



RAISING AWARE SEEKERS

**How the Science of Wonder
Helps Our Kids Thrive**

Deborah Farmer Kris

Praise for *Raising Awe-Seekers*

"Deborah Farmer Kris's urgently needed book, *Raising Awe-Seekers*, offers an inspiring roadmap for bringing more awe into your children's lives and for finding more awe as the caregiver that you are. In this age of anxiety, there is nothing more important for caregivers to do, and no better path than reading this book."

—**Dacher Keltner**, professor of psychology at UC Berkeley, author of *Awe: The Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*

"In *Raising Awe-Seekers*, Deborah Farmer Kris reminds us that childhood and parenting aren't just about the daily routines, extracurriculars, sporting events, and appointments that take up so much time and mental energy. She shows us how one of the most enjoyable parts of life is awe and explains many simple ways to spark awe for ourselves and our children. This book is a masterpiece in showing parents how to set an example for their children that awe is a necessary part of living a life filled with joy, curiosity, and wonder."

—**Afsaneh Moradian**, author of the *Jamie Is Jamie* picture book series

"Deborah Farmer Kris's first parenting book couldn't come at a better moment. At a time when life feels overwhelming and the future seems more uncertain than ever, *Raising Awe-Seekers* is the perfect antidote to the confusion, anxiety, and stress we're all facing. The perspective and practice of wonder is overlooked and underappreciated, and yet it is precisely what every single one of us needs in order to remain hopeful, engaged, compassionate, and resilient. This book is a fantastic read, and the suggested practices are reasonable, doable, and—best of all—fun! I cannot recommend this book highly enough for every parent human out there."

—**Carla Naumburg, Ph.D., LICSW**, author of *How to Stop Losing Your Sh*t with Your Kids*

"*Raising Awe-Seekers* is a transformative guide that reminds us of the profound role awe and wonder play in nurturing resilience and connection in our children. Deborah Farmer Kris masterfully weaves personal stories and research to show how fostering a sense of belonging, kindness, and curiosity can strengthen the bond between parents and children. This book beautifully captures the essence of intentional parenting, inspiring us to slow down, embrace the little wonders, and cultivate a joyful family culture. It's a must-read for anyone looking to deepen their relationship with their child while helping them thrive in an ever-complex world."

—**Bryana Kappadakunnel**, author of *Parent Yourself First*

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Helps Our Kids Thrive**

Deborah Farmer Kris

free spirit
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**To MK, AK, JK & CK—
you are the wonders of my world.**

Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

—Mary Oliver

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INTRODUCTION

Childhoods rich with awe are good for the child.
—Dacher Keltner

On an August night, my dad shook me awake at 2 a.m. I stumbled out of bed and into the backyard. Dad—a taciturn geneticist who felt more at home in a lab than at a party—had already spread out a large quilt for me and my four older siblings. A couple of the kids had not responded favorably to the wake-up call and were still in bed. Those of us who had lay there in grumpy silence.

But then, a streak of light sliced through the sky. And another.

“Woah!”

“Over there!”

“Look at that one!”

For hours, until pink light washed away the stars, my siblings and I lay on our backs, mesmerized by the cosmic dance of the Perseids. My nine-year-old self would have described the night as *awesome*—an apt choice, since within the word is its emotional correlate: awe.

Rediscovering Awe

Nothing fascinates me more than child development—how kids learn, develop social and emotional skills, and form habits that will help them thrive. This passion has sustained me through two decades as a K-12 teacher and administrator, parent educator, child development

specialist, and education journalist. And I have two amazing kids who, of course, test every theory I've ever had about child development.

And *yet*, for all my training and practical experience, I'd overlooked a key concept—one that boosts children's mental and emotional well-being, strengthens their social ties, and supports their curiosity and internal motivation. I was missing the thing that had infused my own childhood with meaning and joy. I was missing *awe*. Or rather, I was feeling it without naming it and yearning for more without knowing why. And I had no notion of the compelling body of research that underpins this three-letter word.

