Introduction

A Perfect ShouldStorm for Parents

As a parent, there don't seem to be any "right" answers. I'm constantly wondering if I'm making the right decisions for my kids, and I'm struggling.

–Jennie, mother of three

When new parents come into my office, they are often filled with questions: Should we breastfeed? Should we co-sleep with the baby? Should we *not* sleep with the baby? Should we buy a certain toy to encourage development? Should we *not* use that toy? As the children get older, the questions change, but the shoulds stay. Should we allow screen time? Should we have the birds and the bees talk now? Should we do this? Should we *not* do that? There are lots of parents shoulding all over themselves out there, doubting themselves, desperate to get parenting "right."

I call this parenting pursuit of perfection a ShouldStorm. We are continually being messaged by the larger culture that we must try to maximize our opportunities to be the best parents possible at all costs—to worry about, well, everything, and to get it right all the time. Otherwise, the consequences will be dire. We are fully

responsible for whatever happens to our children, and the worst thing that our kids can experience is emotional discomfort, because we equate that with trauma, and trauma means permanent damage and evidence of how we've failed our kids. We must keep our kids safe all the time, physically and emotionally. I've had so many loving and engaged parents share with me their fear that they will somehow "mess their child up for life." As a mom, I have had some of the same worry—that I will somehow fail to give my kids the right support or opportunities, and this failure on my part will cause them future suffering.

It's a real ShouldStorm, and it is robbing us of a lot of joy.

We spend more time with our kids than the members of any prior generation, yet there is collective guilt around not spending enough time with our kids—or enough quality time. We do more for our kids than any prior generation, but remain convinced that we are not doing enough. Our parental anxiety is but one part of a larger culture of anxiety, which tells us we should optimize everything to achieve top productivity at work while somehow reaching a maximum level of health and happiness. If we end up unhappy, unhealthy, or burnt out it's probably because we didn't optimize ourselves enough. This is a collective culture that dominates our attention and energy and cuts us off from enjoying our lives. A pre-pandemic Gallup world survey shows that adults in the United States are the most anxious in the world. HealthyWomen, a nonprofit organization dedicated to equipping women with the evidence they need to make health decisions, ran a survey that revealed 96 percent of American women say they have suffered from anxiety, and 81 percent say they suffer from it at least weekly, again before the COVID-19 pandemic sent anxiety rates through the roof. But when our high-pressure culture gets started on parents it becomes the most toxic, because kids are not projects to be optimized. They are human beings to be cherished.

THE SHOULDSTORM DEFINED

The ShouldStorm is a high-pressure culture of criticism and anxiety that pushes perfectionistic parenting. Culture refers to a set of beliefs and behaviors that a group of people take for granted. It influences our friends, family, and neighbors, our online groups, and a huge body of parenting blogs, articles, and books. The ShouldStorm has an opinion on every little thing parents do, but it often contradicts itself. It tells parents what they should or should not do, and threatens that kids will suffer if parents don't follow those shoulds to the letter. Then parents internalize the shoulds; the ShouldStorm lives in our heads and makes parents feel anxiety and shame. Parents end up approaching their kids from a position of frantic worry about getting it right, instead of from their true selves.

There are two important components to understanding our cultural ShouldStorm and its power to make parents feel insecure, anxious, and ashamed: the internal triggers and the external ones. An internal trigger works like this: Your child is being difficult, and you feel anxious because the critical voice in your head is telling you that you should be calm, even as the baby screams in your ear and tears at your hair. The voice says, "You shouldn't let the baby cry like that," but you simply don't know what to do. Perhaps you should follow those three easy steps that you read about in a blog post the other day. You then act on the should, which may not be suited to you and your child in that situation. Your confidence plummets, and you then follow another, different should from someone else. Rather than

drawing on your own instincts or experience, you become caught in the vicious cycle of the ShouldStorm. Beware, it always has plenty more shoulds to offer.

