Psychologist Justin Coulson says parenting can be simple, writes BENJAMIN LONG.

University of Wollongong-trained psychologist Justin Coulson says if you can do a couple of simple things consistently then you’ll be a good parent.

“There are so many things parenting experts tell parents they should do, but really, research tells us that there are only a couple of things that we need to get right,” Coulson says.

“First of all, we need to be emotionally available to our kids. Second, we need to understand them – not just at a cognitive level but at an emotional level.”

“And third, our kids need us to guide them, to teach them the right way to live and act, which means we need to work with them to set appropriate limits and to discipline them.

“There’s a big difference in the way I define discipline to most parenting experts.”

As the father of five daughters, ranging in age from two to 12, the Figtree resident, who runs regular parenting workshops, has had plenty of opportunity to practise what he preaches.

“Parents talk too much. If we be quiet and listen we will learn an enormous amount from them.”

Coulson admits he was ill-equipped for the role of parent when he started out.

“I got onto this parenting journey about 10 years ago,” he says. “My eldest daughter was three and we had a newborn baby.

“I was a radio announcer and was doing well in the radio game, but realised I wasn’t equipped to deal with the challenges that two young children were posing.

“I was exhausted, my wife was as well. Our three-year-old was trying us and our baby was exhausting us. I thought I knew lots of answers, but I was finding my answers were far from sufficient to deal with the challenges of having a young family.

“So I packed up my radio career. I decided to do a degree in psychology so I could learn more about how to look after my children.

“I loved what I was learning, so I did a PhD, kept on running the workshops, kept on practising the things I was learning and eventually I graduated and wrote a book.”

“The PhD has given me the opportunity to investigate,” he says, “and the children have given me the opportunity to implement and to get it wrong, and then work out why, and then try again and hopefully get it right.”

Being emotionally available to your children means spending time with them and listening to them.

“It means we have family time, that we eat meals together without the TV, without smart phones and without the computer,” he says.

“We teach our children the right way to act we don’t need to use punishments and rewards,” Coulson says.

“I teach parents how they can get away from shouting and spanking and time out, and work with their children in ways that will make them behave in acceptable ways because they want to, not because we are making them.

“A child in time out is ‘probably going to sit there and think ‘I hate my dad, and when he’s not around I’m going to get my sister because if it wasn’t for him I wouldn’t be in this mess’. It festers and builds resentment.

“Usually the parents who are the most powerful in their discipline are the ones whose children will act up the most once mum and dad aren’t around. They will be perfect when mum and dad are around, but as soon as mum and dad disappear the kids go crazy.

“Physical punishment has all the same problems as time out, and others as well.

“Smacking is even worse because the one person in the world they are supposed to be able to trust and go to for security and comfort is hurting them,” Coulson says.

When it comes learning right and wrong ways to behave, the aim of parents should be to teach children self-discipline, argues Justin Coulson.

Methods of discipline based on punishment not only damage the child and their relationship with the parent but are also ineffective.

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What Your Child Needs from You by Justin Coulson (ACER Press, $24.95) is available from whatyourchildneedsfromyou.com

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