

NO PERFECT PARENTS

世上沒有理想的父母

A book offering solutions for perplexed mothers and fathers

Many parents regard themselves as mirrors reflecting their children. When the child disappoints, they blame themselves. Or else they set themselves unreasonably high standards, believing that if they can embody perfection then their child will not err. Yet in a world that is changing around us so quickly, with such abrupt shifts taking place in society, many parents find it difficult to adapt – let alone teaching their children to adapt.

This book has a message for these parents: don't be so hard on yourselves. Parents must be imperfect if they are to withstand the many inevitable bumps and jolts on the road to maturity.

Lo I-Chun draws on her experience with her own daughter, which taught her that a back-and-forth dialogue is far more important than one-way instruction, and granted her insight into the most common flashpoints of parent-child conflict. She suggests the kind of question that will encourage the child to voice their innermost thoughts, thus allowing you to understand the motives that lie behind their action, and to help them in the process of shaping their view of the world. Conflict itself needs not be a problem, if effective communication can lead to resolution.

After spending a career handling media and PR, Lo I-Chun has now forged a new method of communication between parent and child. This book was built out of her conversations with her daughter, supplemented with her reflections on the problem of childrearing, in the hope that readers would come to see the communicative logic underpinning their dialogue.

Lo I-Chun 羅怡君

Lo I-Chun was responsible for marketing PR and media planning for companies including Ogilvy, Sanlih E-Television and 3M, until she left her job behind three years ago to focus on enjoying a life as a mother and starting a new career in writing and lecturing. She is also the author of *Speculative Conversations Between Hedgehog Mama and Pangolin Daughter*, and *Saying No is Where Education Begins*.



Category: Parenting

Publisher: Aquarius

Date: 10/2016

Rights contact:
booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com

Pages: 272

Length: 70,000 characters
(approximately 49,000 words in English)

Rights sold: Simplified Chinese
(Guangdong Economy)

Material: Sample

NO PERFECT PARENTS

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Every parent is a choice architect

Many people are curious about how Dear Daughter spends her time. After all, I'm a full-time mother who writes books on raising children! Surely I must be designing cutting-edge activities for her? So whenever I mention Dear Daughter's weekend English class, I get puzzled looks.

"You send your kid to English class?"

"Hang on, aren't you the one who said English isn't that important?"

It's true, my husband and I are not fans of out-of-school classes. Nor do we think that learning foreign languages is particularly necessary for elementary school children. So why did we make the decision that Dear Daughter should go to English class?

This story starts with a book, a book that made me relax my insistence on doing things my way, and think about the other side of "making choices".

The deep logic behind simple choices

In the book *Nudge*, authors Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein relate an interesting experiment carried out in the USA. The food on offer in a school canteen was presented in a different order and a different manner to see if that would affect the children's choices, even though the food itself had not changed. A designer went to a dozen different schools, and asked them each to present the food in the canteen in a specific order: some put the desserts first, some left them till last; some put the French fries at eye level, another put carrots in the same position. When the results were tallied up, they found that simply by changing the presentation, they could make a big difference in the children's selection of lunchtime food. By making use of this discovery, schools were able to steer their students towards healthier eating.

Tiny changes can have a big effect on what people choose. This is the principle of "choice architecture".

We have many, many opportunities to apply this principle in our everyday lives. Where is the boss of a buffet going to place the healthiest foods? The most profitable foods? Or yesterday's leftovers? How do supermarkets and convenience stores decide where to

put things on their shelves? Do they highlight the most profitable items, or the ones with the fewest additives? In fact, the applications of choice architecture go further than you might imagine. How can we increase the number of people who sign up to be organ donors? How can we encourage people to move to a new pension scheme? The smallest changes in the options available can have a completely unconscious influence on the choices people make, even when they are “informed choices”.

How does it make you feel, hearing about all these mysterious influences? A little cheated? As though you’re being tricked? Or is it more of a relief? After all, it’s hard to understand all the different choices we have to make, and at least now you’re getting some professional advice. We all have to buy investments, insurance, a house or an apartment.... At the end of the day, we have to place some faith in the judgment of specialists.

More importantly, I’m sure that every mother and father is very familiar with the principle of choice architecture. In fact, you’re probably already experienced choice architects. We have all wracked our brains for ways to persuade our children to willingly go along with some activity, take an interest in some class, or accept some new rule.

But doesn’t it all sound a bit contradictory? We know that we should respect our children’s own interests and character. Forcing a child to study something is completely useless. At the same time, we have this nagging feeling: isn’t our child just figuring out what it means to learn? Particularly for younger kids – if they don’t get a breadth of knowledge and experience, how will they ever know what they like or don’t like? And are their choices being influenced by some other factors, rather than their own innate interests?

It was exactly this kind of a dilemma that faced me.

Understanding my child’s choices

Dear Daughter always had an appetite for language. In kindergarten, her favorite activities were writing Chinese characters and learning Hokkien, the second language spoken in Taiwan. She would often bring over a pen, and ask me to write characters for her to copy. But funnily enough, in the year before she was due to start school, she *insisted* that she didn’t like her kindergarten English classes. Once she started grade school, it was the same: she got good enough scores in her tests, but as soon as she spotted English on the page, she switched off, no matter how attractive a picture book, song, or game it might be.