The external piece is the messaging that comes from the larger culture, often media or another parent who consumes this same fear-based parenting culture. When a parent is unsure about what to do, they usually look for advice—reasonable enough. But the messages they get are bewildering, often conflicting, and sometimes terrifying. Alana, the mother of a former patient, was in month two of her maternity leave with her first baby. She had yet to figure out how to take a shower while caring for her small baby. She felt like a safe, short period of possible crying might be okay for her child, but she Googled it first. She found articles telling her that her baby would not bond properly if she let her cry. This is not proven by any research, and Alana's instinct disagreed, but it unnerved her. So, she went to her Facebook moms group. The comments poured in, and Alana felt like a terrible mother for considering letting her baby potentially cry for a few minutes. *What did you fail to do in the first place that your baby couldn't be happy for a few minutes? How could you even think of neglecting your child?*

When five minutes of possible fussing is renamed "neglect," know that the ShouldStorm's all-or-nothing toxic thinking is at work. We need and want to parent in community, and parents naturally look for a few go-to resources from whom they can seek advice and support. When the process works well, parents use that advice in concert with their own understanding of their needs and those of their particular child. But this all goes wrong when the ShouldStorm gets into the mix. Whether it masquerades as community or an expert source of advice, the shoulds are shaming, misinformed, and conflicting enough to shut down parents' confidence. As Jessica Winter writes in the *New Yorker*, "The business of parenting advice, though, is to raise the stakes—to

say it's all your fault, but that means you're in control and you can fix it."[1] Even worse, the ShouldStorm mixes just enough right-sounding information with all of the misguided shoulds that it leads parents to doubt what they instinctively know about their own children. In reality, there is usually a range of right, and it is different based on families' temperaments, kids, and situations. These are all things that parents need freedom to explore with their children, but they are robbed of that freedom when they are scared into thinking there is but one right way that they just don't yet know.

Nothing Is Ever Enough

Sociologist Caitlyn Collins spent five years studying parenthood in four wealthy Western countries for her 2019 book, *Making Motherhood Work: How Women Manage Careers and Caregiving*, and found that there is a common cultural ideal of motherhood. Sociologists refer to the cluster of beliefs that form an idea like this as a "cultural schemata." In the schemata of mother devotion, a good mother possesses an all-absorbing devotion to her children as the source of her life's meaning, creativity, and fulfillment.

Whether a parent consciously or unconsciously ascribes to wanting to be the perfect mother, these ideas influence parents and their parenting. A recent study by Patrick Ishizuka in Oxford Academic's *Social Forces* found that "cultural norms of child-centered, time-intensive mothering and fathering are now pervasive, pointing to high contemporary standards for parental investments in children."[2] In fact, most experts refer to all the different versions of the way we parent today as "intensive parenting."

While parents, and particularly the primary caregiver, or the *intensive parent*, as I call them, internalize the unrealistic expectations of the ShouldStorm regarding how they should be at home, parents who work outside of the home can get stuck on impossible

ideals of home and work. As Collins writes in her book, "Across the countries where I conducted interviews, one desire remained constant among mothers. Women wanted to feel that they were able to combine paid employment and child-rearing in a way that seemed equitable and didn't disadvantage them at home or at work."[3] That means in the United States, where 70 percent of mothers work and have kids under the age of eighteen, drowning in stress is the norm for moms and all parents.

The partners of intensive parents are doing far more than fathers did one generation ago, but the split in what was once known as "women's work," that is childcare and domestic chores, is still far from equal. Jennifer Senior writes about this inequality in her book *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenting*, pointing out that in couples with children under the age of six, mothers work five more hours per week than fathers. Much of this shows up at night, when "in dual-earner couples, women were three times more likely than men to report interrupted sleep if they had a child at home under the age of one, and stay-at-home mothers were six times as likely to get up with their children as stay-at-home dads."[4]

Parents are working overtime at home and at work, and they are doing it with significantly less support than previous generations or other parents around the world. Compared to Sweden and other industrialized nations, Collins notes, "The United States is an outlier among Western industrialized countries for its lack of support for working mothers."[5] Indeed, American mothers stood out in Collins's research due to their experience of crushing guilt and work-family conflict. It's so extreme that more women are opting not to have children. In the *Washington Post*, writer Monica Hesse explains her own decision. Hesse's salary range was $37,000 to $45,000 a year during her prime childbearing years, which she noted was far above the minimum wage in the United States. Yet, in the area where she lived, daycare cost an

average of $24,000 per year, while the rent on a two-bedroom apartment could cost more than $30,000. Meanwhile, her own mother was still working full-time, meaning she did not have access to free childcare from a family member. "The math never made sense. I did not have children because while other countries determined that investing in child care—making it free or inexpensive—is the easiest way to encourage motherhood, the United States has determined that what's easiest is simply berating families who can't make it work."[6]

