

THE
Family Firm



A Data-Driven Guide to
Better Decision Making
in the Early School Years

EMILY OSTER



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Introduction

If you are parenting in the modern age, there will come a time when you will face the great question: “When can I get a phone?” The question might come when your child is ten, but more likely five, or eight.

“All my friends have one!” “If I don’t get one, I’ll never be invited to X or Y or Z.” “Don’t you want me to be able to call you if there is something wrong?” “Lauren at tennis camp already has one and she’s younger than me.” At some point, a friend of your child may get a phone, and then they may start texting your phone. “How r u” “i miss you” *emoji-emoji-emoji*. Perhaps it is worth it just to avoid these texts.

However, when you investigate, the internet is a source of cautionary tales: “Phones Linked to Anxiety in Teen Girls” or “Phones Shown to Lower Student Achievement.” An article about Silicon Valley parents says they are eschewing phones, along with all plastic toys. The latter seems unrealistic, but maybe the phones are a possibility. And yet everyone else’s kid does seem to have a phone. Are you going to be the only one? What do they know that you do not?

This is a new kind of parenting dilemma. When you’re parenting a baby, and wondering about questions like “Is it a good idea to swaddle? Should I feed them solid foods at four or six months? What about sleep training?” the decisions feel overwhelming in their

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frequency and their newness. Also, you are making them in an exhausted, dreamlike state.

But from the vantage point of having an older child, these choices can seem incredibly tractable. There is, for example, an actual answer to the question of whether swaddling is a good idea (yes). It's based on data, research, evidence. It's reasonably consistent across healthy babies. And it is also simply not that important in the grand scheme of things. If you swaddle your baby, they will sleep better early on. But if you do not, nothing terrible will happen.

On the other hand, when to get your child a phone feels nothing like this. There isn't much data on it, certainly nothing that would rise to the level of what we know about swaddling. It almost certainly has wildly different effects depending on the child. The best answer to this question could well be different for two children in the same family, let alone two different families.

Adding to the problem, for many older-kid decisions, the question itself may not be immediately clear! Is the question whether the kid should have a "dummy phone" that only calls their parents and the police? Or whether they should have the latest, slickest Google phone? Your partner may be thinking about the second question while you are contemplating the first. Forget about *solving* the same problem—sometimes we aren't even talking through the same choices.

This book is focused on the post-toddler but pre-teenager stage—let's say, the ages of five to twelve. We'll begin with seeing your kid off to elementary school and walk through the very beginnings of puberty. We'll leave teens for another day.

Parenting decisions in this age range do not come with the frequency that they do with a baby, but they are almost always more complicated. What's the right kind of school and at what age should they enter? How do you get them to eat a healthy diet? Should they play a sport, and if so,

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how seriously? Are you a helicopter parent, a free-range parent, a tiger parent, an ostrich parent? Is that last one even a thing?

These issues are all a bit like the phone: they feel big and important, and it's not always clear even how to start. It's easy to see how they can overwhelm harried families.

That brings us to the other hallmark of this period of parenting: logistics. For many of us, parenting in the twenty-first century is an exercise in extreme logistical complexity. Nowhere is this more vivid, for me, than in the case of summer camp.

My younger brother has four kids. Many kids means lots of logistics, so I wasn't too surprised when he signed off an email exchange with me by saying he had to get back to the spreadsheet he was working on to plan the kids' camps.

This was in *November*.

It turns out his kids go to a tremendous number of different camps—various sports, sleepaway, sailing, something called “Muskrat Camp” (or maybe I'm remembering the rodent wrong?), which is apparently so popular you have to plan before Thanksgiving to get the “right week.” Because most American school systems take almost three months off in the summer, summer camp is a large—and very complex—piece of the school-age family puzzle.

Where we live, one of the most popular camps is Zoo Camp. Sign-ups open for one day in February, and if you miss it, you're out of luck. Or, worse, stuck with an inferior week, *not* the one your kid's friends are in (*their* parents remembered the sign-up day).

Even if, by some miracle, you remember to sign up, you've got to contend with the logistics of camp once summer arrives. Inexplicably, in the period before camp starts, the famous Zoo Camp requires you to sign up for what sandwich your child wants. If you forget (yes, I forgot), you get a significant “tut tut” at drop-off, plus your kid is stuck with the

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last available sandwich type (sunflower-seed butter and jelly on wheat—clearly no one’s first choice).

And the timing! Zoo Camp, for example, is from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., with no before- or after-care. Who’s going to arrive late and leave early from work to make this doable? Can the grandparents come in that week? Do you need a babysitter on top of camp? Camp is expensive, and so is the babysitter. Logistics relate to time, but also to money.

