



Raising without the rod: The rise of soft parenting

From smacking to speaking, more parents are choosing connection over correction. How soft parenting replaces fear with understanding, raising confident, emotionally intelligent children while sparking debate about how "soft" is too soft in a tough world.

BY PROMISE TWINAMUKYE

I do not even remember what she spilled," Geraldine Opoka admits. "I just reacted."

Her daughter was four. A small mistake, a smack and then an unexpected intervention.

The nanny, who loved her child, pulled Opoka aside and asked a question that would linger long after the mess was cleaned up.

"You have beaten this child, but does she even understand why?"

For Opoka, a holistic wellness consultant and mother of two, the answer was painfully clear: no.

"I hadn't explained anything. I had just reacted out of fear," she says. "From that day, I never raised my hand to my children again."

That moment marked the beginning of her journey into soft parenting, an approach rooted not in fear or punishment, but in communication, empathy, and understanding.

Love, not fear

Opoka believes many parents discipline from a place of anxiety and fear that a child will grow "spoilt," fear of judgment from society, and fear of losing control.

"But love and fear cannot exist in the same space," she says. "Hard parenting teaches fear. Soft parenting teaches love. It teaches trust, self-awareness, and responsibility."

Instead of silencing curiosity, soft parenting encourages children to explore, ask questions, and learn from their experiences. Mistakes become lessons, not reasons for punishment. Yet, this approach does not exist without debate.

Samuel Ssettumba, a counsellor, cautions that environments matter.

"In societies where the home and school environments are stable and supportive, soft parenting can work," he says. "But in tougher environments, where strict boundaries are necessary, children may struggle if they are not prepared for hard realities."

What is soft parenting?

Opoka describes soft parenting as the opposite of rigid, consequence-driven discipline.

"Hard parenting is 'do this or else.' It assumes children only understand through fear or pain," she explains. "But children are intelligent. They want to understand."

Instead of shouting or punishing, she chooses to kneel to her children's level, explain calmly, and allow consequences that make sense.

"Parenting should be about teaching and guiding, not proving power," she says.

Ssettumba, however, notes that soft parenting often places emotional comfort above structure.

"It does not always leave room for firm rules and tough boundaries," he says. "If softness becomes the child's only reference point, how will they cope with harsh bosses, manipulation, or difficult life situations?"

For him, a balance is essential.

Raising confident thinkers

Today, Opoka's children are 21 and 18. "I don't shout at them," she says proudly. "Maybe I have raised my voice twice in their entire lives and even then, I explained myself."

She has raised them to think independently, to stay calm under

pressure, and to trust their instincts. If stranded, they know who to call, how to seek help, and how to assess safe situations.

"That's what soft parenting does," she says. "It activates their survival brain while nurturing empathy and critical thinking."

Her children are not perfect, and she does not expect them to be.

"They forget to make their beds. They leave things messy," she laughs. "But instead of shouting, I ask them why something matters."

For Opoka, making the bed is not about obedience, it is about self-respect and how a clean space affects one's mood.

"Understanding lasts longer than fear ever could," she says.

Respect over control

Soft parenting does not mean letting children do whatever they want. It means being consistent but flexible.

"If something isn't working, change the approach without becoming harsh," Opoka advises.

She believes children deserve the same emotional respect adults expect from their bosses, partners, and friends.

"Would you want a boss who shouts at you for every mistake?" she asks. "Children deserve grace too."

When children misbehave, she sees it as a reflection of emotional needs, not defiance.

"You teach calm by being calm. You teach empathy by showing it," she says.

Ssettumba agrees that soft parenting accommodates emotions like tantrums through conversation rather than punishment. But he proposes a middle ground: gentle parenting.

"It allows clear rules, proper behaviour, and some punishment but with empathy and reason," he explains.

Unlike authoritarian parenting, which demands obedience without warmth, gentle parenting blends discipline with understanding.

Letting go of judgment

Many parents, Opoka says, discipline harshly because of public pressure.

"What will people think?"

"How will my child reflect on me?"

But parenting is not a performance.

"You are not raising your child for society's approval," she says. "You are raising them to be thoughtful, capable humans."

Her goal is not perfection, it is connection.

"My children know they can come to me with anything," she says. "I am their safe space, not their fear."

The true goal

Soft parenting, according to Opoka, unlocks a child's potential.

"You guide, not control. You nurture, not suppress," she says. "You raise children who thrive not because they are afraid to fail, but because they believe in themselves."

Ssettumba acknowledges that no single parenting style guarantees outcomes. Life is unpredictable.

"A child raised softly may face authoritarian environments later. A child raised strictly may find balance through other support systems," he says.

Some privileged parents even expose their children to less comfortable environments not to punish them, but to build resilience.

Parenting is not about choosing perfection but intention.

And for Opoka, intention looks like love over fear, conversation over control, and children who grow not in silence, but in understanding.

A soft parenting approach can help nurture a stronger, more trusting, and emotionally healthy relationship with your child. PHOTO/ LEADERSHIP.

QUICK NOTE

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