

The background is a solid blue color with a pattern of small, light blue dots. Scattered around the central text are several stylized illustrations of diverse families. These include parents walking with children, parents pushing strollers, and families of various ethnicities and ages. The illustrations are in a simple, flat style with bold outlines and a limited color palette of blues, reds, oranges, and greens. The families are shown in various poses, some walking towards the viewer and others away from it, creating a sense of movement and community.

# PARENT NATION

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

*“When a group of people  
speak with one voice,  
it’s amazing what  
they can accomplish.”*

—Dr. Dana Suskind



# DISCUSSION GUIDE



## Note to Readers:

*If you're using this guide for yourself or a small group of two or three people, you may want to tackle each discussion point. If you're discussing the book with a larger group, feel free to pick one or two discussion points from each chapter.*

## ONE: Toward a New North Star

We learned how the mythic ideal of American individualism is at the foundation of so many of our policies and systems (or lack thereof), leaving parents unable to live up to an impossible standard and ashamed to ask for support. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing barriers to help and was a forceful reminder that no one is meant to parent alone. Yet many parents were left to do just that, as schools, daycare centers, camps and even therapy offices were forced to close or severely limit services. “What we need is to recognize that we can lighten the parenting load by sharing it, by demanding what we need, and by asking society to help,” Suskind writes. “What we need is to see the power in coming together as parents and as a nation to help all children.”

### Discussion points:

- Do you have the tools and teammates you need to raise your child(ren)?
- If not, what are the barriers to finding or keeping those tools and teammates?
- What or who could help you remove those barriers?
- Are you able to help remove them for other parents in your community?
- What were your biggest parenting challenges during the pandemic?
- Have you ever felt ashamed to acknowledge that parenting feels overwhelming?
- Do you think of other parents as your allies?



## TWO: The Brain's Greatest Trick

Out of an entire human lifespan, the biggest surge in the brain's growth and then pruning of neural connections occurs in the first few years of life, which means there will never be a more effective time than early childhood to establish the foundation for learning and development. And what happens—or doesn't—often follows children for life. The author introduces us to a study plotting children's cognitive test scores in relation to family affluence, which illustrates why, as a *Washington Post* reporter put it, "It's better to be born rich than gifted."

*"It is the circumstances  
into which people are born  
that shape the opportunities  
they will go on  
to have in life."*

*—Parent Nation*



### Discussion points:

- What did Charlotte's story teach you about the brain's ability to rewire itself?
- How might her story influence the way we approach childcare and early childhood education?
- What did Hazim's story teach you about the distribution of resources and opportunity in the U.S.?
- Did society help or hamper Charlotte's road to success? How about Hazim's?
- Imagine a society that viewed foundational brain development as its North Star. What would have to change in our schools? Our workplaces? Our communities?
- Are you able to help advocate for any of those changes?

### THREE: The Streetlight Effect

Our modern system of public education, particularly its focus on K-12 schooling, is founded on principles that date back to a 17th Century minister named John Amos Comenius, who argued that it was a mother's responsibility to educate children under 6, and the state's responsibility to take things from there. (Sound familiar?) We're also still clinging to a Puritan-era childcare model that undervalues and underpays the workers who help build our children's brains. "If we really want to find the key that will change our children's educational, economic and occupational fates," Suskind writes, "we must peer into the shadows beyond the glow of the K-12 streetlight."



*"If we don't focus  
our efforts on those  
first few years,  
we will never get  
where we're trying to go."*


*—Parent Nation*

#### Discussion points:

- What options did your parents have for your care before you started full-time school?
- How did those options differ from what was available when you became a parent?
- What are some ways that society could increase wages for childcare workers without simply shifting that cost to parents?
- If you could re-imagine our school system, based on twenty-first-century thinking, what's the first thing you would change?
- Some parents can and want to provide their children's full-time care until they begin school. What supports do those parents need?
- Some parents need to or prefer to work full-time outside the home. What supports do those parents need?

