It all started at a parent-teacher evening in London. The feedback on my son was good but the praise really turned to gold in the Art Room. One of his works, a sketch of a magician done in the style of Quentin Blake, was pinned to the wall as a model for other pupils. Underneath the portrait, my son had depicted the man's head from different angles. The Art teacher took it down to show me.

"Amazing for a seven-year-old to come up with something that plays with perspective like that on his own," she gushed. "Your son really stands out in the class. He is a gifted young artist."

And there it was, the G-bomb, the six-letter word that gets the heart of every parent racing. *Gifted*.

That night, I trawled Google, hunting down art courses and tutors to nurture my son's gift. Visions of raising the next Picasso swam through my mind – until the next morning. "Daddy, I don't want a tutor, I just want to draw," my son declared at the breakfast table. "Why do grown-ups always have to take over everything?"

The question stung like a belt on the backside. My son loves to draw. He can spend hours hunched over a piece of paper, inventing alien life forms, designing intricate comic books or sketching Lionel Messi taking a free kick. He draws well and it makes him happy. But somehow that was not enough. Part of me wanted to harness that happiness, to hone and polish his talent, to turn his art into an achievement. My son was right: I was trying to take over.

That showdown at the breakfast table turned out to be one of those life-changing moments of epiphany. It made me realize that I was losing my balance as a parent. It also inspired me to write *Under Pressure: Putting the Child Back in Childhood.*

To research the book, I spent two years travelling through Europe, the Americas and Asia to investigate the state of childhood today. I visited schools, nurseries, sports teams, laboratories and toy fairs; I interviewed teachers, coaches, camp councillors, advertisers, police, therapists, doctors and every kind of child development expert; I sifted through the latest scientific research. I also spoke to hundreds of parents and children.

What I discovered is that adults have hijacked childhood in a way never seen before in history. *Under Pressure* explores why the modern approach to children is backfiring, and offers solutions from around the world to help us find a better way. The book is not a parenting manual - there are enough of those already. My aim goes deeper than that: to redefine what it means to be a child and a parent in the twenty-first century.

Of course, the impulse to micromanage children is not new. Two thousand years ago, a schoolteacher named Lucius Orbilius Pupillus identified pushy parents as an occupational hazard in the classrooms of ancient Rome. When the young Mozart made prodigies fashionable in the eighteenth century, many Europeans hothoused their own kids in the hope of creating a *wunderkind*. Today, however, the pressure to make the most of our children feels all-consuming.

As parents, we feel under pressure to push, polish and protect our kids with superhuman zeal, to give them the best of everything and make them the best at everything. Think Baby Einstein DVDs and Mandarin-speaking nannies; the latest

iPod; GPS tracking devices in the school bag; schedules jammed with ballet, football, pottery, yoga, tennis, rugby, piano, judo. If our children do not shine as artists, academics, and athletes, if they suffer in any way, we feel like failures.

Around the world this micromanaging approach to childrearing has different names. Some call it hyper-parenting. Others refer to “helicopter parents” who always hover overhead. Canadians joke about “snow-plow parents” who clear a perfect path through life for their kids. Even in Scandinavia, where everyone is supposed to be gloriously relaxed, they talk of “curling parenting”: picture mum and dad frantically sweeping the ice in front of their child.

Of course, not all childhoods are created equal. You don’t find many children being hyper-parented in the refugee camps of Sudan or the shantytowns of Latin America. Even in the developed world, millions of youngsters, especially in poorer families, are more likely to suffer from underparenting than overparenting. Let’s be honest: most helicopter-parents hail from the middle class. But that does not mean this cultural shift only affects the well-to-do. When it comes to social change, the middle classes usually set the tone. And already hyper-parenting is eroding social solidarity because the more obsessed people become with their own children, the less interested they become in the welfare of other people’s.

Yet parents are just part of the equation. Outside the home, everyone from the state to the advertising industry is trying to bend childhood to fit its own agenda. A task force of British parliamentarians recently warned that too many children dream of growing up to be fairy princesses or football stars. Their solution: career advice for five-year-olds.

