**Announcer:** This is a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

**Louise Stewart:** Navigating parenthood is hard. We all want to build happy, healthy, robust children but how do we do that in a complex world? Hello my name's Louise, and today Dr Norman Swan joins me to provide some tips for parents of primary school aged children.

Trained in pediatrics, Dr Swan is an award-winning broadcaster, journalist and author known for his ability to break down complex medical topics and cut through the noise in a world overflowing with advice. From screen time and school readiness, to understanding anxiety and preparing for adolescence.

In researching his book*, So You Want To Know What's Good For Your Kids*, he sifts through the scientific evidence to present what really works and what certainly doesn't.

Hello. Dr Swan, thanks for joining me.

I’m interested to know what inspired you to write the book and what do you most hope parents will take away from it?

**Dr Norman Swan:** There are 2 reasons why, or 2 or 3 reasons why I wrote the book. One is there's a real gap for parents. There are a lot of books available on the early years, and there's a lot of books available for adolescents, and there's almost nothing for 5 to 10 age group, which are called the middle years. But people have been told these are the salad years. Kick back. Enjoy them while you can before the dark clouds of adolescence descend on your household. But any parent of a 5 to 10 year old, particularly the current environment, will tell you, these are not the salad days. There's all sorts of complexities that are involved, and far more complexities than before. So that’s the first reason to fill that gap in. The second reason is, people have got advice coming out of their ears. It's never been harder to be a parent than today, because there are so many sources of advice. There are influencers of social media, streaming services and so on. When our parents were growing up, they had 2 to 4 television channels, a few magazines and newspapers. And the people who really annoyed them with advice were their own parents and the neighbours, but not what you've got today and who to believe.

So, there's a need for somebody to just say look, I'm not giving you advice. I'm treating you like an adult. You make your own decisions, but what I will do for you is the hard work. I will sift through the evidence, scientific evidence, that is just solid evidence about what works, what doesn't work, what might work. And you make up your own mind. You're an adult, it's your child, it's your situation. You know best.

And the third reason which is what I have alluded too, is that I, I really feel that it's harder to be a parent today than any time before in human history, for the reasons I’ve just said, there's just so much pushing and pulling. And the evidence is that kids between 5 and 10 are all far from all, but some and more and more are doing it tough, and parents need help with that, and they need information, and the information they can rely on.

**Louise Stewart:** You speak about complexities of that 5 to 10 age group. Now, I would say that a lot of sources of stress and tension in families with children of that age is around screen and technology use. What do you most want parents to understand about screen use? And second to that question, what would you like teachers to understand about screen use?

**Dr Norman Swan:** In answer to that question, because it's a simple question, but it's a complicated question. I need to back up a little bit to talk about some of the basics here, so that you understand why you really should be concerned about screens, because I do take quite a hard line on screens but based on what we know about the science.

Okay, there are 2 periods of brain plasticity in a child when they're growing up. The brain is always a bit plastic, but there's really time when it's very, very plastic. In other words, it's changing a lot, and your ability to change it is significant. Every parent, first 2 years of life, they all know, every parent knows that. The first 2 years of life, are really, really important. That's when the brain is shaped, and incredibly important for the rest of that child's life. But what happens and parents and primary carers, early childhood education and so on, are all very important to that brain shaping, including the village. In other words, the broader environment which we grow up, is really important. What happens during that time, in the first 2 years of life, is that the child's brain overgrows because they're absorbing everything around them, they're learning, and it's unedited, and it's all going in, and the brain grows like topsy. But what happens is, that the brain growing topsy does not produce a person who's going to become an adult, doesn't prepare them for the rest of their lives. It's the important foundation. The second period of plasticity is when the brain, that overgrown brain, is literally pruned. The way a gardener prunes a rosebush, for the rest of that child's life, and that's towards the age of 10. The end of that period, that I'm talking about into adolescence. And it's literally pruning down that overgrown brain to prepare that child for the rest of their lives.

Now, while the parents, carers and immediate environment is almost, not quite, but almost everything in those first 2 years, towards early puberty and adolescence, towards 10 years of age thereabouts, parents have less of an influence. They still have a hugely important influence, but it's less. The outside world helps with that pruning, and that's the way it should be, because the brain is being prepared to live in the outside world. You're not going to have your parents with you every minute of the day for the rest of your life. So, the outside world has got to have an effect on the brain, but it can have good effects, it can have bad effects or neutral effects. So, you've got less of an opportunity.

