

Discussion Guide for

Parenting Through the Storm

by Ann Douglas

A warm and compassionate guide to parenting a child who is struggling.

"This is more than a book: it's a life raft for parents whose children struggle with mood disorders or developmental differences. As a parent, I've been there. You feel utterly overwhelmed by information, while at the same time isolated and without direction. Ann Douglas does something remarkable by combining concrete, empathic guidance with the voices of other parents who guide us to find the way forward."

- Asha Dornfest, author of *Parent Hacks*

About the book

Raising a child with a psychological condition is a "perfect storm" of stress, heartache, and hard work. Ann Douglas knows firsthand just how daunting it can be—and what a difference knowledge and support can make. Each of her four children (now grown and thriving) has dealt with one or more mental health challenges, and Douglas shares what she has learned about coping with the emotional roller coaster, finding the best treatments, helping kids

manage their symptoms and succeed academically, and keeping the family strong. Voices of numerous other parents who have weathered the storm are interwoven with advice from leading child psychologists. Douglas cuts through the often-confusing clinical jargon and speaks to parents from the heart about what matters most: the well-being of their kids.

How to use this discussion guide

This discussion guide for *Parenting Through the Storm* contains

- a list of questions (both general overview questions and more specific questions tied to each individual chapter)
- suggestions for some spinoff games and activities for parents and kids to try at home.

These questions and activities have been designed to spark conversations about some of the key concepts discussed in the book.

How you choose to incorporate these materials into your group discussions is totally up to you. You can tackle as many or as few questions as you and your group wish. There's no right way or wrong way to do this, so just dive in and start reading and talking!



"If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to support that child's parent."

- Ann Douglas, author,
Parenting Through the Storm

Discussion Questions

What follows are some general overview questions about the book followed by some more specific questions that focus on the contents of each particular chapter.

Overview questions

- *Parenting Through the Storm* opens with an epitaph containing two quotes. Why do you think the author chose these two quotes? How do they relate to the ideas discussed in the book?
- *Parenting Through the Storm* contains a large number of parent stories. How would this book have been different if the book had only incorporated advice from researchers and clinicians—if these parent stories had been omitted? What is the impact of including them?

- Based on what you have learned from reading this book, what advice would you offer to a friend who has a child who is struggling? What are the most important things she could do to help her child and to take care of herself and other family members at the same time?
- Which ideas and concepts discussed in this book are most likely to stick with you? How have you applied some of what you've learned to your day-to-day life as a parent?
- The author notes that nearly 1 in 5 children and teenagers is affected by a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder that is serious enough to cause them problems at home, at school, in the community, or in their relationships with friends. Did this statistic surprise you? Why or why not?



“Having a child who is struggling doesn’t make you a bad parent, just as being a child who is struggling doesn’t make your child a bad kid.”
 - Ann Douglas, author,
Parenting Through the Storm

Chapter 1: Parent Radar

- “You know your child better than anyone. The most important tool you have is your instinct,” says Mark, one of the parents quoted in this chapter. What role has gut instinct played in your own life as a parent?
- Sometimes, despite our best intentions, we don’t manage to pick up on the early warning signs that a child is struggling. In this chapter, the author stresses the importance of sidestepping self-blame. “It may be helpful to remind yourself that you did the best you could with the information you had at the time,” she writes. Have you ever experienced these types of feelings of regret about your own parenting decisions? What allowed you to forgive yourself and move on? What advice would you offer to another parent who is struggling with these kinds of feelings?

Chapter 2: Obtaining a Diagnosis

- What advice would you offer to a parent who is afraid to obtain a diagnosis for their child out of fear that their child might be judged negatively as a result of receiving a particular diagnosis?
- What would you say to a parent who is concerned that their child might have received an inaccurate diagnosis?

- What kinds of messages does a child need to hear from his/her parents and other caring adults in the wake of a diagnosis?
- What kinds of feelings might a parent experience in the wake of a child's diagnosis? Where could that parent turn for support?

Chapter 3: Starting Treatment

- What kinds of questions should a parent ask regarding their child's treatment plan, regardless of whether that treatment plan involves medication, therapy, or both?
- Why is it important to involve a child in making decisions about his own treatment, to the extent that that is possible? What are some practical ways to do this?

Chapter 4: Advocating for Your Child

- Why are parents uniquely equipped to be their child's strongest advocate? Why is it important to remain positive and to focus on solutions (as opposed to merely assigning blame) when you are advocating on behalf of your child? What advice would you offer to a parent who is feeling frustrated and angry and who might be tempted to lash out at a teacher or clinician?
- Why is it important to help children to develop self-advocacy skills, too? What are some practical ways to do this?

