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* HEALTH



PARENT POWER

WORDS LINDA READ

Parenting could well be the toughest job on the planet.

IT'S STRESSFUL, BADLY PAID, has high and ongoing hidden costs, and you can never quit once you've started. With no formal qualifications required, it also means that most people are woefully unprepared before they start.

On the upside, it offers the experience of unbridled joy and deep selfless love. In fact, it is a job which can give you the power to change the world – at least according to one parenting expert.

Dr Bob Jacobs, a clinical psychologist, family law solicitor and family dispute resolution practitioner, should know. He has spent his career advocating for children and helping parents be better parents. He runs the Parenting Centre at Maleny, which offers individual, couples, child and family counselling, and alternative solutions to Family Court for separating parents. And yes, he is also a parent himself. A father of three, Bob raised two of his children as a single parent.

"I'd say 80 per cent of the practice is psychology," says Dr Bob, as he is popularly known. "The idea of the Parenting Centre is working with parents to assist families. The law and mediation comes in as

part of being a children's advocate. My whole career's been about that – advocating for children."

One of the core values of the Parenting Centre is that each young person is unique and should be celebrated for who he or she is.

Dr Bob has written a book about his parenting philosophy, called *Perfect Parents Perfect Children: Changing the World By Celebrating Our Perfection*. It advocates a shift from the traditional "reward and punishment" style of parenting towards one of unconditional acceptance and love.

"I believe parenting is everything," he says. "I believe parents have enormous power to change both their families' lives, their children's development and the world. I used to think we could effect change from the top down. Now I think it's exactly the opposite."

Bob specialises in helping parents who are separating, or who have already separated. This can involve developing parenting programs, or going through the formal mediation process or consultation. "It also involves post-separation parenting, which is really an emerging issue," he says. "There are so many separated parents who are trying to co-parent children; it's very complex."

Although Bob is a family law solicitor, he is quick to point out that he does not represent clients in court.

"I will not practise in court because I believe it's a destructive process for children. We are always looking at alternatives to Family Court," he says. "We know the thing that's so destructive for children is when parents are angry with each other, so why do we have a process that sets them up as enemies? Court is such an inappropriate place to help families who are separating."

The Parenting Centre is about to launch a new initiative called Complete Separation Solutions. It will offer people who cannot agree on a parenting plan an alternative to Family Court, which has costs that can often run into many thousands of dollars and a process that takes years. "There are no other post-mediation alternatives until now," he says. "My dream, my goal, is to let every parent who goes to court know there is an alternative."

Bob describes himself as a pacifist and social activist who is passionate about social justice. Originally from America, his goal was to be a professional baseball player. When that didn't come to fruition, he started coaching sport, and working closely with a group of teenagers who talked to him about some of their "personal stuff". This sparked an interest in adolescent psychology, and set him on a course of university study in sociology, followed by a Master's degree in physical education and then Master's and Doctorate degrees in psychology. Later, he studied law and was admitted to the bar in Florida.

Bob first visited Maleny in 2002 whilst doing an internship with the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland. He fell in love with the hinterland town, which was at the time engaged in the now-famous Woolworths protest.

After several more visits to the country, during which he was a keynote speaker at state and national youth conferences in Australia, and with his own children at university, he settled at Maleny and established the Parenting Centre in 2009.

Bob is now a proud Australian citizen, but returns regularly to America to visit his children, whom he happily describes as having "tremendous social consciences".

He also praises their mother, adding that it is because of both of their parents, as well as themselves, that his children are who they are today.

"What I would want to know is that my children are joyful, that they are enjoying their moments on the planet. And I believe they are, and that makes me very, very, happy." 🌱

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