In my mind, these two scenarios—the phone and camp—illustrate the two key problems of this era of parenting. The day-to-day is a series of logistical challenges. This is then punctuated by big, complicated, weighty, consequential decisions that you often have no idea how to even think about. And by the way, the choices you make about those complicated decisions will feed back into the logistics.

This is, again, fundamentally different from many of the challenges of early parenting. There, you had more relevant data (as with swaddling), but your problems were also simply more immediate. They required, and were satisfied by, a more in-the-moment approach to the solution.

Consider this baby situation: the baby has pooped in their crib during a nap, and it’s gotten everywhere, including the rug—and, also, the poop is green. What to do? It’s clear: Quickly clean it up, wash the sheets, change the baby, shampoo the rug. Then immediately call the doctor to ask about green poop (it’s fine, by the way).

This is physically draining, and a bit gross, but it’s over fast. A small fire arises, and you put it out, and you move on.

You may have found this green-poop stage wasn’t really your thing (to be honest, it wasn’t mine). Maybe you expect later parenting to play to your strengths more. Which is good! But even if you are more comfortable making a decision about whether your third grader should participate in travel soccer, that decision requires a contemplation of whether this is the right activity for them and what the benefits and costs of this type of team sport are. Is there a reason to start now? And how would it

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actually *work*? Is this going to get in the way of something else your family cares about? How do you know whether this is more or less important than other priorities?

There isn't just one piece of data here—it's not just "Is green poop okay?" There's now a lot of data to bring in, both information on soccer itself but also (probably more) information on your family structure, your central values, the day-to-day structure of your lives. And if you make these choices wrong, you may end up in a situation that makes you unhappy.

Imagine you have two kids. Simon is nine (third grade); Ellie is six (first grade). They go to public school a couple of miles away. Morning bus pickup is at 7:30; school ends at 2:45. Let's imagine your household has two parents—Mom and Dad—with the acknowledgment that your adult configuration may well look different.

Here's one way your day might go: Kids wake up at 6:30, get themselves dressed, and come downstairs. Family eats a quick breakfast together, then the kids are hustled out of the house to the bus stop (check: Do they have their lunch cards?). Mom and Dad clean up and head off to work. At 3:15 the bus drops the kids off at home, to be met by the babysitter and taken inside. Two days a week, Simon goes to soccer after school and another parent drops him back home at 5:30. Mom and Dad arrive home around 5:45, say goodbye to the babysitter, and dinner is on the table at 6:30 (okay, it's not a gourmet meal, but everyone likes pasta again, right? RIGHT?). Dinner, bath, some homework for the older kid, and both kids are in bed by 8:30.

Or here's another way: Kids wake up at 6:30, get dressed, and eat breakfast. Mom is out the door shortly after they get up; Dad is in charge. Kids are off to the bus, Dad returns to his home office. At 3:15 the bus drops the kids off, to be met by Dad. One day a week, he shuttles both kids to music lessons; two days a week, the older child has soccer and the younger has gymnastics at the same time (soccer drop-off, drive to

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gymnastics, wait, drive back, soccer pickup). Most days they are home by 6:30. Kids eat something while doing their homework or watching some TV. Mom returns around 7. Kids are in bed by 8:30 most nights, and Mom and Dad eat a late dinner together.

Or here's a third: Kids get themselves up at 7:10 and grab a granola bar on the way out the door to the bus. Dad has already left for work by 6; Mom is at home, organizing the chaos. Mom does school pickup at 2:30 and they're off to a neighboring suburb. Both kids do their homework in Starbucks with a snack and then head to the ice rink. Figure skating is 5 to 8 most nights. Mom picks up some dinner around the corner for the kids, or, if the day was calm enough, she brings sandwiches. Meanwhile, Dad arrives at the rink around 7 to take over and get some time with the kids. Everyone is home by 9 and (on a good day) in bed by 10.

There isn't anything inherently wrong with any of these family set-ups. There are lots and lots of different (good!) ways to organize your family life. The trouble arises, though, when expectations do not match reality.

If you envisioned yourself in version 1 of this story, and you find yourself in version 3, you may not be happy. If you have always felt that family dinner together is a top priority, and in fact 6 out of 7 nights a week you're eating on the road between events, it's a recipe for frustration.

The choices you make about logistics may seem like just that—logistics. But at this age, logistics are a lot of the puzzle. What your kids (and you!) do with each hour of each day will affect your budget, your time, how you feel about your connection with your kid.