Hesse hits on another key component of the ShouldStorm here: berating and publicly shaming families. I've heard endless stories from parents about being shamed by their relatives, their children's daycare providers, in a social media group, or just randomly at Target for not conforming to some ShouldStorm cultural standard of blemish-free perfection. When did it become okay for everyone to comment on another's individual parenting choices?

"What is wrong with your daughter?" an older woman on the street casually asked Nina, a new mom. "Is she sick? What are those marks on her face?"

Nina smiled and told her that it was entirely normal baby acne. But when the woman shook her head in disbelief, it was hurtful. In the Facebook parenting group that I facilitate, Should-Free Parenting, I polled parents about their experiences with public shaming. A full 338 parents responded, and the results were overwhelming: 86 percent said they had been shamed by other mothers, and 50 percent said they had been shamed by everyone!

There were plenty of the expected subjects, like being shamed for bringing too light a jacket for the weather or using formula to feed a baby. But most surprising was how often these mothers were shamed for doing what is recommended by the scientific, medical community, not for doing anything radical or controversial. Moms were shamed for breastfeeding or for keeping their infants in rear-facing car seats.

When Monique talks about her kids, she often mentions her "big plans" for them. Her parents had big plans for her, too, that centered on her finding financial security. But Monique's plans for her daughter are broader. "My mother was extremely close to her mother," Monique told me. "And I'm extremely close to my mother. So, the three of us are always passing things down: every 'mistake' my grandmother made, my mother made, and I made. She [her daughter, Zo] was going to be the one who was not going to make it. So, Zo was going to be so perfect in every single way." This is the impossible goal that drives the ShouldStorm: that we can raise perfect kids who are better than we are in every way.

And until recently, Monique's attempts at parenting perfection were going well. She breastfed Zo until she was four years old; and then when she didn't have milk for her son, she bought breastmilk for him on the internet. Her kids attend a desirable private school, participate in a full range of activities, go to playdates she carefully curates for them, and have their mother's presence whenever they are not elsewhere.

But there was one thing Monique wishes someone had told her before she became a mother: "I wish I had known and understood that your children are their own entity. They're just a whole other human being outside of you." Her daughter, now thirteen years old, has begun disrupting the big plans Monique had for her. "I'm figuring out that's not her plan. She has her own plan. So, I have to sit back as a spectator and just guide her when she wants to be guided." Monique says she's not alone: many of her friends are dealing with the same surprise with their own kids.

The compulsive drive to overdo it can come from a different place for each of us. Early in her marriage, Jane had practiced in a top law firm, but after she had kids, she stayed home with them. She is exhausted from managing her kids' activities, including the

tutors to make sure they place well in school. "Sometimes I wish we could cut down, but then I feel I have to justify the fact that I don't work," she told me. The ShouldStorm claims that its pressured brand of parenting is all about the kids, but neither of these well-meaning mothers knew what their kids thought of all this. They were blinded by fears and anxieties.

In single-parent families, our culture creates a crushing weight of stress. Laura strives to make up for the fact that she's the only parent because her kids' father left the family five years ago due to his substance abuse. Laura combines working as the breadwinner with covering both kids' activities and their emotional needs. In short, living up to the ShouldStorm is unworkable for Laura. Recently, her daughter, Emma, developed depression and thoughts of hurting herself. Laura works tirelessly to take Emma to and communicate with Emma's doctors and therapists. "I worry about her risk of suicide and self-harm constantly," said Laura. That fear, along with the nagging voice that constantly asks Laura if she's doing enough for her kids, keeps Laura constantly stuck in the ShouldStorm.

Nothing Is Enough for Dads, Either—But It's Different

It doesn't matter what the gender of one or both parents may be; all parents are subjected to the unrealistic expectations and shaming of the ShouldStorm. However, men are influenced by the ideal of motherhood in ways distinct from the influence on their female parent counterparts. This may, of course, play out differently in different families.

