieve if he steered that same spirit and determination toward a more civilised way of dealing with things.

## 'fighting is stressful'

All this fighting is stressful for your children and it's stressful for you. At heart, your children don't like this behaviour any more than you do. They don't like creating a mess of emotions. They get upset and *come out fighting* which makes a bigger mess. Then they get even more upset. They go deeper and deeper into the jungle but don't know how to stop. You know that they love you and don't want it to go this way but they just don't know how to stop themselves.

Flick through the pages of this book quickly and you'll see a jungle monkey going for glory in the bottom right hand corner of the pages. Keep this picture in mind, whenever you think of the jungle.

It doesn't have to be like this. There is another way but it's complicated and it takes a lot of practice. It's called **SELF CONTROL**. No child is born with it. Self control is a skill they have to develop but, once mastered, it provides the civilised option for dealing with big emotions.

All of us will experience big emotions at some stage. The question is whether we opt for the primitive response or the more cultured one. Do we come out fighting or show self control? Fighting might be a way to survive in the jungle but it's rather

frowned upon in civilised society.

Children, of course, have no choice how to respond because they don't yet have *self control*. Their swirl of emotions flings them into the jungle and they have no other option but to set loose their inner monkey.

If we leave kids to discover self control by themselves they are going to struggle. They're certainly not going to find it while stomping around in the jungle. If we want them to succeed, we need to help them.

At some stage, every child goes through a phase of fighting behaviour. When we try to help them, their instinct is to fight against us. Our children go into the jungle and sometimes we feel like we're swinging through the trees with them. If we want to help them, it's important that we don't jump into the jungle with them. Our instinct tells us to *come out fighting* as well, but that won't work. You've probably already tried arguing and yelling back but it didn't get you very far. Now you're looking for a better way.

We need a strategy to help us deal with their fight response without falling into the jungle with them. As adults we have tools to deal with our own emotions and we can teach these to our children. It's time to introduce our little monkeys to the use of basic tools. It's time for them to learn the ways of a cultured and civilised world. We can teach them a framework and a culture which starts with rules and consequences but will one day develop into *self control*.

There will come a time when they know how to recognise their emotions and know confidently what to do with them. They'll have made peace with their inner monkey and can resist *the call of the wild*.