For me, adapting to this new era of parenting required a pretty fundamental change. I have two children: a daughter, Penelope, and a son, Finn. I'm an economist by training and I've been a professor for many years. My work is data focused. I do research on health—Why do people make the health choices they do?—and also on methods for learning

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from data. I try to understand questions like “What makes this evidence more reliable than other evidence? Are there ways to learn from imperfect evidence?”

When I was pregnant with Penelope, and then over the course of both kids’ early childhoods, I brought these data skills to my parenting life. Virtually any pregnancy- or kid-related problem that came up—what kind of prenatal testing, should I get an epidural, do I really need to breastfeed until a year, circumcision, potty training, toddler screen time—my first instinct was to refer back to academic research on these topics, to systematic data and evidence. I did this even in places where the problem was, quite frankly, unimportant (I am thinking, specifically, of the time I tried to find academic papers on whether infant Penelope should wear baby mittens).

The data wasn’t always perfect—indeed, sometimes pieces of it were downright bad—but for most of the decisions that felt big, weighty, and important, there was at least some data I could hang my hat on. The evidence on the benefits (or not) of breastfeeding has some holes, but there is a lot to learn from it. I wrote two books using this approach—*Expecting Better*, on pregnancy, and *Cribsheet*, on early childhood.

I figured I’d rely on data in this way forever. But as my kids got older, the problems changed, and I found that the data-oriented solution wasn’t always available. It wasn’t that the problems felt less important, but they felt more specific, more unique. The data alone couldn’t help me.

For example, at some point, we were looking to choose a school. There are data and research on schools. But it is very general. The academic literature doesn’t ask the question “From my personal option set, what’s the best one to pick?” We wondered about sleepaway camp, but there was no place to search for “Is *my* kid ready to spend time away from home?” And it’s hard to even get started on framing questions about social issues—bullying, behavior challenges, anxiety, self-esteem.

It was tempting to throw up my hands and decide that data wasn’t

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relevant, that I should just give up on being systematic with all this and go with my gut or whatever random thing had occurred to me most recently. But that wasn't right. There was still relevant data. I still needed to find the best evidence, to sort out the good data from the less good. But that data wasn't useful alone anymore. I needed more scaffolding surrounding it, on both sides.

On the one hand, we needed to think much more about the *question* we were asking, and about framing. "Is green poop normal?" is a pretty basic yes-or-no question. But take a question like "What kind of school is right?" That question is too vague. There is no way to bring data to it because you haven't asked it correctly. A better one is "Should I choose school A or school B for this particular kid at this time?" Of course, this requires you to think about what the options are even before you get started with evidence. You need to stop and first think about how to frame the question. Is there even a school B option?

It's not that this kind of thing never happened in early parenting, but in this phase, I found myself wondering: *What is the question?* Much more frequently, I found that moving forward required my husband, Jesse, and I to step back and frame things before we could even start to think about which evidence was appropriate to gather.

There were other adjustments. It had always been clear to us that family preferences were important. Indeed, a central point of *Cribsheet* is that different families will make different choices about things like breastfeeding and sleep training, and that family preferences should play an important role in those decisions. But now the choices we made were all linked. It was necessary to step back, to think more carefully about the bigger picture, about the basic structure of our family. We could no longer separate individual decisions from these larger issues.

Think back to the three family scenarios. The choice to be serious about ice skating isn't made in isolation. This shapes the whole day, the

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whole week, the year. It's a primary choice. Family dinner and ice skating are one choice, not two.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized we had started running our house like . . . well, like a firm. I hadn't left my job behind in my home. I'd just switched out my statistical-methods-researcher hat for my former-business-school-professor hat. Before I came to Brown University, I worked for five years at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, teaching microeconomics to MBA students. I spent an awful lot of time explaining to my students there how to use tools from economics to organize their future business dealings, as well as mentoring students with big, entrepreneurial ideas.

It dawned on me that the lessons I tried to impart to them about running their businesses had value in how I ran my house. This idea crystallized for me when Jesse and I scheduled a meeting (using Google Calendar) with eight-year-old Penelope to discuss the school-year schedule. We presented an agenda and draft schedule in advance. (Good meeting! Penelope and Jesse noted some errors in the documents I drafted, but I felt it was largely successful.)

I would argue that, in fact, many of the tools and processes you most need to manage this period of life are exactly the ones that many businesses use to function well. Yet I think even people who *use* these tools every day at work do not always see their parallel uses at home.