Consumerism has crept into corners of children’s lives that once seemed untouchable. Even the humble sleepover is now an advertising opportunity, with companies such as Girls Intelligence Agency sponsoring slumber parties where tweens sample new products and fill in questionnaires. McDonald’s workers visit the children’s wards of hospitals to hand out toys and balloons, as well as leaflets promoting their food. Put all this together, and many kids now see an estimated 40,000 ads a year.

At the same time as we abandon our children to the orgy of consumerism, we wrap them in cotton wool and prevent them from taking the kind of risks that would actually do them good. In many countries, officials have banned “dangerous” activities such as tag, marbles and snowball fights. Nearly half of British children aged 8 to 12 have never climbed a tree because their parents think it’s too dangerous. Never mind that in most countries paedophile crime is no more prevalent than it was a generation ago (it just gets a lot more media coverage) - there is so much panic these days that we cloister our kids indoors like battery hens to save them from becoming the next Madeleine McCann.

And look at what has happened to education. Children are stuffed with academics earlier and earlier and then tested over and over again until exam scores become more important than learning itself. Today, more kids than ever before are prescribed drugs like Ritalin to help them sit still and concentrate in class – and what is medication if not the ultimate form of micromanagement?

Wherever you look these days, the message is the same: childhood is too precious to be left to children and children are too precious to be left alone. But is that a bad

thing? Maybe all this micromanaging pays off. Maybe we are raising the brightest, healthiest, happiest children the world has ever seen.

Or maybe not.

Of course, we should take reports of the death of childhood with a pinch of salt. There are many advantages to growing up in the developed world in the early twenty-first century: You are less likely to suffer malnutrition, neglect, violence, or death than at any time in history. You are surrounded by material comforts that were unthinkable even a generation ago. Legions of academics, politicians, and companies are striving to find new ways to nurture, feed, clothe, school, and entertain you. Your rights are enshrined in international law. You are the center of your parents' universe.

And yet something is wrong. All this micromanagement, however well-intentioned, is backfiring. Children need plenty of guidance and a firm push now and again, but when adults call all the shots, when every moment is scheduled, supervised and structured, there is a price to pay.

Let's start with health. Cooped up indoors and ferried everywhere in the backseat of a car, kids are growing fatter than ever before. The International Association for the Study of Obesity estimates that 38 percent of under-eighteens in Europe and 50 percent in North and South America will be obese by 2010. Already the extra kilos are condemning children to heart disease, type 2 diabetes, arteriosclerosis, and other disorders once confined to adults.

Athletic kids suffer as well. Too much training too young is wearing them out. Injuries like anterior cruciate ligament tears, formerly only seen in college and professional athletes, are now rife in secondary school and increasingly common among nine- and ten-year-olds.

And where the body goes, the mind follows. Child depression and anxiety—and the substance abuse, self-harm, and suicide that often go with it—are now most common not in urban ghettos but in the smart downtown apartments and leafy suburbs where the go-getting middle classes are piling pressure on their children.

Micromanaged kids can end up struggling to stand on their own two feet. University counseling services report that students are going to pieces in record numbers. And professors tell of 19-year-olds handing over the mobile phone in the middle of interviews with the words: "Why don't you sort this out with my mum?"

The umbilical cord even remains intact after graduation. To recruit college graduates, blue-chip companies such as Merrill Lynch have started sending out "parent packs" or holding open-house days when Mum and Dad can vet their offices. Parents are even turning up at job interviews to help negotiate salary and vacation packages.

Along the way something precious and hard to measure is also being lost here. William Blake, the English poet, famously summed up the magic and wonder of childhood thus:

> To see a world in a grain of sand,
>
> And a heaven in a wildflower,

Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,

And eternity in an hour.

Today, many children are too busy racing to violin practice or math tutoring to hold infinity in the palm of their hand. And that wildflower sounds a little scary—what if it has thorns, or the pollen triggers an allergic reaction?

The truth is that children need time and space to explore the world on their own terms: that is how they learn to think, invent and socialize; to take pleasure from things; to work out who they are, rather than what we want them to be. When adults micromanage childhood, children miss out on the things that give texture, meaning and joy to a human life—the small adventures, the secret journeys, the setbacks and mishaps, the glorious anarchy, the moments of solitude and even of boredom. Their lives become strangely bland, packed with action, achievement, and consumption, yet somehow empty and ersatz. The freedom to be oneself is missing—and children know it. “I am like a project that my parents are always working on,” says Jessie Cartwright, a 12-year-old in New York. “They even talk about me in the third person when I’m standing right there.”