That's why people are concerned about the early use of drugs and alcohol in those early puberty, adolescent years. Because if a child's brain is exposed to alcohol or other drugs, it affects the pruning, and it's very hard to reverse the pruning. So just imagine the gardener's drunk and you're taking away the thing, and the pruning goes wrong, it's very hard to fix that up. So other things can have an impact in those times, that time too. And screens can have an impact, because you're introducing something from the external environment which is going to have an effect on that pruning process in the brain, that second period of plasticity, which is really the final kind of, the final edit for the rest of your life. I mean I don’t want to panic people, but that's what it's all about. That's why people go on and on about drug and alcohol, and that's why people are really worried about screens. So, screens are an ongoing process for parents. So, a parent might be listening to this is whose child is 8 or 9, and who’s nagging them for a mobile phone. Everybody else has got one. Why can't I, or why can't you let me on TikTok? It's harmless, you know, just kids playing with cats, and you're getting all this nag, nag, nag, nag, nag, and the pressure, and then there's pressure on you, should I, you know, the child's going to be working with screens for the rest of their life. Should I expose them to screens early and give them an opportunity? Forgive me if I just lead up to the answer to your question in the primary school age group, because what happens before is really important.

So, you can have a parent who's a great parent, who's trying to do the right thing, and they know that they've got to curate content on screens. They know that they shouldn't be allowing the child to go and screen by themselves. Television on in the background is terrible for a child's developmental pathway. So, then they say, well, okay, what's the difference between an iPad, reading from an iPad, than a physical book? And it probably isn't very much difference at all, except there is a little bit of growing evidence that comprehension is a bit different off a screen than off a book, and we've had centuries of books that maybe a book is a safer thing to do, but if you're sitting there with an iPad, it's probably not going to change your life, your child's life. Then, well, what about things like cartoons and so on, my imaginary parent they curated it, and they found great cartoons, and they're lovely stories. There's no porn, there's no violence, it's just a nice story. You look a little more carefully at it, because if you watch Sesame Street or Play School, in fact, on the ABC today I was timing the edits in Play School. And the edits take place maybe once every 12 to 14 seconds, and it's the same with Sesame Street. Some cartoons, absolutely perfect story for children, the edits happen every one or two seconds, and that changes a child's brain. It changes the networks of nerves inside the brain, and quite possibly, shortens attention span and changes the child's perception of the world. The safest thing to say is, no screens at all up until the age of 2, and then very carefully created and watch what they're watching because you could only be focused on the content.

And then there's a problem later on with the child saying. Well, what's wrong with TikTok?

Two things. One is time spent on the screen can replace normal developmental activity where they're outside, playing at the park or playing with friends or doing sport, and that is developmentally very damaging just because of time on the screen. Then there's the issue of, if you've replaced even unconsciously, telling a story to your children with a book with TikTok or reels, what they're getting there, and this is critical for teachers, what they're getting there, and teachers, if they play into this, may well be creating a problem. I'm not sure. I don't, I would doubt that many are. Is that what you get with TikTok on reels is a 15 second story, maybe 30 seconds, if you're lucky. TikTok creators say, oh, I can tell a story in 15 seconds. They can't. All they're doing is giving you an episode, a little event. There's no narrative, there's no beginning, there's no middle, and there's no end. So children lose, potentially, lose the sense of narrative. And within the narrative, there's also a sense the actions of consequences, and the parent discusses that with the child. Oh, the little lamb tripped over the rock. What would have happened if the lamb had moved around the side of the rock? And you have a sense of alternate realities and so on, and you get to the end of the story. So there's lots of hidden traps, even for the parent who is attentive and doing the right thing with earlier screen use. Now, when you come to later screen use, there is a disturbing, incredibly disturbing statistics about the rise in eating disorders in the under 10s, and not just in girls, but in boys. And it's global, but Australia and New Zealand seem to be leading the world. Nobody's quite sure why. Could be just a measurement phenomenon. Why is it happening? And then anxiety disorders are going up as well.

Much more controversial with autism spectrum disorder or ADHD are going up. They're almost certainly not going up, but anxiety and eating disorders are. The rise is almost identical to the rise in the use of screens and social media over the last 12 years. Now that's not proof of cause and effect. That's just association. You know, happens at the same time might have nothing to do with each other, except that there is something going on with screens that can explain it, and it's called Upward Comparison. Now, upward comparison has always been around. There's always somebody more beautiful, more handsome, more muscular, thinner, richer, more compelling than you are. And now there are influencers, and if you’re not on social media is circulating within, electronically within your social group, and it can start to look like cyber bullying. An upward comparison is psychologically toxic and sits behind anxiety disorders and eating disorders. And a child who is unleashed onto screen media too early that can change their brain. Remember what I was saying about the second period of plasticity, and this is why it took me a while to explain it, because you've got to have that developmental context to follow that. Now politicians are on top of it. They're saying, oh, well, we need to. They won't ban gambling ads, but they will ban social media, and it's an easy cop out for politicians, because it means that they don't have to regulate social media anymore, because they band it, but children will get round it.