In almost every family I have seen over the last two decades, one of the parents in a two-parent family takes on the intensive parenting role, while the other assumes the dismissed one. I first recognized these roles while caring for the children of same-sex couples, who helped me see beyond gender stereotypes. Indeed, my clinical

experience with heterosexual couples has taught me that gender has little to do with who assumes each role.

For example, Jordan is a stay-at-home dad, and he, not his wife, is the intensive parent. Before he was a father, he spent many years as a coach for children's sports, while Jordan's wife had very little experience with children. Yet he confessed to me that he feels belittled or ignored most of the time. "She's a great mom, and I love her, but it's hard," he told me. "I'm the one with the kids all day. But if my wife or any other mother disagrees with me, then I'm wrong. If my kid bumps his head on a cabinet, it's a big deal. It means I wasn't watching him properly. But if he does it when he's with his mom, then it's because he's a kid."

Jordan's story shows the cultural ideal of motherhood at work. The belief that men lack the necessary skills to raise children undermines them when they step up to do it. Even though Jordan is the one at home with the kids and the one who observes them all day, his experience has been that the opinion of any woman who is a mother matters more than his when it comes to his kids. That's something our culture does to parents in a million different ways. It says that the parent who knows their child doesn't know what they are talking about and someone else does.

On the other hand, dads routinely tell me that they don't feel the ShouldStorm's blaming or shaming the way moms do. "Dads get a pass. That's been my perception for sure since I was a kid," Eitan told me. "So, when it's two dads, it's like, oh, you're heroic." His husband, Andrew, echoed the sentiment: "As a two-dad household, anything that we do is kind of miraculous because the expectations for dads are so low."

But that doesn't mean they aren't influenced by the ShouldStorm in other ways. Andrew, an architect and a business owner in New York City, feels the parenting subculture of their neighborhood. He

describes living in Park Slope, an affluent neighborhood in Brooklyn, as a cliché of intensive parenting. "It's routine for parents to ask, 'What are your kids doing?' When they were infants, it was, 'Oh, are you teaching your kids sign language?' As they got older it became, 'What afterschool activities are you doing?'" Andrew recalled. "It's hard not to judge yourself when you're like, 'Oh, he's doing Russian math? Oh, she's also doing Russian math?' Is everybody doing Russian math? Should we be doing Russian math?" In Andrew's experience, parents ask these questions for the same reason he does, "I think a lot of it is genuine curiosity. I do think about how many activities our kids do and whether they are being properly stimulated." He also worries they may be overscheduled. His husband shares both these concerns.

As they do for every parent who wonders if their child is overscheduled, all of the activities feel important to Andrew and Eitan. Besides swimming, their kids' activities reflect an appreciation for family and culture. Both Andrew and Eitan were born in the United States and grew up in California, and both had parents who immigrated to the United States from China and Israel, respectively. Their children are adopted: their son is of mixed Chinese and Black ancestry, while their daughter is Afro-Latina. The kids take Chinese and attend what Eitan calls "the most hippy-dippy Hebrew school in New York City." They also take a class in capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian tradition of music, dance, and self-defense that Andrew says is attended almost entirely by Black children. His daughter, who attends a predominantly white public school, has been struggling with her racial identity, and Andrew hopes attending the capoeira class and sharing more time with folks who may look more like she does will help her take pride in something Afro-Brazilian.

Parent guilt is a routine part of our high-pressure culture, something both Andrew and Eitan feel. "I'm always thinking

about what I'm doing wrong, and what I could be doing better," said Andrew. "I parent a little bit out of guilt." Meanwhile, Eitan, a Chinese medicine practitioner and business owner, reported the sort of self-blame one often hears from working mothers—feeling guilty for not staying home with the kids for their first year, for not being home enough, for the times he is too tired to play, and even "guilt that I'm not grateful all the time for the experience of being a parent." Even though the kids have had the same "wonderful" and loving nanny for eight years, Eitan immediately blames the fact that he works when something goes wrong with the kids. If only he had stayed home, his son might not have become a picky eater, their behavior might be more perfect, and his daughter might have started speech therapy earlier if he had been there paying attention. (He was. Eitan brought up concerns about her speech at multiple visits where the doctor advised waiting.) And in one of the most classic statements of ShouldStorm-induced parent guilt I've ever heard, Eitan said that if he stayed home with the kids, "I would have the energy to find the best occupational therapist and shuttle her there three times a week, instead of relying on the most convenient occupational therapist because they're willing to come to our house or they're a block away." Eitan has taken on most of the roles of the intensive parent: he's the one who keeps the kids' complex schedules straight and packs their lunches.

