

You Find What You're Looking For: Changing the Way We See Our Kids

Have you ever noticed how, when you're thinking about buying a certain kind of car, you suddenly see it *everywhere*? It's not a coincidence. Psychologists call it *selective attention*—we tend to notice what we're already focused on.

As parents, we do this with our children.

If you've had a rough day and your child is dragging their feet, mumbling, or rolling their eyes... you start seeing only *those* behaviours. Before you know it, every interaction feels like a battle. You expect the worst—and that's all you see.

What you focus on grows. If we're not careful, we can unintentionally reinforce the very behaviours we're trying to change.

The Danger of "Pre-Agitated Parenting"

In a recent moment of less-than-ideal parenting, I found myself walking into the living room already annoyed—just because one of my daughters was *there*. She hadn't done anything wrong in the moment, but it had been a rough day for us. We had endured some conflict. I was pre-agitated. Just seeing her brought back frustration and disappointment. My brain was viewing her through a clouded lens, scanning for faults and finding them... because that's what I was looking for.

The result? Snarky comments. Escalating tension. A disconnection that neither of us wanted—but both contributed to.

So How Can We Do Better?

The good news is, we can turn this around. It starts with one powerful insight:

If you look for the good, you'll start to see it.

Even in challenging moments. Even with difficult behaviours. Our kids are more than their eye rolls and messy rooms. But we have to *choose* to notice the gold flecks—because they're there.

Here are three practical strategies to help:

1. Change the Lens

Ask yourself: *What's one good thing I've noticed about my child today?*

Maybe it's the way they helped a sibling. Or how they finally put their dish in the sink. Or just the way their eyes lit up when you walked into the room.

Write it down. Say it out loud. Let them hear it.

Positivity is contagious—and when our kids feel seen for their good, they're more likely to repeat it.

2. Avoid “Always” and “Never”

Statements like:

- “You always leave your stuff everywhere.”
- “You never listen.”

...are *never* true, and *always* harmful. They shut down conversations, create shame, and damage connection.

Instead, try:

- “I’ve noticed the room’s still messy—what’s your plan for cleaning it up?”
- “I feel like I’m not being heard right now. Can we try again?”

Focus on the behaviour, not the identity.

3. Fill the Bucket Before You Correct

Relationships are like buckets. The *water* in the bucket represents positive connection. The *air* is correction and direction. If the bucket is full of air (constant criticism) and no water (connection), it’s not a healthy relationship. We don’t tend to carry empty buckets around.

So before you correct or direct, pause and ask:

- Have I connected with my child today?
- Have I spent time with them, laughed with them, listened to them?

If not, start there. Fill their bucket first.

See the Gold

There’s an old story about a young man looking for gold in a river. He wanted big nuggets—but only found small flecks in dirty rocks. He gave up... until a wise prospector showed him that those tiny flecks, collected steadily over time, are what *real* wealth is made of.

Our children are like that.

Yes, they’re messy. Emotional. Confusing. And hard work. But if we look closely, we’ll see the glimmers of who they really are—kind, capable, resilient, funny, generous humans in the making.

You find what you’re looking for.
Let’s look for the good.

Action Step for This Week: Each night, reflect on *one* gold fleck from your child’s day. Then tell them. You’ll be amazed at how it changes the tone of your relationship—and your home.



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine’s Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia’s #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.