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Basic training for dads

Six years as an army commando didn't prepare Neil Sinclair for the minefield of bringing up his children. When he became a stay-at-home-dad, he found what he needed was a straightforward survival manual. So he wrote one. By **Jon Henley**.

NEIL SINCLAIR spent six years in the commandos. He survived winters in Arctic Norway, cleared minefields in Iraq and tracked drug traffickers in the jungles of Belize. He guarded the British mission to the United Nations in New York. But he never felt so panic-stricken as when he was facing a howling two-month-old at 3am.

"I guess that's when the idea was born," says Sinclair of his sensible and accessible new guide to parenthood, *Commando Dad*. "When we brought our first child home from the hospital, everything we had read and everything we'd been told up until then was about the birth – and now, here we were, back at home, with a new baby, and I hadn't the faintest clue what to do."

Sinclair, 41, now a father of three, found himself wishing for something he'd been given when he joined the army: a basic training manual.

"Any soldier will tell you how precious that little book is," he says. "It's a survival guide, basically. It tells you how to do everything you have to do: simply, clearly and concisely. So that was my plan: a book that will tell dads exactly how to bathe a baby, change a nappy, make a bottle, give it. A book that will give them confidence."

Most parenting blogs, books and websites aimed at fathers,

Sinclair says, "are gimmicks or not very different from the others". "They lose me very quickly. I switch off. At two in the morning you don't want to have to plough through a chapter. There's this little thing in front of you, completely dependent, and you're lost. Worse, you can't think straight, with the noise. You need to be told what to do."

Commando Dad sets out to offer "a few essential skills, to reduce the stress, and allow you to function". The tone is cod-military and tongue-in-cheek, referring to a dad's "mission" and to newborns as BTs (baby troopers).

Chapter headings include: Preparing Base Camp (baby's bedroom); An Army Marches on Its Stomach (feeding); Welcome to the Thunderbox (toilet training); On Manoeuvres (transporting kids); and Dealing with Hostilities.

"It's 'Right, gentlemen, today's lesson is... burping baby'. For this task, you will need equipment A and B. The core skills you require are X and Y. Here are the key dos and don'ts," Sinclair says. Then: "Fall out, commando dads."

This may not be to everyone's taste, but Sinclair is sanguine: "For me, a new dad is a new dad, no matter what his circumstances. That's the real leveller. I've just tried to make my book as useful and relevant as possible to everyone."



Commando dad: Neil Sinclair always acts in the best interest of his troopers.

The advice, approved by healthcare professionals, is quick to read, easy to understand and simple to digest, delivered in short, unambiguous bullet points and, no-nonsense rules – and, unarguably, spot on.

"Because this is a very serious task, and a mission that lasts a lifetime," says Sinclair, slipping into commando-speak, "There's absolutely no more important job to do well and get right than being a good dad. It's about doing the best you can, every day and in every situation. And that's not easy."

No-one could say he doesn't know what he's talking about. Besides having three children – Samuel, Jude and Liberty – Sinclair, since leaving the army, has worked as a PE supply teacher, a stay-at-home father (his wife, Tara, is a PR executive who helped "tremendously" in the writing of the book) and as a qualified childminder.

In fact, it's been far from what you might call a standard-issue career: a brace of school academic qualifications; 59 Independent Commando Squadron; teacher training; and three years in security in New York after Tara landed a job with an international PR company.

The family later returned to Britain and Sinclair became primary carer for the couple's two children, followed by a third (born during a planned trip to New York so that she, like her siblings, could have dual nationality). Being a stay-at-home father, he says, laid the foundations for the project. Then, Sinclair says, he started to feel he wanted to contribute more financially while staying at home and decided the best way was to train as a childminder. But that in itself presented a number of hurdles. "People just didn't get it. I had to explain time and again: Look, I have two kids at school, and a daughter still at home. I'm

at home all day with her. I want to bring in money, to offer a positive male role model and to allow someone else to pursue their career. Is there really anything so terribly wrong with that?"

Childminding, he says, taught him even more: "It's hard work. Long days. But it taught me the importance of being organised. If you can get organised, you can have fun."

Organisation, unsurprisingly, is a core element of *Commando Dad*. "Preparation and planning prevent poor parental performance," says Sinclair, grinning as he subverts a military axiom. "Think ahead. Be prepared for all eventualities, but have the confidence to adapt. Have your kitbag squared away and ready for deployment. Recognise that good routines should be standard operating procedure."

Other top tips? "The golden rules start from the fact that a commando dad is a hands-on dad. He gets involved, he takes his responsibilities seriously. He's engaged, he spends time with his kids, caring for them – and he gets the information he needs to do it. What's more, he knows that his sole and undivided attention is the most engaging entertainment tool at his disposal. He will always act in the best interests of his troopers."

It may be couched in unfamiliar language, but this is all sound commonsense. And even the most pacifist-minded of dads can see that the military metaphor works surprisingly (and entertainingly) well.

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Commando Dad is published by Summersdale / Nationwide Book Distribution, \$27.99.



Mind, body, spirit

THE STORM BEFORE THE CALM

By Neale Donald Walsch
HayHouse
\$25.99

THE AUTHOR who turned a "conversation with God" into a mass dialogue has increasingly become more secular in the wake of his seven *New York Times* bestsellers. His latest conversation is the first in a projected series of dialogues with humanity. Neale Donald Walsch addresses the turbulent times we live in and, by posing seven simple questions, suggests the answers we individually come up with will help us collectively engage with each other in more constructive ways.



TIME OF THE QUICKENING

By Susan Martinez
Bear & Company
\$44.99

AS THE most Googled and talk-about date in modern history approaches – 2012 – Susan Martinez examines the role prophecy has played in various cultures, how often so-called visionaries have got it wrong, the nature of cycles and why so many of these "once and future Armageddon scenarios are erroneous responses to the natural cadences and rhythms of life on this planet and throughout the universe."



WISHES FULFILLED

By Wayne Dwyer
Hay House
\$20.99

WHEREAS OTHER self-help writers have often detoured into more esoteric pathways as their popularity has expanded, Wayne Dwyer continues to keep it simple. In considering the art of manifestation and why some people don't get what they desire (which is actually what they want), he examines the power of imagination, intention and trust in helping us move from where we are not to where we want to be.



LOVE HAS WINGS

By Isha Judd
New World Library
\$34.99

THE ISHA Way, as Isha Judd describes it, is a set of principles designed to show people how to fall in love with life. She originally outlined these ideas in her first book *Why Walk When You Can Fly* and has subsequently developed them for life situations that she says we either approach with a victim or a creator mentality. That springboard to awareness involves disillusioning ourselves of limiting beliefs such as "I am separate" and "there is not enough".



FULLNESS OF JOY

By John Stephenson
DeVors
\$34.99

PUBLISHING COMPANY DeVors has been at the forefront of the new thought movement for almost a decade through the works of Joel Goldsmith, Catherine Ponder and Ernest Holmes. John Stephenson is a student of Goldsmith's and expands on the latter's Bible-based spiritual principles for attaining the kingdom within. The fullness of joy, he observes, is the fruit of living under divine law.