And the second reason it's troubling, is that parents might think, ah well, it's banned I don't have to worry about it anymore. When kids will get around it. When the process is much more regulating the social media companies, but also parents learning themselves and passing on healthy screen use to their kids and working it out with them. And then there's the other phenomenon, which I talk about again and again in the book, is they're always watching. Children are always watching. And the strongest determinant of a child's screen use, or desire for screen use, is their parent’s screen use. So, if a parent is sitting at the table when they're supposed to be having a meal, texting and doing emails for work, then the child sees that. And then when you say you're not having a mobile phone, they say, why not? You're on it all the time. Well, they think that if they don't say it. So, I'm pretty hardline about screens.

That's a very long answer to a very short question.

**Louise Stewart:** I loved what you said about you know, a way to conceptualise that is, this pruning that occurs at this age. And we have to ask ourselves, do we want to hand Elon Musk or a social media influencer the shears to prune our child's brain? It sort of seems as simple as that, the way that you speak about it. That they are, they are literally inside or our actually inside our children's heads. And that's a scary thought.

**Dr Norman Swan:** And the other difference between newspapers and television is that these media are designed to be addictive. They're exquisitely and cruelly designed to keep a child on there. So, you can have a child with full blown ADHD, who the teacher is having trouble controlling in the classroom, having trouble getting them to complete tasks, and they will sit on social media and their screen for hours on end, and that shows you how addictive those processes are. And I can assure you, they're not necessarily doing that child with ADHD any good at all.

**Louise Stewart:** You touched on the word anxiety there and how you know, this is sort of something that's leading we're going to lead on to.

In the book there’s a sentence you write there about common teenage mental health issues don’t suddenly appear from nowhere at age 15, but rather there’s this runway running through the early childhood years and the primary years that sort of sets them up for these teenage years

What should parents of primary age children be doing to set them up for robust mental health throughout the teenage years?

**Dr Norman Swan:** Step one, look at your own mental health. You've got to be match fit to be a parent, and it's very hard to be match fit, if you yourself are affected, your life is affected yourself with depression and or anxiety. The reassuring thing here, by the way, is that you instantly assume and feel guilty – I’m trying to reduce guilt with this book. It sounds often that I’m not doit it, but I am. But the reassuring thing here for parents who do have anxiety disorders themselves, is that 65% of parents who have anxiety disorder, do not have a child with anxiety disorder. And of the remaining 35% it's not necessarily severe. So, it is a risk factor, but it’s far from inevitable. And I need to go back again. I'm sorry to keep on doing this. I need to get continuity of the runway through to 5 and 10, so you get a sense of that, and you can look back, particularly also, since many parents and 5-year-olds also have much younger children at home.

I talk a lot about genes and environment in the book. And I talk about genes being the black canvas of life and we paint on the surface. So what that paining looks like is up to us, it’s up to the village, that we’re living, growing up in, up to all sorts of things but we paint on the canvas. Now, one of the blank, in a sense, blank canvases that we're born with is something called temperament.

Any parent who's got more than one child, knows what I'm talking about here. One child, when they were a baby, were easy, you could do anything with them, they slept. Then the second child is irritable, doesn't like being handled. And then when they look back on the child has become the adolescents, they can trace back to that baby. In other words, very much the same child, manifest in different ways.

Underneath a lot of stuff is the child's temperament. Now, academics, researchers have divided temperament into multiple different factors, which are mind bogglingly complicated. In the book, using research from Harvard University and also, to some extent, from Australia. All of this research by the way, internationally, is Australian research. There's an amazing study called the Australian Temperament Project in Melbourne, where they recruited parents 40 years ago with young babies, and they followed them through, so they know a lot about the parents. They know all about the babies. Now these babies are parents themselves. So now into the third generation of this longitudinal study, following these children through, looking at the influence of parenting, seeing what the outcomes are. It boils down to one thing really, and it's something called reactivity. And you know this, when you lift a newborn baby. It is what I said earlier. Some babies are just irritable. They don't like it. They throw back their arms. And some babies are just nice and cuddly and what have you. And a baby who's a bit irritable and so on tends to be the more difficult child. They're often shy. As they get into about 2 to 3 years old, they don't like mixing with other kids much, and they're always a bit less social than other children. It's not pathology, it's just the way we are in the world. Some of us are gregarious and some of us aren't. It's not a medical diagnosis. It's just our different way of being in the world, and you shouldn't pathologise that temperament or expect it to be a bad outcome. It's just the way the child is in the world. And we've got to understand that. Anxiety is not on a separate line from temperament. Sure, kids are a bit reactive to the world around them. May have a slightly increased risk of anxiety, but it's a separate thing pretty much, from anxiety disorders.

