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BRAIN, CHILD

the magazine for thinking mothers

Author Q&A: Dr. Laurie Hollman

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Laurie Hollman, PhD, is the author of [*Unlocking Parental Intelligence*](#)

What was your inspiration for writing *Unlocking Parental Intelligence*?

It's hard to write in the past tense about being "*inspired*" because even though the book is finished and published, I continue to be inspired to write about unlocking Parental Intelligence. My inspiration has had and continues to have three ongoing sources for which I am grateful—the children and parents I treat in my clinical practice, my children, and my grandchildren. Furthermore, I'm fortunate to be able to continue to write about parenting and Parental Intelligence for *Huffington Post*, so I can keep on reaching more and more parents and receive their feedback and questions. I'm still inspired!

As my three decades of psychoanalytic practice and research progressed during the years of my clinical work, I incorporated the voices of so many mothers and fathers who came to me at different stages in their parenting careers. They were questioning what to do to salvage their parent-child relationships, asking how to put their children back on a reasonable course, and wondering how to find meaning in their family life. Feeling thankful to those parents for telling

me how unlocking their Parental Intelligence benefited their families, I was compelled to narrow Parental Intelligence into five accessible steps for others to read and grow from.

Just today a patient told me about intending to buy three copies of my book—one for her daughter who just had a baby, one for her daughter-in-law with her six-year-old grandson, and one for herself. She said to me that her favorite word now is “unlocking” because these ideas have helped her to unlock all the resources from inside her to live a fulfilling life.

My children were raised with the precepts of Parental Intelligence. It was natural for me to want to understand their minds—their thoughts, feelings, intentions, and imaginings. It brought me close to them as they grew. Early on we began to learn from each other as I tried to guide them to think for themselves about making good judgments and choices. It’s amazing how wonderful it is to share trust and love with your children. I hadn’t coined the term, Parental Intelligence, when I was a young mother, but I was practicing it nonetheless. Today I have the good fortune to have two empathic, industrious sons with wonderful senses of humor who enjoy learning, creating, and relating well with others in their own individual ways. They have been and surely are an inspiration for my writing.

At the conclusion to my acknowledgments for the book I also thank the future generation who inspire me. I write:

“I can’t conclude without thanking the future generation: my loving grandsons Zander, age seven, and Eddie, age four.

Hearing their remarkable use of language at such young ages and watching their vibrant youthfulness has always inspired me to keep on writing. When they confide in me their personal thoughts and wishes, I am reminded of the essence of Parental Intelligence; the close bonds it brings between parent and child, grandparent and grandchild.

What were some of the most surprising aspects of your years of practice and research?

It’s surprising when a child you treated at age four comes back at twenty-nine to resume treatment. A little munchkin who was filled with worries shows up 6’4” tall to share his conflicts about this dramatically different stage of life. I find I remember his worries long forgotten by him that have been transformed and changed by his early treatment and his life experiences. This is the joy of having been trained to work with infants, children, adolescents, and adults. I see the life span evolve.

One of my great surprises was a call on Thanksgiving from a mother of a patient I had first seen as a teenager. Now a young adult he was wondering if I should be invited to his wedding! This was a boy who resisted school, withdrew from socializing, and initially challenged all my attempts to help. How validating it was to be considered a guest at his wedding.

One of my biggest surprises was when I was doing research on nine-year-old girls and discovered serendipitously that they *all* had fantasies of being kidnapped. This led to my

fortunate ability to contribute original research findings about this age group that hopefully led other clinicians to help many nine-year-old girls with these fears.

How did your own experience as a parent inform your writing?

As mentioned above, I've learned a great deal from my children because fortunately we had and have the kind of relationship where they openly articulate their thoughts and ideas. A specific example is when I learned from my younger son when he was a self-reflective teen how grade school kids find teachers so powerful. He was an excellent student, the kind of kid you never had to prompt to do his homework, and earned his A's without too much effort, yet he reminded me that children see adults with a kind of power they may not have been deserved or earned.

As parents we need to keep that in mind. It's great to expect our children to reach and stretch and expend a good amount of effort as they learn, but it should be in an atmosphere of pleasurable learning *for its own sake*. At home, I know that was clear because my husband and I enjoy learning like it's a hobby! But, in school, sometimes test performance overshadows the joy of learning. The knowledge my son passed on to me informed my understanding of how parents and teachers could exert too much power without understanding they were doing so or its effects on sensitive growing minds.

I surely hope my book orients parents not to wield power, but to use the new parenting mindset that behavior has meaning and is a form of communication. Whether it's a temper tantrum, a messy room, hitting, fidgeting with poor concentration, or hiding out in your teenage room—to name some examples I look at in my book—even the most difficult behaviors have meaning and can be a catalyst to change. If parents take on this perspective they won't misuse the power they have over young children. If parents show they care by careful listening there will be less push-back from teenagers because they will feel loved.

What message would you like the reader to take away after reading your book?