That changed in September 2021.

A school had reached out, asking for a parent presentation on “resilience and stress management.” Resilience is crucial to psychological strength, and it's a topic I normally enjoy presenting on for parents, but I just couldn't muster my usual excitement. For a year and a half, since the start of a global pandemic, it seemed like all my articles and workshops had been focused on how to help kids and adults “navigate these unprecedented times.” I knew my parent readers and workshop attendees were looking for this advice—I was too. As parents, we'd shouldered our own anxiety while helping our kids work through a massive upheaval, including the loss of routines, anticipated milestones, and the security of normalcy. We'd risen to the task again and again and again. That's what parents do, after all. But I was tired, and the other parents I knew were tired too.

Staring at this school's email invitation, I froze up. *I don't want to talk about stress and resilience again*, I thought. *I want to talk about . . . hope*. But what would that look like?

That same week, I was finishing edits on my picture book *You Wonder All the Time*, which celebrates young children's innate curiosity. Somehow, I stumbled upon a forty-five-page white paper called “The Science of Awe” from the Greater Good Science Center at the University

of California, Berkeley. The paper summarized fifteen years of research, much of it research from the Center's founding director, Dacher Keltner.

Sitting at my computer, reading the research on awe for the first time, I got goosebumps. I remember how the light filtered in through the office window as I read. My brain whirled, connecting these findings with decades of child development research. I laughed, scribbled notes, and texted the paper to a dozen friends and colleagues. I was awestruck.

Over the next several weeks, I devoured every article and academic paper I could find on the benefits of awe and wonder. And then I called Keltner to interview him for a *Washington Post* article about how parents can help their kids experience these emotions. In the days that followed the article's publication, I watched the response from readers. Scores of parents, educators, and faith leaders shared the piece. It made the rounds in online groups. Awe seemed to be resonating with everyone.

Researching awe has changed my life. It has affected how I take my daily walks, what I listen to in the car, and how I think about my daily schedule. When the dog wakes me up at 4:30 a.m. to go out, I am less inclined to grumble and more likely to look up at the stars. Becoming an awe-seeker is even (slowly) improving my attitude toward New England winters. Most importantly, awe has influenced my parenting in profound and concrete ways. And I believe that understanding this emotion can change your life and your parenting too.

Raising kids has never been an easy job. In addition to tending to their basic needs, as parents we must contend with the many challenges facing our children and teens: intense pressure to achieve, the hazards of social media and the online world, struggles with focus and motivation, spiking rates of anxiety and disordered eating, and worries about climate change, political strife, global crises, and local injustices, to name just a few. There are wonderful parenting books out there that give pinpointed insights and advice on each of these topics. This book offers something a little different. It aims to reorient you and

your parenting toward something fundamentally human: the capacity to wonder.

This book is about raising awe-seekers and becoming one yourself.

What Is Awe, Exactly?

Before we continue, take a minute or so and make a list of all the human emotions you can think of. When I ask parents and kids to do this exercise, they usually respond with variants of four basic emotions: happy, sad, mad, and scared. Our brains also go quickly to excitement, frustration, fear, anger, joy, and worry. But in all my years of giving workshops on children's emotional development, I have yet to have a participant write *awe* on their list.

So, what is awe?

Awe is perhaps our most overlooked and undervalued emotion. It is what we feel when we encounter something vast, wondrous, or beyond our ordinary frame of reference. It evokes a sense of mystery, reverence, or wonder. It is the feeling that washes over us when we hear a beautiful song, watch a flock of geese fly south, or see images from the new NASA telescope.¹

Keltner, who has spent two decades studying this emotion, describes three ways you might know you are experiencing awe: tears, chills, and “whoa.”² For example:

- Think of a moment when you watched your child do something beautiful, and your eyes got misty (tears).
- Think of a time you heard a song or a story on the radio, or read a passage of text, that gave you goosebumps (chills).
- Think of a time when you saw a stunning sunset or vista that prompted you to utter, “Wow!” (whoa).