Assumptions about dads are still very prominent in Andrew's working world. "Colleagues who may not think about the fact that we're gay parents assume that there must be a wife at home to pick up the kids," he said. "When I say I have to do this or do that [for the kids] they pause like 'Oh, you don't have somebody in your life to take care of that? Can't the nanny do that?'" Andrew wants to be with his kids and finds the assumption that he would prefer to be at work confusing.

Al has also felt the difference in expectations for dads. In his case, his own father and his father-in-law are often surprised if he mentions doing the dishes or changing a diaper. "I was a hero. They couldn't believe I did so much," he told me. Al, who runs operations for a natural gas company, and his wife, a nurse, are raising two daughters. As a dad, Al says he feels little pressure from the ShouldStorm, but he doesn't realize how much his approach is influenced by norms of intensive parenting.

For instance, Al observes what he calls "parenting hours" between 7:30 a.m. and 7:30 p.m. while the girls are awake. "That time is theirs, and I'm going to be completely present in that time," said Al. That means whenever he is not at work on weekdays and "90 percent of the time on weekends," Al either directly interacts with his daughters or stays in a room nearby and makes sure not to engage in any activity that will distract him from giving his full attention if the girls walk in to say something. Which they do every ten minutes on average. When Al decided to build a dollhouse for the girls as a Christmas present, parenting hours meant that he would start construction after the girls were in bed and often go until 3:00 a.m. as often as five days a week rather than using their weekend parenting hours. By the time he was done, "It turned into two dollhouses with a shared yard. The whole thing is eight feet wide by five feet tall. It takes up what used to be our dining room.... It's outrageous," Al said. The impossible standards of the ShouldStorm, the parent-shaming that keeps us stuck in it, and the way that it polarizes our parenting relationships, all add up to one thing: parents are burning out.

Parental Burnout

Intensive parenting and the chronic stress of the ShouldStorm are every bit as demanding as a high-pressure career. And that means that parents are now suffering the type of burnout that we used to

associate with doctors or social workers. Burnout happens when people work extremely hard without enough support. People who are burned out feel emotionally exhausted, ineffective, and like their work lacks meaning. They also experience symptoms like rigid thinking, irritability, difficulty sleeping, and trouble with attention and memory. Burnout makes people think about quitting their jobs—but, of course, parents can't quit being parents.

Burnout feels terrible. "It's not that I'm stressed out," says one mom in an article by psychologist Robyn Koslowitz in *Psychology Today*. "It's like I've progressed beyond stressed to numb. Managing my kids and their endless needs seems impossible. I'm always messing up."[7] A recent paper published in *Clinical Psychological Science* examined two related studies designed to find out whether parental burnout is different from job burnout. The study found that parental burnout is defined by exhaustion, detachment, and/or a sense of inefficacy, and is a distinct entity from job burnout or clinical depression.[8]

"Burned out parents are exhausted by the unceasing demands of parenting. Although they might have rest periods, they never fully recharge. They're always in survival mode, which of course leads to more exhaustion and stress," writes Koslowitz in her article on the study.

Almost every intensive parent I ask tells me they have experienced parental burnout, and most of them say they feel it currently. Years of pandemic parenting have intensified these feelings substantially for many. "I've definitely experienced parent burnout. All the time, all day," said Monique. And some fathers feel it too. "I feel like I'm in a perpetual state of parental burnout at this point," said Eitan. "I don't experience as much joy in parenting as I used to."

