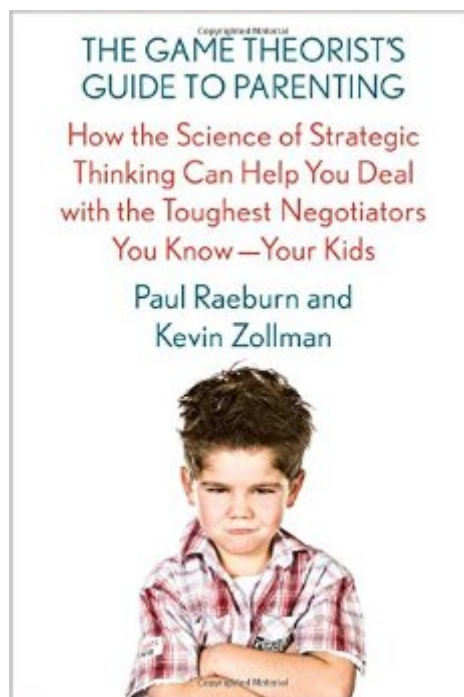


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# The Game Theorist's Guide To Parenting: How The Science Of Strategic Thinking Can Help You Deal With The Toughest Negotiators You Know--Your Kids



## Synopsis

I absolutely loved this book, both as a parent and as a nerd. • Jessica Lahey, author of *The Gift of Failure* As every parent knows, kids are surprisingly clever negotiators. But how can we avoid those all-too-familiar wails of "That's not fair!" and "You can't make me!"? In *The Game Theorist's Guide to Parenting*, the award-winning journalist and father of five Paul Raeburn and the game theorist Kevin Zollman pair up to highlight tactics from the worlds of economics and business that can help parents break the endless cycle of quarrels and ineffective solutions. Raeburn and Zollman show that some of the same strategies successfully applied to big business deals and politics—such as the Prisoner's Dilemma and the Ultimatum Game—can be used to solve such titanic, age-old parenting problems as dividing up toys, keeping the peace on long car rides, and sticking to homework routines. Raeburn and Zollman open each chapter with a common parenting dilemma. Then they show how carefully concocted schemes involving bargains and fair incentives can save the day. Through smart case studies of game theory in action, Raeburn and Zollman reveal how parents and children devise strategies, where those strategies go wrong, and what we can do to help raise happy and savvy kids while keeping the rest of the family happy too. Delightfully witty, refreshingly irreverent, and just a bit Machiavellian, *The Game Theorist's Guide to Parenting* looks past the fads to offer advice you can put into action today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This was so much fun, and I don't even have kids! The book beautifully explains and considers applications (to [co-]parenting) of: 1. Fair division algorithms ("I cut, you choose", adjusted winner,

balanced alternation).2. Auctions (1st & 2nd price, Dutch, and English clock).3. Of course, canonical games (ultimatum, dictator, iterated prisoner's dilemma, and so on).4. A potpourri of game theoretic concepts ([in]credible threats, punishment, reputation, pre-commitment, moral hazard, cheap talk, costly signaling, Zahavi's handicap principle, the tit-for-tat strategy).5. Nash equilibria (nicely, in terms of social conventions à la David Lewis).6. And voting theory (voting rules like plurality and Borda count, and no-go results like Arrow's theorem and the Gibbard-Satterthwaite theorem).The explanations also touch lightly, but thoughtfully, on topics ranging from behavioral economics to the evolution of morality. This is a gem, and it gets my vote for the most enjoyable gift for a game theorist that I've run into yet. ^\_^A caveat: I am indeed a game theorist, and while I do think non-game theorists may thoroughly enjoy this book (especially if they're parents) as it's certainly written in a very accessible way, I'm well aware that a good part of my enjoyment in it stems from seeing thoughtful and playful applications of concepts that I happen to be familiar with.

Parenting books are a dime a dozen, most of them written badly and verbosely. Compared to the usual dreck, *The Game Theorist's Guide To Parenting* is a breath of fresh air. It's short, to the point, and of course, uses math. The math seems all correct as far as I can tell.The disappointing thing for me is that I already knew most of what this book covered, including the various auction systems. While they're interesting, the use cases for the various auction technologies available for parenting are really limited, and the examples they provide are really contrived.Where the book pays for itself are the chapters on strategic voting and how voting systems can be gamed. My own kids aren't old enough to play those games yet, but I'm sure that'll happen sooner or later.The book's big problem is that most of the examples are either contrived or would yield to simpler solutions. There's an example of two kids fighting over who gets to play a new video game system first. The answer seems pretty obvious: make them bid with time (i.e., whoever plays first would play for less time), but the book ignores that and uses this example to go into Solomon's adjudication of the two mothers claiming the same baby.Similarly, later on there's an example about a boy who persuades his parents to get a cat, but of course ends up leaving the cat care and training to his parents within a short period of time. The solution should be obvious: getting a cat is an ongoing contract, so extracting a promise up front is useless. You have to design systems where by cat care is incentivized through ongoing penalties. The authors ignore that and get into the Nash equilibrium without ever coming up with a good solution.Having said that, the book is so short that it's still worth a read and who knows, maybe the ideas presented will eventually be useful. Mildly recommended.

Anyone not familiar with game theory but who normally enjoys a good parenting book might still be a little bored by this one. However, if you're like me in that you prefer your non-fiction mixed with a smattering of math and dry economic principles whenever appropriate AND you happen to be a parent of small children, then the Game Theorist's Guide to Parenting could be the book for you. You'll likely discover you employ some of these tactics already, but didn't realize there was a name for it. The authors make an original case for their methods "a modern twist based on centuries-old ideas" and then provide demonstrations using the paradoxical rules of parental negotiation. Even a term like "parental negotiation," for example, usually means the parents' word is the law (Authoritarian), but the authors argue that this approach still has the side effect of child resentment which in turn causes a slew of other unintended consequences. The goal, after all, is to arrive at an elegant and fair solution even though children possess little more than a nonsensical sense of logic and argument. Then again, you might lack the patience for game theory if you're on a road with a car full of hungry kids trying to find a friggin' place to eat.

I can summarize this book in two bullet points: 1. When you make threats, they should be credible. 2. The I cut/you choose strategy for dividing things is handy. Most of the book is variations on these themes, padded out with advice your game-theory-oblivious grandmother could have given you. There's some interesting discussion of auction theory, if you're into that, but the author doesn't make a good case for its utility in childrearing.

This book was very disappointing. It consisted of a college term paper type summary of game theory, with a few incomplete examples of how to apply it to parenting. Nobody will be a better parent as a result of reading this book.

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