For kids especially, I would add this: wide eyes. I love seeing a young child's eyes pop with amazement when they encounter something

brand new—like a chicken hatching out of an egg, an ocean wave, a parade, a street performer, or a baking-soda-and-vinegar volcano. As Keltner writes, we can all find “the extraordinary in the ordinary . . . the wonders of life are so often nearby.”³

Why Does Awe Matter?

If you take an evolutionary view of human development, emotions serve distinct purposes. Fear keeps us alert for dangers and prepares us to deal with them. Prolonged stress isn't healthy, but short-term stress can be our friend: It gets us ready to act, it reminds us of what is important to us and worth protecting, and it can heighten our senses and provide us with crucial information we can use to keep ourselves and others safe. I remember the first time my son saw the ocean at age two and strode right in. Luckily, my stress was operating at proportional levels to his nonchalance, and I used that burst of adrenaline to race in to get him.

Likewise, anger, with reason and limits, can prompt us to protect others and to confront injustice. Loneliness reminds us that we all crave companionship. Disgust keeps us from eating the chicken in the fridge that doesn't smell right. Contentment and joy send us powerful signals about what replenishes our bodies and spirits and helps us find equilibrium.

So what's the purpose of awe? Why do we get goosebumps when we watch Simone Biles vault herself into the air or catch our breath when we see a rainbow after a storm? How does this emotion help the human species survive and thrive?

For such an overlooked emotion, awe packs a punch. According to the research I outline in this book, awe supports our physical, mental, and emotional well-being. It strengthens curiosity and humility and enhances our connection to other humans. Several studies you'll read about describe how experiencing awe can make us kinder and more

generous—prompting people to work cooperatively, share resources, and sacrifice for the common good. These types of behaviors and dispositions strengthen family and community life today and likely helped our early ancestors survive.⁴ In addition, awe has been linked to improved mental well-being, including a decrease in PTSD symptoms and a reduction in biomarkers of inflammation.⁵ As a bonus, feeling awe also supports academic engagement, because this feeling spurs curiosity about the world, strengthening internal motivation.⁶

Put simply, awe supports just about every outcome that we want for our kids, our families, and ourselves:

- Do we want our kids to be compassionate and civic-minded?
- Do we want to form healthy and meaningful relationships?
- Do we want our kids to retain their innate curiosity as they grow and strengthen their motivation to learn?
- Do we want everyone in the family to develop perspective, resilience, and the capacity to find wonder in everyday life?

Awe supports all these aims. And yet it's an emotion that, generally speaking, we and our children do not experience enough.

In Keltner's *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*, there is one paragraph that I highlighted, underlined, and starred (my annotating trifecta):⁷

One of the most alarming trends in the lives of children today is the disappearance of awe. We are not giving them enough opportunities to experience and discover the wonders of life. Art and music classes do not make the school budget. The free-form play of recess and lunchtime is being replaced with drills to boost scores on tests that have only a modest relation to how well kids do in school. Teachers must teach to those tests rather than engage students in open-ended questioning and discovery, where the unknown is the centerpiece of the lesson. Every minute

is scheduled. And the natural world children are experiencing is undergoing mass extinctions. It's no wonder that stress, anxiety, depression, shame, eating disorders, and self-harm are on the rise for young people. They are awe-deprived.

With pediatric health experts raising the alarm about the mental health of children and teens, helping our kids experience a little more awe could become part of our collective response. As Keltner puts it, "One simple prescription can have transformative effects: Look for more daily experiences of awe. . . . Their benefits are profound."⁸

How Do Kids Understand Awe?