## FOUR: The Brain Architects

In this chapter, we learn about the Three Ts (Tune In, Talk More, and Take Turns) at the core of the author's work at the TMW Center for Early Language + Public Health. We also meet parents, like Kimberly, Michael and Keyonna, whose stories illustrate just a few of the many barriers that stand in the way of parents receiving and/or applying the research and information about what their children's brains need. Inspired by what political philosopher John Rawls called a "veil of ignorance," Suskind invites us to engage in a thought experiment: Design a future society, but with no idea what your status would be within it. How would you design it to maximize your child's chances of a safe, healthy, fulfilled future?



*"What would you want  
every parent to have to make sure  
that, no matter who ends up  
raising your child, the child will  
be adequately cared for  
and educated?"*

*—Parent Nation*

### Discussion points:

- Spend a few moments considering or discussing with your group the "veil of ignorance" thought experiment.
- In terms of parenting, how would your imagined society differ from the current one in the United States?
- How would it be similar?
- Do you know parents (including yourself) whose dreams for how they'd parent were sidelined by unexpected barriers?
- Kimberly took her story to the American Academy of Pediatrics, where she helped craft a statement on the importance of paid family medical leave. What could you do with the parent stories you've heard or lived?

## FIVE: It All Starts with Beliefs

Babies don't come with instruction manuals, but newborns, thankfully, are pretty adept at making their needs known. Feed me! Change me! Rock me to sleep! (All of which sound remarkably similar . . . *waaah!*) But when it comes to the important work of building children's brains, parents are really on their own. Babies can't articulate this particular need, and while research has proven what works and what doesn't, we have failed to pass that information onto parents in an organized, systemic way. "We say parents are children's first teachers and then fail to tell them how to teach," Suskind writes. "We say children are our future, but we invest less in children's early years than any other developed country. We say we believe in the American Dream, which embraces growth and progress, yet we have set up a society that is so unequal that the Dream has become almost impossible to achieve for far too many."

### Discussion points:

- When and where did you first learn about what babies need to develop healthy brains?
- Did it change how you interacted with your child? If this information is new to you, will it change how you interact with your child going forward?
- What are some ways we could pass this information along to parents earlier and more systemically?
- Based on the author's descriptions, do you identify as a "concerted cultivation" parent or a "natural growth" parent?
- Suskind writes that the disconnect between what we say and what we do as a nation has direct—and sometimes dire—consequences for parents. Can you think of an example? Can you think of a solution?



## SIX: Building Foundations and Building Sturdy Boats

More than half of American children aren't "on track" in at least one developmental area by the start of kindergarten, which can prove perilous for future success. Research shows that 5-year-old children who are ready for school are less likely to drop out of high school and have a better chance of reaching the middle class by the time they turn 40. In countries with more family friendly policies—universal childcare, paid family leave—there are smaller language gaps between rich and poor children. Those smaller language gaps benefit all of society in the form of a more educated workforce and other public goods.

*"Their boats are leaking,  
and they are struggling  
to ferry their children  
across the river  
to a bright future."*

*—Parent Nation*



### Discussion points:

- How much did the cost of childcare impact your decisions about when and whether to return to work after becoming a parent?
- Were you able to find affordable childcare that also offered the attention you wanted for your child?
- Does your workplace offer on-site childcare or assistance finding or paying for childcare?
- Would on-site childcare or assistance finding or paying for childcare make a workplace more attractive to you?
- What are some other ways workplaces could work with, rather than against, parents?

