

interview with Andrew Bomback

*Author of Long Days, Short Years:
A Cultural History of Modern Parenting*



**“How parenting
became a verb”**

Andrew Bombback is a nephrologist, Associate Professor of Medicine at Columbia University Irving Medical Center, and the father of three kids aged 11, 8 and 5. He is the author of *Long Days, Short Years: A Cultural History of Modern Parenting*. In an interview with Tanmoy Goswami, Bombback talks about the cultural pressure to be perfect parents, how parenting has changed since the pandemic, and a “revolutionary” roadmap for parents to normalise help seeking and prioritise their wellbeing.

When did “parent” become a verb and what bearing did this have on the wellbeing of parents?

The use of “parent” as a verb began as far back as the 1950s. But the real uptick in that usage, at least in the USA, begins in the 1970s. It parallels pretty neatly the movement of women into the workplace. When the word “parent” becomes a verb, it’s essentially saying: “If you’re going to go into the workplace and adopt a new role in life, you need to put the same amount of effort into parenting as you would into your career.” It repositions parenting as a skill you can master if you put enough work into it. Now, if you’re a parent, you know it’s impossible to master parenting. But for multiple reasons this idea took hold ...

Yeah, and many of these reasons were market-driven ...

Indeed. Since more parents were working and spending less time at home, there was this new-found pressure that you needed to use your time more efficiently. Entire businesses were created off the promise that they’d help you parent better. Now that women were working, they also had extra money that they could use to buy these products and services. There’s also a cultural expectation that began in the ’70s that if you’re going to try to have it all as a mom with a career, you need to work at it, it’s not going to come naturally. We just completely sucked out any free time for parents because of these expectations.

Let’s explore the title of your book – the conventional narrative that parenting entails long days but short years. What do you make of this narrative?

I’ve heard the expression “long days and short years” so much that I was shocked when I learned

it was a relatively recent thing – the podcaster and writer Gretchen Rubin first used it less than 10 years ago. To me it feels like a double-edged sword, as if society will make some concessions and say, “Yeah, we realise being a parent now is much harder than it used to be. But at the same time, you’re a bad person and you are failing as a parent if you don’t appreciate the experience.” I think that’s also a very modern phenomenon – that you’re expected to sort of grin and bear it, and that way you can get through it faster than you think. Like it’s a chore.

“We just completely sucked out any free time for parents because of these expectations.”

The days are particularly long for parents who struggle with economic precarity.

I was just thinking about this yesterday as I dropped my children off at their summer camp. I remember thinking that it’s a real privilege that I am able to drop them off at 8.30 and start my job at 9 o’clock, rather than having the kind of job where I’d need to start at 7 or 7.30. The parenting advice industry that tells you how to cope with these long days is also geared towards people with privilege. You don’t see too many books that address single parents who are struggling to pay their rent, do you?

It doesn’t help when social media influencers project the idea that parenting is fun and effortless.

As far as social media goes, perhaps the best thing to do is to get off it. But I do feel that things are changing. Before the pandemic, there was a lot more of the high-gloss, fake version of parenting from influencers. It was all about successes: “Look how great we’re doing! Look at our amazing vacation pics! Look at our great birthday party! Look how happy my children are! Look how perfect this day was!” Now I see more authentic emotions. If somebody has a birthday party, they’re saying, “We’re so grateful we could do this with our family.” Parents are more open about their difficulties. They’re saying, “We are all struggling, let me share a few ideas that have helped me.”

There's also greater recognition that placing your entire focus on your child's wellbeing without any on yourself is a recipe for disaster.

You talk about the pushback against intensive or helicopter parenting in favour of giving kids more freedom.

Again, this philosophy is really geared towards middle- and upper-class parents. If lower-income parents practise hands-off parenting, they could be accused of neglect – even though they need their kids to be more independent because they don't have the resources and support that higher-income parents have.

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You say fathers have found reading your book particularly cathartic. Why do you think that is?

I think they're talking about some of the discussions I have about parental frustration and rage. Moms feel anger too, of course. But I think there's a specific fear that some fathers have about where they might end up if their anger boils over, and they don't have enough spaces to talk about it. Unlike for my parents' generation, spanking children is out of the equation. When I rage as a parent, I know that if I were to spank my child, I'd feel extremely awful and guilty. I don't think people in my parents' generation always did this kind of post hoc analysis. We're much more critical of ourselves now.

As the father of a 5-year-old, I wonder whether early childhood is particularly fraught for parents, and if things get easier as the child grows older.

I do think there's something to the fact that people who are outside the active parenting years tend to be happier. Around the age of 50 or 60, people are at their happiest because they finally reach a state of acceptance. They no longer feel like they have to constantly prove themselves. The freedom to finally live the life they've missed can feel very relieving.

Do you have a roadmap for parenting that normalises help seeking and prioritises the wellbeing of parents?

I like what Angela Garbes says in her book *Essential Labor*. She uses the word “mothering” – a vision of raising children as a social and collective responsibility that includes people of all genders as well as non-parents – instead of parenting. Mothering, when seen this way, isn't a task for just one person. What you really need is to build up a circle of five to ten adults who love your child and who you can trust to be part of this child rearing. Garbes talks about how she lets some of her neighbours discipline her kids and pick them up from school. And she does the same for the neighbours' kids. So they have a symbiotic relationship. You could build the same understanding with grandparents or babysitters. Ultimately, the more reliable and safe and trustworthy help you can get, the more likely you are to succeed as a parent. And I think that is a potentially revolutionary way to view parenting.

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References

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Garbes, A. (2022) *Essential Labor: Mothering as social change*. New York: HarperCollins.