But do kids really feel—and understand the feeling of—awe? And how early in life can they recognize it? It's not one of the core four emotions (happy, sad, mad, scared) that we usually talk about with young children. In 2023, researchers at the University of Chicago conducted a study with children ages four to nine. They found that children can discern awe-inspiring experiences from other kinds of experiences. Researchers wrote: "[Children] perceive diverse positive effects of awe-inspiring experiences—in terms of their motivation to explore, awareness of things to understand, and multiple aspects of their sense of self. . . . Our work provides evidence that awe-inspiring experiences, such as seeing nature's beauties and power, are readily appreciated even from an early age."⁹

Fan Yang was the lead researcher on this project. She is the director of the Human Nature and Potentials Lab at the University of Chicago, which researches human happiness, meaning, and awe. She told me that she hopes her research will help parents see that "children are capable of experiencing much more and appreciating the world in deeper ways."

I can confirm just how accurate Yang's reflections are. Recently, I visited a school to read my picture book *You Have Feelings All the Time* to a large group of kindergartners. Before opening the book, we

generated a list of emotions they already knew. The children quickly moved beyond happy, sad, mad, and scared—calling out feelings such as grateful, frustrated, surprised, exhausted, worried, and hopeful. How did they develop this sophisticated emotional vocabulary? They had to first experience these emotions themselves, and then they needed guidance in finding a name for what they were feeling. Identifying feelings gives children a mental framework for their emotional world—and it helps them identify emotions that they *want* to experience. When we seek out awe with our children, and give them a name for the feeling, we help bend their worlds toward wonder. They can choose to become awe-seekers, with us and on their own.

While writing this book, I spoke to hundreds of kids and teens about awe and wonder, through classroom visits, school assemblies, workshops, and personal conversations. While *awe* was largely a new word for these audiences, I found that kids—even preschoolers—could grasp its meaning. Kindergartners loved to tell me their favorite “wow facts.” When I asked a group of nine- to twelve-year-olds, “What do you think *awe* means?” hands shot up. A fourth grader said, “It’s like when you really look up to someone—you are in awe of them.” A classmate added, “It’s when you want to say, *Wow! That’s so cool!*” Fifth and sixth graders offered these synonyms: *flabbergasted*, *amazed*, *dumbstruck*, *surprised*, and (my personal favorite) *transfixed*. After a visit to a high school in Massachusetts, the newly elected student government chose “Awe” as the theme for the upcoming school year. I have had teenagers reach out to me weeks after a presentation to ask me the name of the song I played or the painting I showed. Kids and teens have also eagerly shared their own stories about what it felt like to dance in *The Nutcracker*, learn about the Franklin Expedition, meet a red-tailed hawk, create art, sing with friends, lead a drum circle, hold a new baby, or experience a parent’s supportive love. And, with their permission, I’ve included many of these stories in the pages that follow.

Where Do We Find Awe?

The best part about awe is how accessible it is. How *ordinary*. We don't have to take our kids to the Grand Canyon to experience it. Awe is an everyday emotion, something we can feel during a morning walk, a puppy playdate, a bedtime story, or a soccer game.

How do we know this? Researchers Yang Bai, Maria Monroy, and Dacher Keltner collected awe stories from adults living in twenty-six countries. They drew from a diverse pool: members of all major religions, people living in democratic and authoritarian countries, and people with widely varying educational, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds.

Participants were given a definition of awe and then asked to share a time when they felt this emotion. Researchers then coded the 2,600 responses, looking for patterns in people's awe-inspiring experiences. They identified several sources of awe. This book is structured around seven of the main sources,¹⁰ with an eye toward how each relates to parenting and child development.

1. **Nature:** From sunsets to ocean waves to the first spring flower, nature is a universally accessible source of awe. And, as I discuss in chapter 1, there are tangible benefits to getting our families outside and in touch with the natural world.
2. **Music:** For humans, song is our first language. We react to our babies' coos and cries; they respond to our lullabies and sing-song voices. For teens and adults, a meaningful piece of music can elicit intense emotion, and a song from childhood can transport us back in time. Auditory wonders, and how we can use them to support kids' development, are covered in chapter 2.
3. **Art:** This broad category includes making art, seeing art, and experiencing the wonders of design—such as looking up at a

skyscraper or walking into an artfully designed courtyard. Chapter 3 dives into the visual world, sharing ways parents and kids can experience art together.