Let's imagine your day job is managing the shampoo line at a haircare company. An opportunity comes up to purchase a smaller firm that makes a particular type of scented shampoo. There is a process to think about this. You'd likely start by asking whether this purchase fits with the mission of your firm (for example, maybe your firm's motto is "All Natural, No Scents," in which case this is probably not a good acquisition). You'd look at the data on their sales to see if it's a successful brand. You'd have meetings, and you'd frame the decision in a specific way ("How

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many dollars should we bid for the company?”). You’d use scheduling tools, probably some kind of task-management software, and you’d think about the benefits and costs of buying the smaller company. In the end, you’d decide, and then you’d move on to the next thing. There is an ease of process here, at least in theory, that we don’t often have at home.

Now think about a (possibly) familiar family scenario: travel soccer. Nine-year-old Sofia is invited to join the travel soccer team. She really, really wants to do it. Her best soccer friend is doing it. If you do not let her do it, *you will literally ruin her life*.

It may be tempting to approach this decision based on what is happening right in that moment—how much whining there is, what other parents are doing—or to go with your first basic gut instinct. But this decision deserves more attention than that. It’s four evening practices a week for the fall, plus one weekend day (at least!) spent at tournaments. If you say yes, this will be a huge part of your life. If you say no, though, see above—*you will ruin Sofia’s life forever*. Quite a trade-off there.

This decision deserves the same attention you’d give to buying that scented shampoo company. Does this fit in your family’s “mission”? Is it consistent with your basic values, or the central pieces of family life that you find important (for example, family dinners might be key for you)? You need to look at the data. Are there risks (Concussions?) or benefits (Healthy lifestyle? Benefits of team sports?) to soccer you should be thinking about? You need to think about a specific question: Should Sofia sign up for travel soccer or . . . what’s the alternative? No soccer? Local soccer? Volleyball?

Just like in your shampoo firm, this decision will be helped by having some processes around it. Some meetings, perhaps some shared documents. You may not need to go as far as having a dedicated Slack channel, but this is a big enough choice that it likely makes sense to keep track of your discussions. At the end of all this, you get to a decision, hopefully one that is better thought out than one you’d make on the fly.

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It probably does not escape you that this seems like a lot of work. And up front, there is no question that it is. Relative to going with your immediate gut instinct, deliberate decision making is going to take more time. But I'd argue that spending this time up front will save you time—and pain—later. If you decide to do this on a whim and then spend hours every week fighting about who is going to spend their weekend at the soccer tournament, that's a lot of wasted time and lost family harmony.

In addition, sometimes making big decisions up front will allow you to make smaller decisions faster. This book will advocate taking serious time to think about the question of family meals: Which ones do you eat together, how do you prepare them, how do you coordinate? But once you've made decisions like those, other decision making may be very fast.

For example: My daughter Penelope's main athletic activity is running, after a brief and unsuccessful foray into youth soccer. At some point around second grade, a fellow parent in the class told me about a youth running club that met twice a week at the local high school. It seemed on the face of it like it might be great for Penelope—an opportunity to run with someone who wasn't me, a chance to have a teamlike atmosphere, exercise.

But when I looked into it, I found that it met at 6 p.m. One of the central organizing principles of our household is that we eat family dinner at 6 p.m. every night. So that made the decision for us—I didn't even have to raise this with anyone else.

Your choice perhaps would be entirely different, but I'd argue that all families of school-age kids would benefit from more ease of process.

This book is, at its core, a business book. The business of parenting. I'm going to outline a framework and some systems. A way to run your family a bit more like a firm. And I'm going to argue that this approach is suited to this new age of parenting.

Concretely: we begin by outlining the "Big Picture" for your family.

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This first step will require *thinking deliberately* about your household and parenting style. What do you want your family life to look like? It may seem mundane, but a lot of this really does come down to the basic structure of your day-to-day. Do you want to eat meals together? Which ones? What does the end of the day look like—is bedtime early or late? What are the weekends like? When it’s midweek and you look forward to Saturday and Sunday, are you going to be excited to see a bunch of extracurricular activities and social events on the calendar, or do you want those days to be more family- or religion-oriented?

This Big Picture extends to slightly larger questions as well. Do both parents work outside the home, or do you want to adopt a more traditional approach where Mom stays at home (if there is at least one mom)? Or a less traditional one where, say, Dad is at home (if you’ve got at least one dad)? Even more broadly, it’s worth thinking a little bit about your “parenting philosophy”—how much do you want to lean into encouraging independence in your kids, and how much scaffolding do you want to provide them?

Working through the Big Picture goes beyond just thinking about it in passing. I’m going to suggest you actually sit down—alone, or with your partner if you have one, or with any other family stakeholders—and work out what you want your life to look like. You can do this at any time (and there is probably some benefit to having some of these conversations even before you have children), but around the age of school entry is a natural time to at least revisit them because with the advent of more full-time school, a lot of logistics change for many families.