Chapter 5: Stress Management and Coping Skills

- Why is it important for parents to identify stress management techniques that work well for them?
- Which stress management techniques described in this chapter have proven to be most helpful to you in your own life as a parent?

Chapter 6: Parents Can Make a Difference

- This chapter describes a process called *dyadic regulation*, in which the calming presence of a parent helps a child to soothe himself/herself. How have you encountered this in your own life as a parent? How can you continue to be a calming presence in your child's life as he/she moves into or through the often tumultuous teen years?



"Keep on doing the part that comes naturally: loving your child, no matter what."
 - Ann Douglas, author,
Parenting Through the Storm

- This chapter talks about the power of validating a child's emotions (telling a child that his or her feelings make sense). Can you think of some times when you've used this technique to calm your child? How did things play out and what did you learn?
- Humans are creatures of habit, kids included. We all love structure and routine! What have you done to create a predictable environment and to put a predictable routine in place for your child? How big of a deal is it for your child when your family needs to deviate from its usual routine?
- Why is punitive discipline ineffective for a child who is struggling? How can it make a bad situation even worse? What are the benefits (for both the child and the parent) of practicing positive discipline?
- "Instead of focusing on the things you wish you could change about your child...begin to focus on the things you admire about your child instead," notes the author. Can you see some opportunities to apply this advice to your own life as a parent?
- What are the benefits of taking a mindful approach to parenting (of making conscious and deliberate parenting decisions that are in synch with your big-picture goals for your relationship with your child)? When are you most likely to be mindful? When are you least likely to be mindful? How can you apply that knowledge to your life as a parent?



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Chapter 7: Calming the Raging Storm

- Some children are more likely to have difficulty with emotional regulation than others. What are some reasons why children might find it difficult to manage their emotions in ways that work for and not against them?
- What types of situation are most likely to trigger an emotional outburst and/or feelings of anxiety in your child? What parenting strategies are most effective in helping your child to work through these difficult emotions?
- What does it mean to raise an emotionally intelligent child? What do children need to understand about emotions and what can parents do to support this learning?

Chapter 8: Family Matters

- “Mental illness is a family struggle. It affects everyone in the family,” says Susan, one of the parents quoted in this chapter. Why is it important for parents to ensure that everyone receives adequate support when a family member is struggling?
- How might siblings be affected? What can parents and other caring adults do to offer support?
- How might the relationship between a child’s parents be affected by their child’s struggles? Where could they turn for support?
- “The myth of the perfect family is just that: a myth,” notes the author. How might understanding this simple fact make it easier to ask for and accept support?

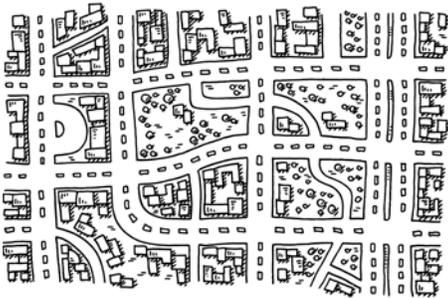


“Self-care isn’t selfish. It’s self-preservation.”

- Ann Douglas, author,
Parenting Through the Storm

Chapter 9: Lifestyle Matters

- This chapter emphasizes the importance of self-care. Why is self-care particularly important for the parent of a child who is struggling? To what extent have you managed to make self-care a priority in your own life? What challenges have you encountered? What strategies have worked for you?
- To what extent is sleep deprivation a problem for your family? What strategies have proven most effective for encouraging sleep? What have proven to be least effective? What advice would you offer to another parent who was trying to figure out how to get more sleep?
- Are you and your children as physically active as you’d like to be? What strategies have proven to be most effective for making physical activity a priority in your lives? What strategies have proven to be least effective? What advice would you offer to another parent who was trying to figure out ways to be more active as a family?
- “Play is the pause that refreshes and replenishes our minds,” notes the author in this chapter. What are some practical things you could do to inject more fun into your family’s day-to-day routine?



"Find your parenting village.
Don't be afraid to tap into
support from other parents."
- Ann Douglas, author,
Parenting Through the Storm

- Nutrition plays a key role in supporting our mental as well as our physical health. What strategies have proven to be most effective for making good nutrition a priority in your family's life—and for ensuring that mealtimes are relaxing and enjoyable? What strategies have proven to be least effective? What advice would you offer to another parent who was trying to figure out ways to make healthy eating a priority for his/her family?