4. **Big Questions:** Think of the last time you read a book, listened to a podcast, or learned something new that made you sit up and say, “Wow.” Chapter 4 explores how packed childhood is with this source of awe as kids seek answers to compelling questions—and how we can join them.
5. **Collective Effervescence:** This is the energy that comes from being part of a group that is working toward a common purpose. Most kids crave this source of awe—it’s why they join sports teams, drama troupes, and D&D clubs. Chapter 5 is about belonging and how we can support our kids’ desire to be part of a larger whole.
6. **The Circle of Life:** Think about how you responded to your child when they were a baby. Did your face brighten as you tried to make them smile or marveled at their tiny toes? Think, too, of the reverence and mystery that can surround a loss. Chapter 6 explores how awe can help us reframe how we talk to kids about life and death.
7. **Human Kindness:** The most common source of awe is witnessing other people’s goodness. Moral virtue is inspiring. “It’s kindness and courage,” Keltner told me. “We really have this capacity to be moved by other people.” That’s the topic for chapter 7.

This is not a prescriptive parenting book. Rather, in these pages, you’ll encounter research and hear from experts in various fields about how their work relates to parenting and wonder. You’ll learn about the benefits of awe and ways to make awe-seeking intentional. I share stories from parents and kids, as well as my own stories (with my

children's permission) about living and parenting as an awe-seeker, in hopes of inspiring you to invite more of this emotion into your and your children's lives. Finally, each chapter offers concrete ideas and resources—from activities to book lists—to help you fill your kids' worlds with wonder.

Parenting Anchors

Before we dive into the heart of this book, I want to share four broad concepts that anchor my approach to parenting and that you'll find infused throughout these pages. I have been writing about these ideas for years. But when I began to study awe, I quickly realized that these concepts also support awe-seeking. So as you read the research and encounter new ideas in this book, think back to these anchors and how you might infuse them into your parenting.

1. Slow Down Childhood

Today's highly structured, competition-oriented child-rearing culture largely ignores or even stifles awe. Waking hours are often filled with adult-directed activities, pressures, or obligations. That leaves kids less time to wonder, wander, or tune in to their emotions and surroundings. As Keltner told me, awe requires unstructured time: "How do you find awe? You slow things down."

I've worked with fourth graders who were so programmed with after-school classes and weekend activities that they rarely had time to play. I've spoken with eighth graders who told me they "don't have time" for hobbies and activities that bring them joy. I've worked with stressed-out, sleep-deprived high school juniors and seniors for whom activities were—first and foremost—résumé builders for college admissions. Awe requires being present in the moment, and that's not easy in a future-oriented, go-go-go culture.

Pressing the pause button to make more room for awe will likely take some adjustment. I think about all the times I've barked at my kids

to hustle while they were, say, crouched on the sidewalk, staring at a dandelion growing through a crack. But when I think about my favorite parenting moments, and hear from other parents about theirs, they are often centered around simple moments of awe: wandering through the park with my kids, watching fireworks on a hill, or snuggling together during a thunderstorm. It's the joy that comes from seeing your child's eyes grow wide with understanding, watching your kid who struggles with nerves perform confidently on stage, or noticing siblings be good to one another.

2. Embrace PDF

As a mental model, I love the acronym PDF, developed by Stanford University's Challenge Success, an organization focused on "strategies that improve well-being, engagement, and belonging for all K-12 students." PDF stands for:¹¹

Playtime

Downtime

Family time

Challenge Success founder Denise Pope says the research is clear: "Every kid needs PDF every day."¹² Awe fits beautifully into this paradigm. Wonder is often playful. Wonder requires downtime. And wonder can strengthen family relationships as you get curious *together*.

Of the three, adults and kids struggle most with downtime. When we don't have an activity, agenda, or digital distraction, sometimes we don't know what to do with ourselves. That's why I'm a big believer in the generative power of boredom. Within seconds of finishing screen time, my son invariably says, "What can I do, Mom? I'm bored." Sometimes I give him options, but he usually swats them down reflexively. Other times I respond: "Brilliance is born of boredom."

