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LIFESTYLE

# Goodbye Gentle Parenting, Hello ‘F— Around and Find Out’

Parents are ditching the softer approach to child-rearing that has dominated the culture and taking a harder line; ‘out-feral their feral’

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July 25, 2025 5:30 am ET



ILLUSTRATION: HARRIET LENNEMAN

Carla Dillon tried lots of ways to discipline her rambunctious 13-year-old, including making him write the same contrite sentence 100 times. But when he sprayed her

with a water gun at a campground after she asked him not to, she saw only one option:

She threw him in the pond, clothes and all.

“Some of the best lessons in life are the hard ones,” she said.

The internet calls it “FAFO,” short for “F—Around and Find Out.” It’s a child-rearing style that elevates consequences over the “gentle parenting” methods that have helped shape Gen Z.

FAFO (often pronounced “faff-oh”) is based on the idea that parents can ask and warn, but if a child breaks the rules, mom and dad aren’t standing in the way of the repercussions. Won’t bring your raincoat? Walk home in the downpour. Didn’t feel like having lasagna for dinner? Survive until breakfast. Left your toy on the floor again? Go find it in the trash under the lasagna you didn’t eat.

Parenting that’s light on discipline has dominated the culture in recent decades. But critics blame the approach for some of Gen Z’s problems in adulthood. They cite surveys that show young adults struggling with workplace relationships (was it because their parents never told them “no”?) and suffering from depression and anxiety (was it because their parents refereed all their problems?).

For parents who have spent years trying to meet their children’s emotional needs without slipping into overt permissiveness, FAFO can sound blessedly simple.

Dillon, 35, knows the approach can be off-putting. “Maybe your kids wouldn’t like that, but, not to be rude, my kid is tougher than yours,” said the mother of two outside Richmond, Va.

She said her son, who is comfortable in the water, thought it was hilarious but still learned a lesson. She wants to teach her children to be responsible, persevere through hard times and treat others with respect. She adds that some children have different needs that might require gentle parenting. “My kids will walk all over me if I do that,” she said. “I’ve tried it.”



Carla Dillon, shown with her children, said ‘some of the best lessons in life are the hard ones.’ PHOTO: CARLA DILLON

FAFO parenting goes by lots of names: Tough love, authoritative parenting, or, as Dillon once put it, a method to “out-feral their feral.”

But it’s also deployed in other contexts. During a diplomatic dispute with Colombia, President Trump reposted on Truth Social a doctored image of himself in a fedora in front of a yellow sign reading, “FAFO.”

To some, the parenting debate reflects a divided country. The paradigm of gentle parents vs. FAFO parents isn’t quite Snowflake Kids vs. MAGA Kids, but there’s a whiff of that. Not in actual politics, but in style.

Hard-line parenting is necessary for a child’s survival in a harsh world, said FAFO father of five Jon Wellington. The era of the participation trophy is over, he said. “It caused us to get a little soft.”



Wellington, 46, a stand-up comedian from Summerville, S.C., recalled that when he and his brother misbehaved, they had to stare into each other's eyes while their parents simultaneously spanked them. He hardly thinks it's excessive that he made his high school daughter go to color guard practice even after she realized she hated it.

"In the real world when you commit to a loan or car payment or house payment or even a marriage, you have to finish that thing until it's over with," said Wellington, who paid for his daughter to join the group at her request.



Jon Wellington, with his sons Max and Nic, said the era of the participation trophy is over. PHOTO: JON WELLINGTON

Andrea Mata, a clinical child psychologist who offers a webinar entitled "Gentle Parenting Doesn't Work," practices her own version of FAFO. Recently, her 8-year-old son kept having accidents in what Mata thought was him intentionally disregarding

the urge to go to the bathroom during a fun activity. After attempts to correct it, she told the boy to take his allowance and buy himself new underpants.

She later discovered the problem was related to a medical issue, which was resolved, and she has since apologized to him. But she didn't reimburse him since he'd lied about it and tried to cover it up, and she stands by the idea of repercussions when children intentionally fall short of expected behavior.

The subtleties of gentle parenting techniques are so challenging, "you need a clinical Ph.D in child development" to master them, said Mata, 41.

Becky Kennedy, the psychologist known as "Dr. Becky" who doesn't identify her methods as gentle parenting but is often associated with the label, sees aspects of FAFO working. All that mindful adulting has robbed parents of their freedom and left them tiptoeing around their children's feelings. She argues a gentler style doesn't advocate for those things, but it has been distorted in a culture that thrives on extremes.

Still, the author of the parenting book "Good Inside" opposes FAFO's authoritative methods. "There's just a very old idea that somehow feelings get kind of equated with raising snowflakes, like feelings are weak," she said.

Millennial parent Madison Barbosa said she struggles with boundaries and is a chronic people pleaser because of the type of parenting she experienced. So rather than scaring her children into obedience, she wants them to trust her.

"If my kids are ever in trouble, I don't want them to say, 'Mom's going to be so mad at me,'" said Barbosa, 31, a mother of two small children in Ontario, Canada. "People feel weird about creating a generation of soft kids and my opinion is, would that be so bad?"

Recently, Barbosa posted an image of a bite mark on a child's arm after her children got in a fight, calling it "my gentle parenting f\*ck up" because she'd reacted by screaming at her toddler. Barbosa's followers leapt to her defense. In the comments, it was easy to spot the FAFO parent of a biter.

"I bit mine back," the person wrote, "and she never did it again."

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*Appeared in the July 26, 2025, print edition as 'In This Brand of Parenting, Mom and Dad Bite Back'.*

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