Chapter 10: Working With Your Child's School

- What types of difficulties are likely to occur at school when a child is struggling with a mental health, neurodevelopmental, or behavioral challenge? What can parents, teachers, and school administrators do to support a child who is experiencing difficulties at school?
- What strategies have you used to forge a healthy working alliance with the key adults at your child's school?

Chapter 11: The Friendship Department

- Friendship skills don't come easily or naturally for every child. Can you think of some practical things you could do to support a child who is having difficulty making and keeping friends?
- What are the best ways for parents, teachers, and other caring adults to respond to an incident of bullying? What can parents, teachers, and other caring adults do to reduce the likelihood that bullying will occur?

Chapter 12: Finding Community

- Why is it so important to seek support for yourself when your child is struggling? Who in your own life could you turn to for this type of support?

Chapter 13: Destination Recovery

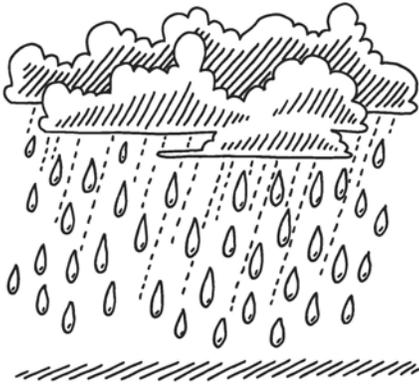
- Why is it so important to encourage a child who is struggling to (1) set goals for himself/herself; and (2) accept the fact that setbacks are normal and a part of life? What can parents, teachers, and other caring adults do to help a child to get back on track following a setback?

Chapter 14: Creating a Better System

- What are some of the biggest challenges families face when it comes to accessing suitable supports for a child who is struggling? What would make the situation less stressful for all concerned?
- What practical things can parents, teachers, and other caring adults do ensure that appropriate supports are in place for every child who needs them?

Spinoff Activities and Games

Looking for some ways to bring some of the concepts discussed in *Parenting Through the Storm* to life for yourself and your child? Here are some games and activities you can enjoy together.



"Children are resilient. Families are resilient. Together we can weather the storm."

- Ann Douglas, author,
Parenting Through the Storm

Game: Eye Spy Emotions

If humans were robots, we'd be able to read one another's emotions predictably and easily. Sure, that would make life easier at times, but it would also make life a whole lot less interesting. What makes life and relationships interesting, after all, is the fact that different people can react in different ways to the very same situation—reactions that are revealed by everything from body language to our facial expressions to the words we use. One of the best ways to help your child to understand this concept is by giving him the opportunity to experience it for himself by playing the emotional world equivalent of the classic children's game "eye spy." Encourage him to note the wide range of emotions on display in a particular situation—for example when people are waiting in line for a ride at the amusement park. (Odds are you'll see a range of emotions on display: everything from eager anticipation to complete and utter terror!) You'll also want to talk about the fact that even people who are experiencing the exact same emotion can react in dramatically different ways. Some people become very fidgety when they're anxious, while others fall asleep.

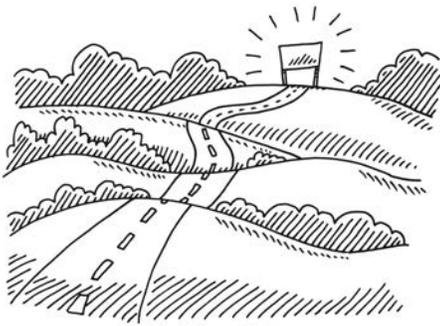
Activity: Emotion Masks

It's a hard lesson for anyone to learn—the fact that the artificial smile plastered on someone's face isn't necessarily revealing that

person's entire emotional truth. To help your child to understand that people can mask their emotions, make a set of emotion masks (a face drawn on a paper plate works well). Practice wearing one mask while portraying another (e.g., wearing the "happy" mask while acting angry)—and then come up with some real-world examples of how and why this could happen.

Game: Emotion Detective

It's easier to make sense of emotions once you understand the concept of triggers—the idea that emotions can be brought on by something that's happening inside you or outside you. To help your child to understand that there's sometimes some detective work involved in figuring out what's triggered another person's emotions, give your child the opportunity to play emotion detective. The next time you're reading a book or watching a movie together, ask your child to suggest some reasons why a particular character might be exhibiting a particular emotion. Did something happen to him? Is he thinking about something? What are some other possibilities? Can your child think of situations from in his life when he reacted in a similar way?