This excessive rejection started to make me a bit suspicious. What was going on? Dear Daughter went to an ordinary neighborhood kindergarten. It didn’t have anything beyond the standard introduction to English, and we’d never enrolled her in classes outside of school. So where had this particular dislike for English come from? After all, she would often ask us how to say things in Hokkien, and she loved listening to the Japanese in her manga cartoons. Why would a kid who enjoys languages take so violently against one particular language?

Her dad was not as worried as I was. He didn’t think it really mattered if she disliked English. Language is just a tool, after all. What’s important is whether you have a creative mind. We weren’t worried that she didn’t like rollerblading or playing chess, so why should we fuss over whether or not she liked English? Dear Husband asked me more than once: was I sure I wasn’t slipping into the fallacy of thinking she’d need English to succeed? Why was I so concerned about her not liking English?

Talking it out gave me the opportunity to think carefully about my own motives. Was I just being a pushy parent, anxious that my little darling must keep up with the Joneses? Or was there really something odd about this highly specific reaction against English?

At the end of Dear Daughter's first year of school, she got a report card, and the teachers said that her English was "Excellent". I tried to open a conversation with her about it. "You got a great report, even though you don't even like English! You must be pretty smart."

"Mom!" She replied. "We still have classes, don't we? It doesn't matter how I feel about it."

"Have you ever thought about why you don't like English, but you like Hokkien?"

"I don't know, I just don't." Dear Daughter was clearly not very interested in this line of conversation.

I started to apply the facts that I knew to try to find the answer to the puzzle. She was doing well in school, so it wasn't fear or frustration. She was interested in the languages all around her. So perhaps the best explanation was that her teachers had not made English interesting enough for her. Could it be that the word lists they learned at school were just dull, so she thought that English was dull? After all, she had never had any other type of English lesson outside of her school classes.

This was my hypothesis. Now I had to test it: We would take her to try a different type of English class. So I called up the three English training centers near where we lived, and organized to go to trial classes. I proposed a deal with Dear Daughter: if she still didn't like English after these trial classes, I would not make her sign up. Dear Daughter was not impressed – and nor was Dear Husband. But my word still carries a little weight in our house, so I said, "Please, this is what I would like to try. Everyone just give it a chance."

By the end of the first class, Dear Daughter was keen for more, but also frustrated by the fact that she couldn't keep up with the other children. By the end of the second class, she was entranced, and wanted to tug me over to the desk to sign up on the spot. Half way through the third class, she asked if she could go to the bathroom, then ran out into the hallway to find me. "Mom, have you brought money? I like this one the best, go and sign up now to make sure you get me a place."

Dear Husband was not entirely convinced, but he agreed that we might as well do what she wanted, and sign her up for classes at the third center to see if her enthusiasm would continue. After just the second class, Dear Husband told me that their bath time conversation was all about her new-found interest. She peppered him with a mishmash of English words, and proudly announced, "My English is pretty good now!"

Since then, her neglected English picture books have gained a new lease of life, and Dear Daughter has officially declared that she no longer hates English.

Interrogate your own decisions, over and over again

I learned a very important lesson about raising children from this process. We influence our children all the time, in a million different ways. Our preferences, lifestyles, choices, and viewpoints all reveal our values, and in fact, this unspoken communication affects our kids much more than anything we say to them. However much we respect our children and engage them in dialogue, we cannot deny this subtle influence which we wield over them. All we can do is develop a measure of control over it.

In the story of the English class, it was my beliefs that needed controlling: I don't like Taiwan's culture of extracurricular classes for kids, and I don't think English is as

important as people make it out to be. That meant that I accepted my child's dislike of English a little too unquestioningly. I didn't realize that I was ignoring the reasons behind her behavior, perhaps because it matched my own subconscious preferences (and Dear Husband's). Even to this day, I feel slightly uncomfortable telling people that my daughter goes to English classes. It doesn't seem like something that I would do.

But when I let go of my own feelings about English classes, and opened my mind to the idea of giving them a try, the results surprised both Dear Husband and me. We haven't changed our liberal ideas about education, but we have realized that we have to be very careful that our "progressive" ideals don't lead us to ignore the real issues that the child is experiencing (a lack of interest in English, despite her love of languages).

I'm absolutely not advocating weekend classes and extra English. There is still an ocean of difference between a nudge and a push. A nudge is when you have walked to the end of the diving board yourself, and the coach gives you just a little helping hand to get you through a psychological barrier. A push is completely different: it is doing something in which you yourself have no interest, purely to live up to someone else's expectations.

Of course, there is no objective standard that can always accurately distinguish between a nudge and a push. Ultimately it is all about a parent's self-awareness and their ability to be open and honest with their child. Too often, we deceive ourselves by telling ourselves that a push was really a nudge.

Human beings are unlike almost all other animals. Most young creatures have to grow up and learn to take care of themselves very fast indeed. Human infants are reliant on their parents for ten years or more, and particularly during the early years, their parents make nearly every decision in their lives. We choose what they eat, where they live, what kindergarten they should go to, what books and toys they play with.... But the crucial thing to remember is that as they develop more of an independent identity, we must stop, observe with an impartial eye, and finally provide the resources that the children need to make their own choices.

Being a reflective parent

- Do we enjoy the feeling of making choices?
- Are we always aware of the risks and opportunity costs in the choices we make?
- Who can decide for a child what risks they ought to take? If we hand a choice over to someone else, does that mean we no longer take any responsibility for it?