



Book Recommendation

An open letter to Philippa Perry, author of *The Book You Wish Your Parents Had Read*

Dear Philippa,

Where to begin? Your book offers so much; it appears to be slim, so why am I taking so long to read it? The short answer is because of the complex emotions it awakens in me and the processing that I need to do as a result.

Forgive me then, Philippa, for focusing today on only one section of your book: *Part Three: Feelings*. I have shared your book with my adult son, and we have been talking to each other about it. I have also been thinking about the way I was parented. These three lenses, my parents parenting me, my parenting of my son and his parenting of his son, have been the way I have looked at your book (You do speak for the child within all of us).

My son spoke to me of the feelings that arose in him as he read *Part Three*. He wanted to share them, but he was tentative, concerned not to hurt me and worried that I might not be able to hear what he had to say, if I had been driven into shame. He was courageous though and referred to a time when he was a boy, when he had come to me in great need. His recollection, deeply seared into his memory, was that I *was not emotionally available*. He asked me about that time. "Did I remember it?"

Again, the short answer is "No." My next desire was to defend myself, to want to know when, where, how, so that I could search for a justification of my inaction. Instead, in the moment, I chose to park this inquiry and meet him at the level of his feelings, thanks to your book, dear Philippa. I could see after all these years, his feelings were still very raw, and he still needed to be heard. I invited him to tell me his version of what happened.

As he spoke, my own feelings were certainly entangled with his; with your wisdom, Philippa, I sought to 'contain' them, not 'merge' mine with his. You made me see that if I did lose myself and wail with him, I would not be able to help him. He may also be very reluctant to inflict that pain on me again. I would lose this fragile, barely begun channel of honest communication with my son.

My mind went then to the parenting I had received. My parents, both passed on now, did their best to give me love and guidance. I dearly loved them in return. But in this instance, the case of feelings, of a child being heard and validated, the two comments that I remember most are: from Dad, "Now that's enough about feelings, Suzie." From Mum: "Go away, Suzie, and come back when you are feeling better." Don't get me wrong, I am not about to vent my grievances now, because if I take a moment, I am sure that Dad, a child of the Great Depression years, was most unlikely to have had his feelings heard. After all, he left school at 14 to take up an apprenticeship



to gain work when his father was 'laid off'. My Mum, eldest child of nine – with six brothers following her – was her own mother's right-hand person when it came to childcare and domestics. How much time would have been available for her feelings?

Therefore, I listened. I was able to find a way to show that I had heard him. My words were to the effect of, "That was really tough for you, wasn't it?" And most importantly, "Please forgive me. I am not sure what was happening in my life at the time, but I am really sorry I wasn't 'there' for you." Really, all these years later, he still just wanted to be heard.

Graciously, he replied, "It's okay, Mum. This is our journey together now. We are both growing."

Dear Philippa, you made me aware of the importance of "breaking the links in [my] ancestral emotional chain." With your wisdom, we – my son and I – will ensure *his* son is heard.

With heart-felt gratitude,
Sue