I'm not saying my son *likes* that response, which is one that both my kids have heard countless times, but it's a gentle tease with a deeper

meaning. As kids wrestle through the uncomfortable feelings of not knowing what to do in the moment, they (usually) find their way. They become curious and creative out of necessity, pulling out a craft or making up a game, picking up a sketchpad or concocting some “potion” from jars in the spice cabinet. Questions lead to more questions. Wonder begets wonder.

3. Practice Radical Curiosity

As a parent educator, I sometimes field the question *So, what’s your best advice?* It’s an unanswerable query because there is no single checklist for raising kids. But parents can never go wrong with this: curiosity. Get curious about who your kid is. Get curious about what motivates them and confuses them. Get curious about why your teen is acting the way they are. Get curious about what your kids are curious about.

Robert Waldinger has made it his life’s work to study what it means to live a “good life.” He directs the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which, for more than eighty years, has followed the lives of 724 participants and more than 1,300 of their descendants. He detailed the results in his book with Marc Schulz, *The Good Life: Lessons from the World’s Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*. I had a chance to talk to Waldinger, and when I asked him what wisdom his research held for parents, he offered up the concept of “radical curiosity.” He defined this as a “real, deep curiosity about what others are experiencing.”

To practice radical curiosity, Waldinger says, look at one person in your life and ask: *What’s here about this person that I haven’t noticed before?* Your answer could “be anything,” he said, “even the way sweat forms on your partner’s forehead.” Radical curiosity can transform family relationships because “we get lulled into the assumption [that] *Oh, I know this person. I know how they’re going to react.*” Curiosity allows a relationship to grow as the people within it grow and change.¹³

Take our kids. When they are newborns, we are hyperaware of every sigh, smile, and cry. When they are toddlers, we note each milestone.

Years later, do we respond to our eight-year-olds' meltdowns with the same curiosity? The middle school brain develops more rapidly than at any age except birth to age three: Are we awestruck by our eleven-year-olds' cognitive leaps? Are we curious about what makes our eleventh graders giggle like five-year-olds? As I hope you'll see time and again as you make your way through this book, one of the most readily available sources of wonder for parents is the child right in front of us.

4. Become an Awe-Seeker Yourself

I can't begin this book without stating an obvious truth, and it's one I need to tell myself repeatedly: Our kids take their cues from us. They are astute anthropologists of human behavior and tend to imitate what they see. So if we want them to feel more awe, we must become awe-seekers first. If we want them to experience wonder, we must open ourselves to it too.

The phrase *be a lifelong learner* is so overused it's almost meaningless. So let's reframe it: What if we paid more attention to what piques our curiosity? What if we tuned in to our tears, chills, and whoas? And then, what if we named those things out loud to our kids? When we get excited about a new skill we're learning, pause to savor a favorite song, experiment with a new recipe, marvel at a sunset, or investigate a nest in a tree, we remind the kids watching us that wonder is a lifelong pursuit.

One of the best ways to feel collective family awe is this: Listen to kids' questions and notice what brings them wonder. When we notice what makes our kids say *wow*—what gives them goosebumps or expands their minds in beautiful ways—we learn more about who they are right now and who they might become. When we pay attention to our kids' sources of awe, we validate their experiences and invite them to keep exploring.

Parenting is always a push-pull. We push kids to develop healthy habits and skills, to try new things, and to discover their interests. They push back, pulling us in unexpected directions on their path of self-discovery. Together, we grow. It's messy, *wonder*-ful, and *awe*-some work.

I remember dragging my kids on an autumn hike, perhaps trying to channel my nature-loving dad. Like I did at their age, they grumbled a bit. But after an hour of scrambling over rocks, kicking leaves, and watching herons stalk prey, one of them turned to me and said, "Next time I don't want to come, please remind me of this feeling."

I can, because that feeling has a name. And this book is all about it.