So, what is it that you can do as a parent? One of the things that's thought to increase the risk of anxiety disorders. And I think screens in the general environment have a lot to do with it by the way, and parents less to do with it. But if we focus on parents. Overprotective parenting is not good for a child's trajectory through to mental health and wellbeing. Because what happens is, and you're doing it for all the right reasons. You're doing it because you love your child. You don't want to see them crying. You don't want to see them upset. You want to see them safe in the world. And so, you know, in the early days a child cries, you want to solve a problem of the crying. You assume you know what it is, you solve a problem, you move on. You just want that crying to stop. You are worried about how much the child is eating. When they're a toddler, are they getting enough to eat? And you may miss the child's satiety signal. So that child may overeat, because you're pushing them to overeat because you're anxious and you want them to be developing the best possible way, or you're fighting over food, where rather just presenting food at the table, and if they chuck it away or don't want to eat it, leave it just but just keep on presenting the same food that you're eating, so that they eventually do that. So if they see you, as poorly emotionally regulated, overreacting to minor situations, the child will start to do that. Not all children, but they'll start to do that themselves. And emotional self-regulation, as any teacher will tell you, and any early childhood teacher will tell you, is the strongest predictor of easy school entry. The child who's well emotionally regulated does better in school to begin with. It's not being able to read at 4 or do math at 4 and a half, it's can this child communicate? Are they social and are they emotionally well regulated?

Now we're not talking about kids with autism spectrum disorder or neurodivergent, but Autism Spectrum Disorder is only 2% of children. ADHD is 3% so that means 95% of children do not have Autism Spectrum Disorder or ADHD. It's emotional self-regulation, but if you're overprotective and you're solving the child's problems for them, then you communicate an anxiety about the world. But you can't, you know the world's a dangerous place, and you then remove a very important developmental trajectory, which is a trajectory towards autonomy.

Children have to learn executive function, how to make decisions, how to plan ahead, how to make mistakes. They need to experience stress, so the overprotective parent wants to protect their child against stress. Stress is normal, anxiety and fear to some extent, not that you would deliberate, not in a month of Sundays. Not that you would deliberately expose yourself to that. But sometimes, a child will become anxious and fearful about a situation, but you don't shut it down. You help the child solve it through and explain it and decode it. So, the next time that situation is not so fearful and not so anxiety provoking. And you slowly and carefully give that child ability to make decisions about themselves and give them some autonomy within a safe, protective and developmentally appropriate context.

The overprotective parent produces a child who hits those early pubertal years, which probably starts 7 or 8 years or so, hits those years, unable to make decisions by themselves. And what could be more anxiety provoking than that? That's not the whole story, by the way, far from the whole story. But you asked me, what parents can do, do that hard stuff of encouraging your child to make decisions, encouraging some autonomy without putting them at risk.

**Louise Stewart:** Great. You spoke a little bit there in that response, as well about school readiness and emotional regulation. So that leads nicely to my next question, which is: How does a parent know when their child is ready to start school? Should they be worrying about that?

**Dr Norman Swan:** The bottom line in all this, by the way is, what age is your child? If your child’s of school age they’re ready for school. I mean, you haven't got a choice in the matter, in Australia. Yeah, If they're borderline, you can make them back a year, and that's not a debate I particularly want to get into.

One of the commonest reasons for parents to go to see a pediatrician when a child's age 2, is language. The child's not speaking. But almost always, there's nothing wrong with the child because their receptive language, what they understand, is really good. You know, they've got 2 to 300 words, and they understand all that. And then you track that through in terms of receptive language, understand.

We overestimate the cognitive capacity of young kids, so when they do start talking, particularly if we've spoken to them like an adult, I don't mean sophisticated language. I just mean we don't say doggy. We say dog. We don't say meow, meow. It's a cat, you know. We talk in a normal tone, to a child. So, they don't acquire baby language, they acquire adult language, but we start to overestimate what they understand. So, if a child's putting sentences together, particularly in that preschool year, in that 4 year, we tend to think they understand what we're saying to them.

So, the other problem here is the parent who wants to reason with a young child. Now reasoning might be fine when they're 7 or 8, but when they're 5 or 6, they don't understand a word you're saying, you know. So, when you're reasoning with them darling, all they hear is blah blah blah blah darling, blah blah blah blah darling, blah blah blah blah blah darling, because you've overestimated the child's cognitive capacity, and that's one of the problems with school entry.