And let’s not forget what all this pressure does to the grown-ups: when childrearing becomes a cross between product-development and a competitive sport, being a parent loses its magic.

But enough of the bad news. The good news is that change is afoot. Across Europe, Asia and the Americas, people are looking for ways to back off, to give children more freedom to explore the world at their own pace, to let them be children again.

Schools are curbing the obsession with exams and trimming the academic workload – and finding that when pupils have more time to relax, reflect and take charge of their own learning, they learn better. Not long ago, Cargilfield, a private school in Scotland, banned homework for pupils aged three to thirteen. Within a year, exam marks in math and the sciences rose nearly 20 percent. The children also have more time to unwind and play. “It’s very much to do with children enjoying themselves when they are young and not turning their day into one long chore,” says John Elder, the Cargilfield headmaster. “We are here to enjoy ourselves, and we never have the chance again to relive our youth.” This year, Toronto became the first city in North America to slash homework at every age level.

To give over-scheduled children a breather, towns across the world now hold special days when all homework and extracurricular activities are cancelled. Many families are so relieved to go just one evening without dashing off to karate or lacrosse that they prune their planners during the rest of the year. Elite universities are sending a similar message. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology recently revamped its application form to put less emphasis on the number of extracurricular activities a candidate signs up for and more on what really fires his passion. Even the mighty Harvard urges incoming freshmen to check their over-scheduling ways at the door. Posted on the university Web site, an open letter by Harry Lewis, a former dean of the undergraduate school, warns students that they will get more out of college, and indeed life, if they do less and concentrate on the things that really fire their passion: “[You] are more likely to sustain the intense effort needed to accomplish first-rate work in one area if you allow yourself some leisure time, some recreation, some time for solitude, rather than packing your schedule with so many activities that you have

no time to think about why you are doing what you are doing." Lewis also takes aim at the notion that everything young people do must have a measurable payoff or contribute toward crafting the perfect CV. "You may balance your life better if you participate in some activities purely for fun, rather than to achieve a leadership role that you hope might be a distinctive credential for postgraduate employment. The human relationships you form in unstructured time with your roommates and friends may have a stronger influence on your later life than the content of some of the courses you are taking." The title of the letter sounds like a direct challenge to the culture of hyper-scheduling. It is called: *Slow Down: Getting More Out of Harvard by Doing Less.*

Around the world, families are heeding the call. For the Kesslers in Berlin, Germany, the turning point came when the two children—Max, seven, and Maya, nine—began fighting constantly. Their mother, Hanna, decided that their busy extracurricular schedule—violin, piano, soccer, tennis, fencing, volleyball, tae kwon do, badminton, and English tutoring—was driving a wedge between them. "When I was growing up, I had lots of free time with my siblings and we got along well, and still do," she says. "When I looked at our family schedule I realized Max and Maya had almost no free time together as brother and sister because one or the other was always rushing off to some activity."

She decided to pare back the load to three extracurricular activities per child. The children do not miss the clubs they ditched, and sibling harmony seems to have broken out in the Kessler household. "We get along better now," says Maya. "We have a lot of fun together." Max rolls his eyes, Maya glares at him, and for a moment it feels like the old hostilities might resume. But then the two children dissolve into laughter. Hanna beams. "I would never go back to being busy all the time," she says.

To give youth sports back to the young, leagues are clamping down on parents howling abuse from the sidelines and shifting the emphasis away from winning at all costs to learning and enjoying the game. One ice-hockey team for 10-year-olds in Toronto stopped tracking personal statistics and ensured that every child got the same ice-time, regardless of ability. The result: the boys fell back in love with hockey, burnished their skills and won nearly 20 tournaments in three years.

