INSIDE A MULTI-MILLION dollar downtown New York apartment, a Mumbai-born clinical psychologist is being asked provocative questions by an agitated woman at the back of the room. Dr Shefali Tsabary has been talking for an hour about the need to take the time to be “truly present” with your child, or, as she also put it, how to be a “conscious” parent. She starts gently, but as she continues, the message grows louder and more confrontational: if you are having trouble with your child, if your child is “out of control”, it’s not the child’s fault – it’s yours.

This is no ordinary book launch. Dr Tsabary’s book Out Of Control: Why Disciplining Your Child Doesn’t Work, is being launched by businesswoman Wendi Deng, former model Ivanka Trump and adoption advocate Deborra-lee Furness. The women are fully engaged in Dr Tsabary’s every word, but aside from The Weekly, there is no other media.
Central to Dr Tsabary’s teaching is that if a parent (or a caregiver) is fully connected, there is much less need for “rules”, which inevitably lead to the need for discipline and punishment. She says discipline and punishment, in turn, lead to some negative long-term consequences for everyone and chief among them is the epidemic of bullying.

The agitated woman up the back (unsurprisingly) queries the concept of no rules and no punishment: “But this just feels like just another punishment, the woman responds, and is heard by all in the room. ‘What about taking their hand and sitting in the kitchen, please, considering the answer. Dr Purvis came to a similar conclusion. “What about taking their hand and saying, How was your day?”, and really listening to the answer. “And when your children are older, how about … sitting in the kitchen, just being there while the teenagers have their breakfast, allowing them to feel your presence.” II

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Her observations are similar to the work of Dr Karyn Purvis, who co-wrote The Connected Child and spoke to The Weekly in January. Dr Purvis suggests that parents put aside their ambition and the desire for more material goods. “The human brain is still forming when a child is little and nobody is going to meet your child’s cries as you would,” Dr Purvis says. “It’s true when children are older, too. I see parents coming to pick up their children from school. The first thing they do is take out their phone and walk off, with their children following behind like ducklings.”

Dr Tsabary’s theory, which she spruiks as an amalgam of her “East meets West” education, extends to the epidemic of bullying. She believes poor parenting is creating an assembly line of miserable children, terrorising schoolyards, who are not suffering from a lack of discipline, but a lack of “heart”.

“When a child’s own voice has either been neglected or bullied into silence [by a parent], the child can no longer respond to this voice, which is how they lose touch with the natural empathy,” she explains.

Put another way, she means parents who are not “present” with their child, or who are not “mindful parents”, fully conscious of their child’s feelings, often misread the problem and use discipline or punishment as a response to perceived behavioural problems. An adult who is punished unfairly feels resentment, argues Dr Tsabary and so, too, does a child.

Her caveat on this theory is that a mindful parent knows the difference between a child who is truly misbehaving and one who is masking other issues. In essence, if a child is constantly disciplined, this teaches them the concept of “power” and “control”, which means that they often employ these techniques in the playground and, ultimately, in their adult lives.

“I see the repercussions of this approach,” Dr Tsabary says. “The child truly won’t do anything without being threatened or bribed because they have become addicted to being constantly controlled.”

She says most of her clients know that they are in for a rough ride when they come to see her. “The people who come to me already know that I’m going to work on them more than the child, but they just don’t know how much,” she says.

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Dr Shefali Tsabary, PhD, is the author of Out Of Control: Why Disciplining Your Child Doesn’t Work. Dr Karyn Purvis is the co-author of The Connected Child.