"Pace yourself. Parenting is a marathon event, not a sprint."
- Ann Douglas, author,
Parenting Through the Storm

Game: Emotional Charades

We don't just experience a wide range of emotions. We also experience a range of different intensities of emotions. And just as we need to take into account the nature of the underlying emotion, we also need to pay attention to the intensity of that emotion, too. Give your child the opportunity to practice tuning into the intensity of emotions by playing a game of emotional charades. Portray an emotion using actions, facial expressions, and sounds (but no words) and then ask your child to guess which emotion and what intensity of emotion you are portraying. Are you a little bit excited or over-the-moon excited? Are you a little bit scared or are you terrified? Then ask her to take a turn portraying an emotion, too.

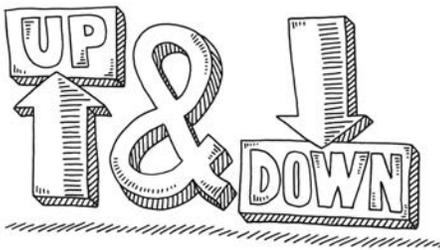
Activity: Jenga Tower of Emotions

Emotions can build on one another or cancel one another out. If you're having a bad day and something else happens to make it even worse, your feeling of frustration is likely to zoom even higher. But if a friend drops by to bring you an unexpected treat,

that feeling of frustration might disappear altogether. Help your child to understand how emotions play off against one another by making a block tower using a set of Jenga blocks (or similar). Add a layer or two of blocks to your tower to represent a foundation of happy experiences—and then remove a block or two to represent life’s more difficult experiences. Your child will see that the tower remains standing as long as there are more happy than unhappy experiences. (If you remove too many blocks, the entire tower will come tumbling down!)

Activity: Color Me Emotional

Imagine putting on layers of emotion, like you might put on layers of clothing. Sometimes those layers clash and sometimes they work reasonably well together. It’s the same way with emotions. You can be both excited and anxious about the first day at a new school, for example. This is because humans are capable of experiencing more than one emotion at the same time. Teach your child about the concept of mixed emotions by mixing colors on a palette. You might decide to use yellow to represent happiness and red to represent anger, for example. If you’re mostly feeling happy, but you’re feeling a little bit frustrated at the same time, you’ll end up with a more “yellowish” result than you would if the opposite were true (you were mostly feeling angry, but something made you happy momentarily, in which case you’d end up with an angry-looking shade of orange!)



“You don’t have to be perfect to be a parent. You just have to keep trying. Think progress, not perfection.”

- Ann Douglas, author,
Parenting Through the Storm

Activity: Emotion Collage

Encourage your child to tap into everything that she’s feeling by creating an emotion collage made up of words and images that capture her emotions. Use this collage to spark conversations with your child about emotion. Your child needs to know that every emotion is acceptable and that you care about how she is feeling; that you are a safe haven where she can turn for support and understanding on days when she’s feeling flooded by emotions that are too big for her to handle on her own.

Activity: Coping Strategies Roadmap

You can get there from here (with *here* being where you are right now, feeling stressed and overwhelmed, and *there* being the much happier and calmer place where you hope to be soon!) This activity

asks your child to identify the coping strategies that will allow him to make inroads on that journey. For some kids, it might mean running around the block to burn off steam; for other kids, it might be reaching out for support from a parent or a friend for help in making sense of their emotions. For added fun, create a coping strategies roadmap for yourself so that you and your child can talk about how you're both different and the same when it comes to coping with challenging emotions.

Activity: Emotion Journal

Help your child to make sense of her most intense and overwhelming emotions by keeping an emotion journal. Encourage her to identify situations that cause her particular difficulty so that she can learn how to spot and manage the associated emotional triggers. Make sure she notes situations that she handles particularly well as opposed to simply zeroing in on situations where she stumbled. You want her to be able to celebrate the progress she's making in learning to make sense of and manage her emotions. And you want her to understand that everyone needs to make a conscious effort to making their emotions work for (and not against) them. This skill doesn't necessarily come easily to anyone and we don't develop this skill overnight. But it is a skill that we can acquire with practice over time. And that's good news for all of us—kids and grownups alike.

Looking for more information about *Parenting Through the Storm*? Visit the book's official website at www.anndouglas.net. You'll find event announcements, author interviews, blog posts, a resource guide, and links that will allow you to connect with author Ann Douglas on Twitter (@anndouglas), Facebook (The Mother of All Books), Pinterest (@annmdouglas), and Instagram (@annmdouglas).

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"Give yourself permission to feel joy in your life right now. You don't have to postpone your happiness until some mythical future day when everything in your life is perfect and your child is no longer struggling. You deserve to feel joy in your life right now."

- Ann Douglas, author,
Parenting Through the Storm