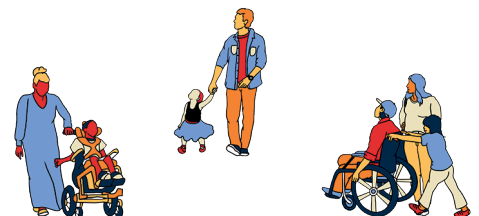


## SEVEN: Making Maps and Navigating the Torrent

Roughly 60 percent of American adults suffered at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE) as a child, and one adult in six experienced four or more. Those experiences can sabotage a child's ability to develop all-important executive functioning skills, since the prefrontal cortex is influenced by and reacts to chronic stress and anxiety more than other parts of the brain. And what happens to us at particular points in life, especially in the critical early years, sets up the body's stress responses for the rest of our lives. "So often we fail to see the connection between issues like homelessness and healthy brain development," Suskind writes, "or between parents' struggles with psychological issues and their children's brain development, when in fact they are intimately intertwined."

### Discussion points:

- What similarities do you see between Sabrina's and Katherine's stories?
- Do you recognize yourself in either of the women or their families? Do you recognize a parent you know?
- Is your community set up to help parents provide a calm, stable environment for their children? What about the communities surrounding yours?
- Katherine envisions intentional parenting communities, where parents from all different backgrounds come together and support one another. What would that look like where you live?
- Research shows countries with fewer robust family support policies are more likely to show disparities in the health of children. What policies should be put in place so that parents receive that support Katherine dreams of, but on a systemic level?



## EIGHT: Lifting Our Voices

“How could a family be forced to rely on a 6 year old as its safety net?” It’s the heartbreaking question, prompted by the death of Freddy Joyner, that launched the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971, landmark legislation that would have expanded high quality childcare and parental support to all. Would have, had President Nixon not vetoed it, leaving families—particularly lower-income families—to fend for themselves for the past five decades. And how could a “Spanish teacher of some renown,” who spent her adult life working and investing, spend her retirement destitute and living in a chicken coop? Her life story set the stage for the founding of the AARP. The author walks us through a brief history of public and private sector wins and losses, whose reverberations shape the landscape upon which parents function today.

*“Sometimes we are limited  
by where we set our sights.  
Then, suddenly, we see over the horizon  
and understand there is another way”*

*—Parent Nation*

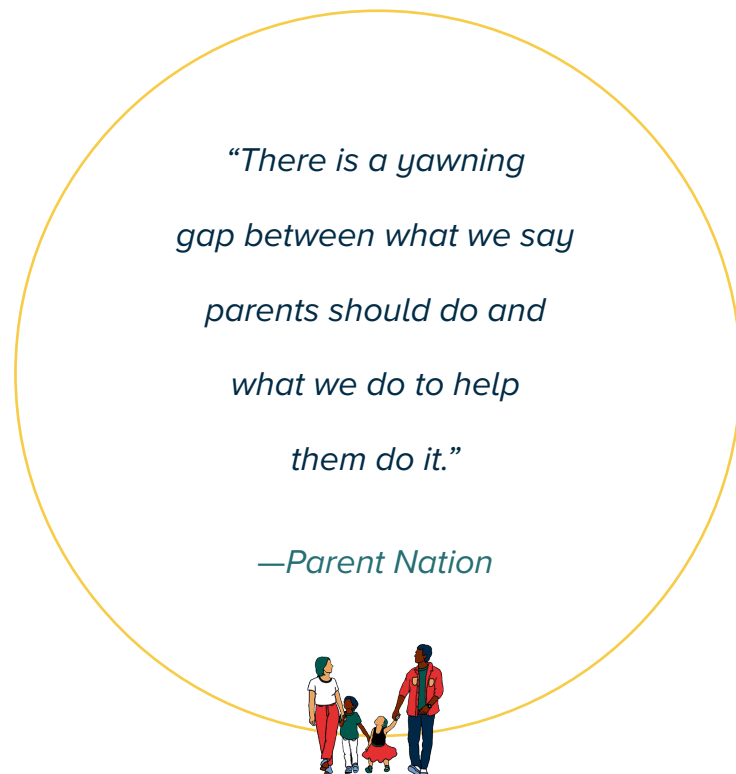


### Discussion points:

- What would a modern version of the Comprehensive Child Development Act include in order to support American families?
- What are some lessons we could draw from the AARP’s success in order to improve the health and well-being of parents and children?
- Should healthy brain development be considered a civil right? Why or why not?
- The author writes, “Sometimes we are limited by where we set our sights. Then, suddenly, we see over the horizon and understand there is another way.” Does that other way feel reachable to you? Why or why not?