I want parents to first ask, "What does it mean?" not "What do I do?" when they are faced with puzzling behaviors. They should know that external behavior has internal meaning. I want parents to think of themselves as "meaning makers" who don't underestimate all they know about their child even when they have self-doubts. Parental Intelligence helps them harness what they know so they can grow as parents. That will lead to the following:

1. The parent will take away a *new style of parenting life* that will sustain them through happy and distressing times with their children through all stages of child development.
2. "Bad" behavior will no longer be part of a parent's view of how their children act. Instead, behaviors or actions will be understood as requests for communication and understanding when words can't be found or don't suffice.
3. With this focus, the overarching meanings behind child behavior will be unmasked leading to effective problem solving and deep, sustained parent-child bonds.
4. In addition, as I reveal through portraits of parents applying the principles of Parental Intelligence, I want parents to be inspired by up-to-date research. For example, they will learn:

- how stress is transmitted from the intrauterine environment to the infant
- how babies' bodies' mime adult language
- how children with Asperger Syndrome communicate
- how parents decide whether to choose what I call "the new wave of scheduled socialization" for elementary school age children
- how current research describes the impact of fathers' involvement on their children.

By the end of the book, if not before, I'd like parents to take away the set of tools needed to help understand their children's behavior and in turn become more effective parents. Parenting will feel more pleasurable, inspiring, and gratifying. Their children will be grateful, thinking, capable, and loving.

What was the toughest part of the writing process?

I love words! I revel in finding the right word to express what I'm feeling and thinking. I remember working hard to try to hone my knowledge into five accessible steps for parents to gain Parental Intelligence. Sounds like a contradiction, but I *playfully* struggled with the right wording by writing lists of options until I felt I could succinctly name each step: Stepping Back, Self-Reflecting, Understanding Your Child's Mind, Understanding Your Child's Development, and Problem Solving. Then describing each step with examples that parents would actually be struggling with became important to me. I wanted to be talking *with* my reader through my writing as I was in my mind.

Once the five steps were in place, one of the favorite but difficult parts of writing this book became writing *Part II: Stories of Parental Intelligence in Practice*. Writing short stories was new for me. I'd read about how fiction writers live with their characters and I began to feel that way. It was so much more fun than writing up formal case presentations of someone in treatment as I was accustomed to in my practice. I remember finishing a chapter about a little boy who drew a picture that led his father to finally understand what he was going through. I was drained—I felt so much for this boy who felt he was a "*bad, bad*" child when he was so sensitive and wonderful.

I wanted my readers to really get to know the parents and children I was writing about and to care about them. I recall loving it when an editor read a story in the book and put comments of endearment or surprise in the margins. To bring my readers into the lives of these people, to get to know them, identify with them, and then naturally learn Parental Intelligence rather than feel like it was an intellectual exercise was the task. Sometimes, it took me to the edge of my facility with words to describe the interactions between the characters and even write their dialogue so it would sound real.

I hope my readers find themselves interrupting their reading to rest the book on their laps just to muse about the characters, to let their minds wander into their own lives with their children. In that way, I hope they get to know themselves and their children better and better—loving them even more.

I know this isn't true for many, but writing became relaxing for me. I guess I would "get into the zone." This experience led me to write to parents through *Moms Magazine* and *Huffington Post*. It was a shift from writing scholarly works for psychoanalytic journals and books to writing for the popular press, but I find it both challenging and exciting. The book gave me the opportunity to write about what I knew very well and felt very deeply and now I can continue to do that. I still jump up at random moments when I'm doing something else and an idea or phrase pops in my mind that I quickly jot down to be elaborated on later. For me personally, this has grown into where writing has become central to my life.

(Here's a recent link to a *Huffington Post* article: "[Can We Change How We Parent? Unlocking Parental Intelligence](#)")

What books have had the greatest influence on you?

This is a tough question because I read widely. So I'll narrow my answer to some of the books that influenced my writing of *Unlocking Parental Intelligence* because then you'll see my range.

Two books by the linguist, Stephen Pinker were particularly influential. I swallowed whole *The Stuff of Thought*, particularly his great chapter, *The Metaphor Metaphor*. I loved this because parents unwittingly use metaphors in their minds for their kids' behaviors. Is a messy room a cyclone, a hurricane, a disaster, or a disorganized mind? How you construe it affects how you understand it and react. I also read his recent book, *The Sense of Style*. Only he could write about grammar with a sense of humor. He's a brilliant, reasoning writer who helped me quite a bit with writing questions I had.

While thinking about understanding parents and children's minds, I read Marco Iacoboni's book on mirror neurons, *Mirroring People*, which addresses the biology of empathy. There's a lot of controversy about this theory, but I find it fascinating.

At the same time, to sharpen my ability to write short stories, I read many. I enjoyed two anthologies by Lorrie Moore, *Like Life* and *Birds of America*. Exquisite writing, insightful, touching, and of course beautifully written, these books got me into the space I wanted to be to frame my characters and their life experiences.