Exhausted parents may have trouble sleeping because burnout is a nasty combination of overstimulation and fatigue. Stress drives

the brain to think constantly, and while parents may be physically exhausted, their brains and nervous systems are overstimulated, causing sleep troubles. It can become a vicious cycle, whereby greater stress and fatigue cause greater trouble with sleep. In other cases, detached parents feel like they are going through the motions. They are doing what they need to do for their kids, but they don't take pleasure in their kids or the activities. They find it difficult to express love or warmth to their children, which means the kids are not feeling their love. This makes parents feel terrible about themselves.

And, lastly, many parents feel ineffective. This particularly happens to parents with children who have special needs or intense personalities, because the parents' attempts to help their children don't seem to work. The unrealistic culture tells them they should be able to nurture or manage their children into near-perfection, or at least to be more like "normal" kids; parents feel discouraged when their children's behaviors and struggles persist. Across the board, parenting feels like an overwhelming and impossible task.

A lot of what contemporary parents take for granted as the level of involvement, protection, and comfort a child needs stems from the misuse of attachment theory (which we will get into in Chapter 1). Whether parents know where it came from or not, the idea that babies had to have just the right attachment to their parents in the early years influenced just about everyone. If a parent didn't get the early attachment just right, the theory said, it could never be repaired, and the child was doomed to a bad life. But in reality, the research on attachment shows that perfection is not how you create a secure attachment—not even close. In order for a child to have a secure attachment, the parent needs to be in sync with their child at least 30 percent of the time.[9] We'll go into this in more depth later, but it means that engaged, loving, and well-intentioned parents who are striving to meet the needs of their kids but missed a child's cue two

out of three times did not harm the security of their attachment. The kids thrived. Furthermore, research shows those daily and inevitable moments of misattunement, referred to by attachment researchers as "rupture and repair," are necessary to create a secure attachment. When well-loved and cared-for children have to practice self-soothing and self-trust during conflict or frustration with the caregiver, it is a time for them to learn and then experience the strengthening of the bond when repair work is done. It is an integral part of knowing they can endure some stress and that their bond is secure.

As beloved Fred Rogers put it,

> Just as it takes time for children to understand what real love is, it takes time for parents to understand that being always patient, quiet, even-tempered, and respectful isn't necessarily what "good" parents are.... Parents help children by expressing a wide range of feelings—including appropriate anger. All children need to see that the adults in their lives can feel anger and not hurt themselves or anyone else when they feel that way.[10]

* * *

When I explain the fallacies of the ShouldStorm to parents, I watch their eyebrows lift and their shoulders relax. Sometimes they cry with relief. Relief from the constant feeling of failure (or fear of failure) helps parents start to make room for a more compassionate and effective way of being with themselves and their children. But if people are parenting with unrealistic expectations of perfection one hundred percent of the time, the results are parents, as I often see in my office, too anxious or too worried to parent at their best.

It does not have to be this way. The Sigh, See, Start method gives us a way to step out of the anxiety and honestly connect with ourselves and our kids so we can choose our actions more wisely both

in the moment and ahead of time. Here's how it works: whenever you feel a should, sigh. Breathe in deeply and let it go long and slow. Sighing helps you calm down and connect with yourself. Next, see. See your child, see their body language, see the situation. Just mindfully observe for a moment without trying to change anything. Then (and only then) start. Start thinking about what makes sense here and then try doing that. You might start something, or you might start nothing to give your child space to work things out for themselves. What you start might work, or it might not, but either way you learn more about your child. And if a mistake triggers guilt, "Oh, I should have done it that way," you know what to do: sigh, see, and start again. With Sigh, See, Start, instead of reacting automatically to the shoulds in your head, you create a continuous loop of learning and growth for you and your child.

How to Use This Book

In Part 1, we'll look at how, over the course of two generations, our culture shifted from a more relaxed parenting approach to the intensive parenting we see today, and we'll hear from kids on how the ShouldStorm impacts them. Then, in Part 2, we'll learn more about the Sigh, See, Start method, why it works, and how to use it to transform the way we parent our kids. For parents who feel it is urgent to get started, it is fine to jump right to Part 2, but I encourage you to come back to the earlier chapters when you can because it's easier to plot a wise course forward if we understand where we started. Finally, in Part 3, we will look at what it means to live with a Sigh, See, Start mindset, and how to meet our kids' genuine needs proactively by using some of the best science-based techniques that complement Sigh, See, Start.