## NINE: Just What the Doctor Ordered

The story of SIDs, and how a relatively simple shift in medical advice saved children's lives, illustrates the power of educating parents, especially when conventional wisdom needs to be updated. Yet there remains, as the author writes, a yawning gap between what we say parents should do and what we do to help them do it. Despite all we know about children's developmental needs, we lack both the mindset and the infrastructure to supply parents with the knowledge, skills and support to help them excel at the job of parenting. "At its most holistic," Suskind writes, "healthcare can be a hub for parents."



### Discussion points:

- Have your healthcare providers (OB/GYN, pediatrician) been reliable sources of information about what your child's brain needs?
- Where would you typically turn to find resources or advice about building your child's brain?
- Are such resources easy to access?
- How does the United States' ratio of dollars spent on medical care versus social services strike you? Should we spend more on social services? Less? About what we currently do? Why?

## TEN: The Business of Business Is . . .

Workplace policies and culture are due for a reboot. The percentage of dual earner households more than doubled between 1960 and 2000 from 25 percent to 60 percent—a change driven largely by economic necessity. More than 30 percent of households, meanwhile, are headed by single parents. And as parents struggle to balance work and family, employers are losing out. Up to 5 million more workers would join the U.S. workforce if American businesses offered more family-friendly policies. The COVID-19 pandemic further crystalized the need for businesses and employers to embrace their citizenship in our parent nation by creating policies that allow employees to be both workers and parents. “If as a society we believe that it’s in our interest to prioritize the foundational brain development of all children,” Suskind writes, “workplace culture should embody that belief.”

### Discussion points:

- Have you ever felt the need to hide your family’s needs from your employer?
- How would it be received if you told your employer you needed to leave by a certain time to see your child’s baseball game/recital/school play?
- Have you engaged in conversations with co-workers about whether your workplace is conducive to parenting? If so have you shared any of those conversations with higher-ups?
- Do you think workplaces can balance both profits and their employees' full humanity?
- Political scientist Jacob Hacker said, “The family used to be a refuge from risk. Today, it is the epicenter of risk.” What changes brought about that shift?



## ELEVEN: Life, Liberty, and Fulfilling Society's Promise

We catch back up with Michael and Keyonna in this chapter, and we learn that Mikeyon is thriving and Michael is healing. We also meet Jovanna Archuleta, whose life and work are a testament to the value of searching for solutions beyond the glow of the streetlight. And we meet Rachel Anderson, whose Evangelical Christian group Families Valued champions policies like paid leave, child tax credits and childcare. Rather than a source of division and discord, we're reminded, America's diversity of thought, beliefs and backgrounds can be its greatest strength when we unite on behalf of the common good — in this case, children. "The rough blueprints for a parent nation have been drawn up," Suskind writes. "Now we need to build it."

*"Investment in early childhood  
will pay dividends in the short term  
by getting more parents into  
the workforce and in the long term  
by building strong and productive  
future generations. It ultimately  
saves us money."*

*—Parent Nation*



### Discussion points:

- The Military Child Care Act of 1989 reimagined and reshaped childcare for families in the service. Can you imagine something similar working in the civilian world?
- Do issues such as paid leave, child tax credits and childcare strike you as inherently political? Why or why not?
- The author introduced us to dozens of parents throughout the book. Whose story resonated most with you and why?
- Do you feel a sense of belonging or collective identity with other parents in a way you didn't before reading the book?
- Did the book leave you feeling hopeful? Why or why not?