Two very different psychoanalytic books that I re-found as I was writing were *Mentalization* edited by Fredric N. Busch, Ph.D. and *Talking to Babies: Healing with Words on a Maternity Ward* by Myriam Szejer, Md. Mentalization is a psychoanalytic term that is rather complex speaking to the capacity for self-reflection and self-observation—thinking about thinking. It extends beyond intellectual understanding though leading to an understanding of one's feelings and how the mind works.

Actually related but written in an entirely different style is Myriam Szejer's book where she talks directly to an infant about the baby's mother's depression which led to the baby's suffering. Szejer dares to talk to preverbal little ones recognizing their mental state of mind. Truly innovative therapeutic work, and I was very proud to receive her endorsement of my book.

Unusual for a parenting book, I address the politics of parenting. To assist me in writing *Part III: The Future of Parental Intelligence*, I read among others E. J. Dionne's *Our Divided Political Heart*. My epithet for the last chapter is: "*When children's voices are heard, leaders are born.*" My younger son contributed to the last chapter with his millennial voice. I'll let him speak for himself:

"America seems to be in a period of political dogma, a place where certitude is more important than nuance and understanding." This certainty "is masqueraded as strength, but it really comes out of ignorance and fear. I think you can argue that parents fighting with a child, letting their ego get involved, are doing so out of fear of the unknown, unconsciously using a survival reflex, defending themselves unnecessarily. The only thing that can combat fear is knowledge: knowing there's a technique to deal with understanding what's happening in someone else's mind. And that technique is Parental intelligence. If Parental Intelligence were taught, if people were encouraged to understand one another before reflexively trying to defend themselves, if trying to empathize and know others' minds was seen as a strength, we'd live in a more compassionate, if not more efficient, society."

How do you balance motherhood and writing?

Oh Marcelle, I think you can see from what I've written that writing is an extension of motherhood for me.

For years I went to school and worked while I mothered. My kids were accustomed to us being students at the same time. You can see above my younger son is a wonderful writer and periodically when he is around and I'm writing, I stop and ask him to straighten out a sentence for me. He has such a facility with language and sentence structure; it's great. My older son, as well, created sentences about fatherhood for me. As we'd discuss fatherhood, I'd find myself grabbing a paper and pen to write his thoughts down with his particular language and emphasis before they could get lost. He created the phrasing to the first sentence below that I included in my introduction:

"In today's society, there is a broad array of roles that mothers and fathers take on as they participate in parenting. These varied roles are readily adapted to family life as parents use their Parental Intelligence."

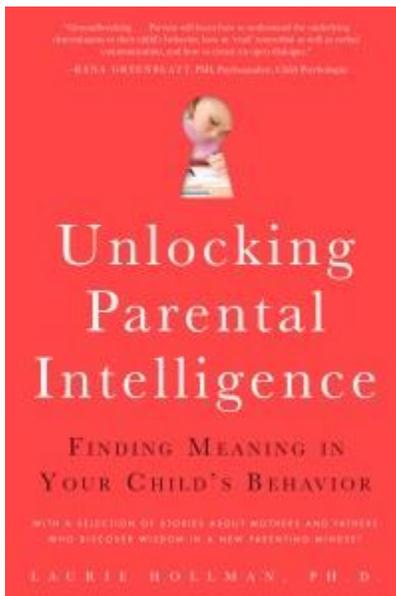
Mothering while writing and doing psychotherapy allowed me to set my own pace. These occupations afforded me the luxury of creating the schedule I needed to keep mothering in mind. My office has always been physically a part of my home, so when I took work breaks, I could periodically run in the other sections of the house and check on things. I couldn't spend time commuting. My practice calendar was always organized around my kids. I remember when I never worked past five o'clock and just referred people out who couldn't fit in my time frame, so I could have dinner and spend evenings with my children. It wasn't only about being a "good enough" mother for them. I didn't want to miss out on sending my kids off to school or being there when they got home. I used to drive my high school kids to school, believe it or not, just to have more time with them.

As they got older, I worked longer hours but always had their needs in mind. Even with grandchildren, I still feel the need to stop what I'm doing when their around. I'm back to planning my vacations around school schedules, so I can see them when they're off from school.

I've heard other women say that at the end of the day, when the kids grow up, you have your career. But I don't see it that way. At the end of the day, when the kids grow up, I still have my kids. My career is obviously important to me, but I'm always a mother first—it's the most important and rewarding job. I hope the parents who read my book can get the chance to feel that way if they don't yet.

Laurie Hollman, Ph.D. is a psychoanalyst with specialized clinical training in infant-parent, child, adolescent, and adult psychotherapy. She has been on the faculties of New York University and the Society for Psychoanalytic Training and Research, among others. She has written extensively on parenting for various publications, including the Psychoanalytic Study of the Child, The International Journal of Infant Observation, The Inner World of the Mother, Newsday's Parents & Children Magazine, Long Island Parent, and her popular column, PARENTAL INTELLIGENCE, at Moms Magazine. She also writes blogs for Huffington Post. She and her husband are the proud parents of two spirited, loving adult sons.

Read an excerpt from [Unlocking Parental Intelligence](#).



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