I believe parenting is one of the most challenging things we will ever do in our lives. I say this for a number of reasons. First, it is a protracted challenge. It is not over quickly. Development through to adulthood occurs over a long time. Second, the non-linear nature of each child’s development means not one size fits all at any one point in time, making it difficult to get a concrete grip on the process. As soon as we have got something working with our children, they go and change on us. Third, they change on us differently than their older sibling, or nephew or next door neighbour (and so on), making it difficult to apply strategies that we thought were ‘tried and true’. Fourth, the world with which children interact changes. Ongoing technological, environmental and social changes (to name a few) often cut to the heart of the home, leaving parents having to make judgement calls they do not feel equipped to make because they too are struggling to keep up with these changes. Fifth, parents themselves change (as do their circumstances). For example, financial and health concerns will often arise over the long developmental phase and these impact on parenting capabilities and approaches. Sixth, given the imperfect nature of our human condition, it is not unusual for children (or us) to have issues that can threaten or impede the developmental process. For some children this may be a diagnosed disability or specific difficulty (eg with reading). For others it will be a rough patch in their childhood (eg a bout of illness, or bullying, or unhappiness). These things are not easy for parents to deal with. Finally, there is an element of chance, luck and ‘randomness’ in the whole business – sometimes there are ‘bad’ days for no identifiable reason, just as there are many great days with no readily identifiable explanation. In all of this, it seems the one thing you can rely on is change.
In my own research program, I have recently built on some of the classic attributes we find are vital to instil in our children – important attributes such as resilience which addresses how children deal with adversity, difficulty and setback. My focus on resilience led to new research looking at ‘adaptability’, which I define as individuals’ capacity to effectively regulate (or adjust) their thoughts, actions, and emotions to deal with changing, uncertain, or novel situations and circumstances. In childhood there are many instances of change and uncertainty: starting school, moving to a new school, moving to a new grade, mastering new school subjects, dealing with a new teacher, adjusting to different teachers, having to get on with new peers, and having to do tasks that are novel or unfamiliar. In fact, these aspects of childhood are so typical that I believe change is more prevalent in our children’s lives than is hardship and adversity. To the extent that this is the case, attributes such as adaptability may require at least as much attention in our parenting as resilience.

In many ways, the chapters in this book provide advice on key aspects of adaptability. Collectively, they shed light on children’s thinking, behaviour and emotion. They also offer advice on how to attain desirable end states on each of these. There are extensions to children’s spiritual lives, which for many parents will be seen as another part of children’s adaptability. Indeed, it may be that the joint operation of positive thought, behaviour and emotion represent the fundamentals of Inspired children, the title and focus of the book.

The striking feature of this book is the unique bringing together of a number of factors relevant to parenting. It showcases many different parenting approaches and experiences. It illustrates diverse pathways through parenting. It recognises the highs and the lows – and the great bulk of life that resides between these two points. It integrates research with personal anecdotes, experience, professional judgement and practical perspectives. It draws from many disciplines (education to psychology to medicine). It deals with a wide timespan, from preconception to early and middle childhood and then to the teenage years.
As with all parenting publications, the application of this book will vary from parent to parent. These books are not novels where there is a linear passage from start to finish. In reality, different chapters are relevant at different points in the parenting journey. In fact, it is not uncommon for chapters to be read and re-read – with each re-reading feeling like a different chapter because one’s needs and experiences have changed since the previous reading.

At a couple of points in the book, authors advise against trying to do everything (or too much) at once. This is good advice and should encourage you to cherry-pick what resonates, what is doable, and what is timely at the point of reading. You do not have to agree on every aspect of the book or chapter within it. With so much advice on offer here, there is something for every parent. On many occasions there will be reassurance – that there are many things parents are doing well. On other occasions there will be insights on how to do things better.

Distilling and synthesising major themes in the book reveals an appreciation of modern parenting life. Headline concepts include the need to address stress, self-esteem (and self-efficacy and confidence), resilience, emotional intelligence, intellectual and emotional stimulation, relationships, money, play, alcohol and other drugs, role modelling, rules and respect. There is also recognition for traditional and non-traditional family structures, including single parents and extended family members such as grandparents.

The authors share quite intimate personal facts and stories. Many also share the typical everyday interactions they have with their own children. The numerous detailed interactions described provide demonstration pieces on how parent–child interactions can be shaped on a day-to-day basis. As noted above, bringing together personal and professional lives is a unique contribution made by this book.

This blend of the personal and professional is also useful because it recognises that parenting need not be a directionless and solely intuitive process. There is good information out there and ‘translational’ authors (that is, those translating research/professionalism to practice) can provide much needed direction and strategy for a role in life one often feels very ill-equipped to deal with. Drawing on so many authors for
different chapters, this book also moves beyond the typical offering of one person’s perspective on the whole parenting caper. Again, cherry-picking from this array of advice and practice, parents can develop an approach to parenting tailored to their own needs and aspirations.

Parents make a difference. The impact of their parenting will play out in many ways. Some days will be diamonds and some days will be stones. Sometimes parents’ impact will be immediately evident and sometimes there is a ‘sleeper’ effect such that later that year or well into teenage life it is evident that the message got through. In fact, sometimes it is when the children become parents themselves that you (now a grandparent!) see that the message got through. If you are reading this, it may be that some of the most important steps to be taken have been taken: picking up a book such as this is proof of your mindfulness and good intent as a parent. That is, there is a recognition and awareness that there are options and sliding doors for you to choose. Often each door can lead to positive outcomes – but being aware of others’ experiences and expertise can provide greater confidence and peace of mind in making a choice. Sometimes, the door chosen makes a significant difference in a child’s life – underscoring the need to be mindful and aware of others’ experience and expertise. *Inspired children* is well placed in both respects – laying out diverse journeys, experiences, and expertise upon which parents can draw as their parenting journey unfolds.

I wish you well on your journey.

*Andrew Martin*