Even hardcore sports parents are learning to relax. Vicente Ramos, a lawyer in Barcelona, used to patrol the sidelines whenever his eleven-year-old son, Miguel, played football. Most of the time he was shouting: Run into the box! Pass the ball! Cover that man! Track back! He would then dissect the match in the car on the way home, giving his son marks out of ten. One day, Miguel, who is strong, quick, and blessed with a sublime left foot, announced that he wanted to quit football. "I was shocked," says Ramos. "There was a lot of shouting and arguing and crying, and eventually it came out that he was fed up with me always being on his back."

Ramos decided to ease off. Nowadays, he sometimes just drops Miguel at football and goes to have a coffee in a nearby café. When he does stay on the sidelines, he keeps his comments to a minimum. On the drive home from games, he no longer grades Miguel's performance, and often the two talk about things other than football. Ramos is surprised and relieved to find that his own mood for the week is no longer coloured by his son's fortunes on the field. Even more important, Miguel has rediscovered his love for football and feels he is a better player. "Now I just think

about the game and what I am going to do with the ball instead of worrying about what my dad is going to shout next," he says. "It's a big relief."

Our penchant for bubble-wrapping children to keep them safe from even the tiniest risk is also coming under review. At a new pre-school in Scotland, three-year-olds spend the day in a forest negotiating harsh weather, open camp-fires and poisonous fungi. Sure, they suffer the odd scratch or burn, but they arrive at kindergarten happier, more confident and less prone to illness and allergies than do their indoor peers. Or look at the global success of *The Dangerous Book for Boys*, a manual stuffed with tips on how to enjoy all kinds of high-risk pastimes, from racing go-carts to making slingshots and catapults.

All these changes imply childrearing with a lighter touch, letting things happen rather than forcing them, but there is much more to do. We need to make schools, sports, advertising, technology and urban planning more child-friendly. We need to bring back the idea that simple play, when children are left to their own devices with no targets or goals, is an essential part of a healthy childhood. A good starting point is to set aside an hour or two every day when your kids entertain themselves without help from technology and or grown-ups.

To make any of this happen, though, parents have to learn to relax. But how do we know when we're pushing our children too hard? It's not always easy because the line between engaged parenting and hyper-parenting can be a fine one, yet there are telltale warning signs. You may be going too far if you do your children's homework; shout yourself hoarse at their sporting events; spy on their MySpace pages; let them take fewer risks than you did at the same age; find them falling asleep en route to their next extracurricular activity; quote verbatim from parenting manuals.

The first step to relaxing is letting go of our perfectionism. There is no magic recipe for parenting. Anxiety and doubt are a natural part of raising children – not a signal to start micromanaging even harder. Childhood is not a race that only Alpha children can win. Every child is different. Look at the people you most like and admire in your own social circle: chances are they followed varied paths to adulthood, and that very few were ever classified as 'gifted'. Many were probably late-bloomers. And most of them have thrived in life without being micromanaged from birth.

And yet a lighter touch is not always the best policy. When it comes to shielding our children from consumerism, we need to wield a heavier hand. That is why parents around the world are campaigning to stop companies from advertising in schools. There is also a backlash against the trend for ever more lavish birthday parties. Many parents are now fixing spending limits on gifts and party bags, or eliminating them altogether. Others are agreeing on guest quotas. In other words, parents are relearning the lost art of saying No.

Many children today actually need to hear the N-word more often. Even as we pour time, money and energy into helping our kids build a killer CV, we tend to go a bit wobbly on the discipline front. It just seems easier to say Yes to another hour on the Nintendo or to an untidy bedroom. But children need discipline and a firm hand sometimes. Boundaries make them feel safe and equip them for life in a world built on rules and compromise. Children need us to say No sometimes.

The bottom line is that when it comes to child-rearing, we need to learn when to do less and when to do more, when to employ a light touch and when to get heavy.

Unfortunately, parents cannot buy or outsource that wisdom: it comes from within. We know our own children better than anyone else, which means the best way to parent is to trust our instincts. I wrote *Under Pressure* to give readers the confidence to block out the peer pressure and the confusing noise from the parenting advice industry and the media to find the balance that suits their family best.

What about me? Well, I'm getting better at striking that balance. My son recently announced his plan to join the school sketching club. I managed to sound pleased without punching the air or saying 'I told you so'. It was his decision, and I knew it should remain that way.

Let's just hope I remember that lesson when it comes time to organize his first exhibition…