This is a lot of up-front work, but some of the payoff is immediate. Having this Big Picture in place has the side benefit of making task delegation smoother. I’d argue that once you know some basic principles, many decisions can be “triaged”—made immediately by one person, without consulting the other decision maker(s) in the family—which makes

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delegation simpler. And the ability to delegate, in turn, can reduce family conflict.

There are a lot of reasons you may have conflict with a partner, but in this phase of parenting, I would venture that at least some of them revolve around the tendency to deal with the aforementioned complexity by micromanaging. And I'd also venture that at least some of us do this micromanaging at home in a way we'd never do it at work.

Let's imagine your workplace provides a weekly lunch, and one of your tasks is to order the food. Usually, you get a selection of sandwiches, cookies, and drinks. Everyone likes it.

One week, you ask a colleague if they can take care of the ordering since you're swamped with a project. Sure, they say, that's fine.

Your coworker gets on the computer to order, and all of a sudden you are compelled to stand over them and comment. "Don't get that many turkey options, no one likes turkey. No, that's the wrong kind of veggie sandwich. Not too many peanut butter cookies! Wait, we do not usually order fruit. What are you doing!?"

You would never do this.

Why not? First, it's a waste of your time. You presumably asked your colleague to do it so you could get something else done. Second, it's disrespectful. This isn't how you talk to other adults, to people you trust, respect, and work with. Finally, it doesn't matter! Maybe people actually do like turkey sandwiches. And even if they don't, the worst that will happen is some people eat a lunch they like slightly less for this one week.

Now imagine you're the person who typically gets your five-year-old ready for camp: you get their shoes and socks on, pack up their requested snack, apply their sunscreen. One morning, you're busy reading to the two-year-old, so you ask your partner to get the kid ready.

When the book is done, you go down to see what is going on. "Those aren't the right shoes! He likes a less ripe banana than that! He'll never

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eat one with a brown spot! We don't use the blue spray sunscreen in the mornings, we use the green spray one!"

Maybe you'd never do *this*, either. But I bet it sounds a lot more plausible than the work scenario.

Yet the reasons *not* to do it are all the same. You're wasting your time. You're disrespecting your partner. And it doesn't matter! Any shoes are fine. You might be wrong about the bananas, but even if you are not, your child missing a snack one day is not a crisis. And why do you have two different spray sunscreens, anyway?

It's not that there isn't anything in this decision that would ever require discussion—for example, you may at some point discuss the issue of what is an appropriate snack. That's part of your family's Big Picture. But the reason you did that was so every morning you wouldn't have to discuss whether they can have a chocolate chip granola bar; now anyone can decide. Including your partner, who has made a perfectly reasonable choice, even if it is not precisely the snack you would have picked.

For many of your day-to-day experiences, having made choices about your family Big Picture will determine what you do. But not all decisions will be made here.

From time to time (or more often), bigger questions will come up: what school to choose, how to think about homework, which summer camp to choose, what to do if your child is being bullied (or doing the bullying). The second big piece of the Family Firm approach is designing a framework for making these big decisions.

The goal in this framework is to ask "How can we make this choice *well*?" Note that it is not "How can we make this choice *correctly*?" You cannot guarantee that you'll make the correct choice. Parenting involves mistakes. It's inevitable that sometimes you'll make a choice that turns out to be the wrong one. But what you *can* do is approach the choice correctly, and make the choice *well*.

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When your family faces a big choice, I give you **The Four Fs**:

- *Frame the Question*: Think about the question you are asking. This is often the hardest step. It may seem easy, but in many cases, our starting-point question is too vague to really be answerable. “What kind of school is right?” isn’t a question you can answer well. Much better is “Should we send our child to school A or school B?”
- *Fact-Find*: Gather the evidence, data, and details you need. This may involve learning more about the logistics and thinking through how you could make this work (or not). Or it may involve data on benefits and risks of each option. This step (the longest one) is a chance to get all the factors together, clearly, in one place.
- *Final Decision*: Once you have the evidence, have a meeting, and use that meeting to make a decision. This may seem obvious, but I think people often fail to have this single decision meeting and instead revisit the question again and again with different information. Let the decision take a lot of headspace in a single moment, decide, and move on.
- *Follow-Up*: Most decisions deserve follow-up. Once you’ve made a choice and implemented it, the last step is to make a concrete plan about when you’ll revisit your choice. Hopefully you made the right choice, but if you didn’t, better to rethink it sooner than later.

The combination of these structures—the big-picture approach and its accompanying schedules and principles, and the Four Fs for more infrequent decisions—provides an overall structure for your household firm. You may be wondering, though, *Where is the data?* Despite the emphasis