The trajectory here is really the emotional, psychological world of your child, rather than the academic world. And in the book, you know, I talk, there are features of a child at age 5 who is going to do well at 10. And a lot of it is psychological and social, and all the factors that go together to talk about problems with language and literacy and so on, are solved with time as much as the risk factors.

But the other problem that we have is misunderstanding the genetics. We have genes for language, every human being, no matter where they are in the world, we've evolved to speak so there that's embedded. We do not have genes for reading and writing. It is not a natural activity.

**Louise Stewart:** Two more questions, if that's okay Norman. Back to anxiety for a moment, because it is a topic that constantly rears its head.

How can parents differentiate between something that's just a normal childhood worry and anxiety or depression that actually might require professional support?

**Dr Norman Swan:** Depression is really rare in the under 10s. It's not that it doesn't ever exist, but it's really rare. The thing that you got to look out for is anxiety. Being anxious and fearful is a normal response to the world, not a disordered response to the world. It's the way we protect ourselves. We have evolved. One of the reasons we're successful as a species is that we have naturally high levels of anxiety and fear. It doesn't take much to make us fearful or anxious, because that's how we protected ourselves against wild animals. Or other tribes attacking us. The people who were fearful survived. The people who were relaxed and Californian, and say it’s always going to be right, they didn't survive.

You know interestingly, I was talking to a spear fisher not so long ago, who said it's getting harder and harder to spearfish. So I said, was that because of depletion of stocks? He said, ‘No, we've actually caught all the fish that were relaxed and curious, and the ones that are left genetically are the twitchy and anxious ones, and they run away from us and are hard to find’. Really interesting. And humans are exactly the same, so we're tuned to fear and anxiety. The key is, is it affecting the child's life? In other words, they might just be a little bit anxious and a little bit twitchy – that might just be their temperament. But is it affecting their life? And I talk about the different types of anxiety. So there’s separation anxiety, and separation anxiety is kind of normal at certain ages. But it's not normal when you can't you leave the house, you can't get the child to go to school because they just don't want to separate from you. I describe the features of the typical anxiety disorders and how they affect it, and it shades into normal. Every kid at times, gets a bit anxious when the parents go off. People, kids go through anxious periods. You've got to find out why have they been bullied at school, or whatever might be going on. The key question is, is it persisting, and is it affecting the child's life? And you, the parent knows your child, and if you think it is, it almost certainly is.

**Louise Stewart:** And then just finally, so that we all don't lose hope with our 10-year-olds, that we feel like we've done the wrong thing for the past 10 years. Obviously, your child doesn't get to 10, and it's either been raised, raised correctly on this runway, or otherwise. Have you got some words of advice for parents who might be feeling a little bit like, oh gosh, I've been helicoptering this whole time, or my kids been watching screens for too long. I've done all the wrong things. I've done exactly what I was what I shouldn't have done. What advice can you give those parents who are a little bit worried at this point?

**Dr Norman Swan:** Chill and look at your child. Most kids do fine and a parent who thinks that has got insight, you're probably being very hard on yourself as well. And some of these things are hard to walk back. So you're already established there's a lot of screen watching going on. Really hard to take that away from the child. You’ve just got to sit back and look at the child and, sure if there's a problem, and if screen time seems to be making them worse, you might have to make a tough decision, to stop it. And stop it early and reintroduce it and have that battle at home over the screen, because you can see the damage that it's doing.

So, the Australian Temperament Project and the Longitudinal side of Australian children, 2 studies, have shown the features of a child that you don't really need to worry about. We all worry about every child, but the features of a child you don't really need to worry about are:

* Are they emotionally regulated? Every child will have a tantrum. By and large, their emotions are reasonably in check.
* Can they tell you when something's wrong and why? Can they express their desires clearly?
* Can they wait, you know, can they can they hold back a little bit.
* And very importantly – have they've got friends?

Have you encouraged them to be out and about, and playing sport, playing club sport, involved in community activities and out there? Now, if you're not out there, it's hard for them to be out there, so you might have to change a little bit. For the child who's out there, who's got friends, who's mixing, who's playing sport and doing other things, there'll be bumps but by and large they're okay.

**Louise Stewart:** Dr Norman Swan, thank you so much for your time.

**Dr Norman Swan:** It's my pleasure.

**Announcer:** You have been listening to a Queensland Department of Education podcast. The Department of Education acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands from across Queensland. We pay our respects to the elders past and present. They help memories, the traditions, the culture and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.