



*FUNNYMAN CHRIS ROCK
HAS BUILT A CAREER
MINING HIS CHILDHOOD
IN NEW YORK CITY.
BUT THE EMMY AWARD-
WINNING ACTOR AND
COMEDIAN HAS A NEW
PERSPECTIVE NOW THAT
HE'S RAISING KIDS OF HIS OWN.
HE OPENS UP ABOUT BULLYING,
HELICOPTER PARENTS,
AND WHY HE HASN'T HAD
A PB&J IN YEARS*

By Lauren Paige Kennedy

Photograph by Mark Mann/Contour by Getty Images



rowing up

IS HARD TO DO.
AND RAISING KIDS IS NO
CAKEWALK, EITHER.
JUST ASK COMEDIAN
CHRIS ROCK.

The stand-up sensation has made countless quips over the years about being bullied as a boy in rough-and-tumble Brooklyn, N.Y., depicted on *Everybody Hates Chris*, the TV show he created. He's also famous for his rip-roaringly funny (and brutally honest) comments about marriage and parenthood in his Emmy Award-winning specials for HBO. Now, as his new film *Grown Ups 2* hits big screens in July, the provocative comic mines more coming-of-age discomforts—that of kids and the adults who rear them—for laughs.

These days Rock, 48, views the wonder years from two very different vantage points: as someone who was once tormented at school and as a father of two young daughters (Lola, 11, and Zahra, 9, with wife Malaak Compton-Rock) living in an age of “helicopter” parents.

And, true to form, he's got some wisdom to share.

BULLY DANCE

The bullying began when he was in second grade. “We lived in Bed-Stuy [Bedford-Stuyvesant], one of the most famous ghettos in the world” is how he once described his former stomping grounds. “My mother and father wanted me to go to a better school, so I was bused to this poor, white neighborhood...I was the only black boy in my grade for most of the time. I was a little guy, too, a skinny runt.”

Surprisingly, he's prepared to give his former bullies a pass—sort of. “Of course, I'm against bullying!” Rock says with his trademark intonation. “To-tal-ly, totally against it! But on the other hand...” He pauses for comedic effect. “Who's going to cure cancer? Who's gonna figure out how to advance stem cell research? *Someone who got bullied, that's who!* You think Bill Gates didn't get bullied? Put the most successful men and women in the world in one room, and ask them to put their hands up to see which ones were bullied.” Another beat passes before he shares his own theory: “*Most of 'em!*”

In 2007 Rock went so far as to tell host James Lipton of Bravo's *Inside the Actors Studio* that bullying was “the defining moment of my life...it made me who I am.” On air, he even profusely thanked the pack of boys who regularly “kicked my a--, spit in my face, and kicked me down the stairs” because the experiences not only forged his quick wit, he insists, but also fueled his determination to succeed.

However, Rock is the first to say all that bad has to be tempered with good, or no good can come out of it. “Who's your boss?” he posits, laughing out loud, before answering: “Either somebody whose dad or mom owns the place, or someone who's put up with a *lot* of adversity and overcome it. But

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you need love, too,” Rock maintains. “Bullying without love? You can be destroyed. ...But you know, I was bullied and I had love at home, so that was kind of the perfect storm for me, you know? I just read the *Steve Jobs* book [the biography by Walter Isaacson]. There's *no way* you can tell me that guy wasn't beat up in school! And what happened? He used that pain to make sure he'd be in a position where he would never be bullied again.”

Catherine Bradshaw, PhD, MEd, deputy director of the Johns Hopkins Center for the Prevention of Youth Violence and co-director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Prevention and Early Intervention, says of Rock's “perfect storm” position: “It's good he can frame his experiences in a positive way and use them as a motivator, and he's providing insightful commentary,” she says.

“But many of us don't have the ability to look back with a positive reflection, much less navigate the experience when it's happening. You've probably heard of the ‘It Gets Better’ campaign [a series of online PSAs that reminds bullied kids that soon enough these tough years will be behind them]. Youth going through the throes of bullying often don't have the insight to say to themselves, ‘Oh, in 20 or 30 years I'm going to feel differently about the experience, and things are going to get better for me.’ If kids don't have a supportive home environment to talk things through, they may not have the reserves to cope.”

TO BE OR NOT TO BE

Is your child a bully or being bullied? “I advise parents to explore stopbullying.gov,” says youth violence expert Catherine Bradshaw, PhD, MEd, who helped develop the go-to federal guidelines for parents, educators, and kids on the pervasive bullying problem. She suggests strategies for spotting and addressing bad behavior in and out of school.

Notice changes in routines.

If your child suddenly can't sleep, begs to stay home from school, or constantly complains of maladies, pay close attention—and query your kid with love. “Also, look for outward clues: scratches on their arms, bruises, or missing items that might have been stolen,” Bradshaw advises.

Talk, but choose your words wisely.

Bradshaw suggests having a “bully talk” before there's a problem, in which you promise support. Also, “never suggest that a child in any way deserves to be bullied: ‘If only you wore different clothes,’ that sort of thing. Defend your child's absolute right not to be treated unfairly or physically harmed.”

Alert school authorities.

Don't hesitate to speak to a teacher or principal—and don't apologize for being your child's advocate. “Insist that the bullies be held accountable and that the bad behavior stop. Gather as much evidence as possible—emails, texts—to support your position,” Bradshaw says.

Remarkably, Bradshaw says, when she conducts seminars on bullying and asks audience members if they have been bullied in the past, it's not only the Bill Gates types who raise their hands. Nearly everyone does. “Research shows that 80% of youth have experienced some form of bullying,” she says, adding, “It's clear Chris was touched profoundly by

crust out of his eyes! Like, I would get *graded* on how I handled my brothers. My girls are *not* ready for that!”

It's clear times have changed. “For every generation, the previous generation makes it easier,” the star muses. “So what happens is, the next generation doesn't have to be as smart or as disciplined. Things aren't as bad.”

“**I'm not worried about bones! I'm constantly repairing feelings. There's no cast for feelings—love is the Band-Aid. I constantly have to apply love to broken feelings and hope they mend.**”

his experience, because he continues to draw upon it in his work all these years later.”

Bradshaw does back up Rock's belief that he may be a funnier man because of those Brooklyn baddies: “Some research does show that youths who can draw upon sarcasm as deflection can handle these instances better than kids who really internalize these actions.”

PARENTING PREDICAMENT?

Rock is reflective about his childhood battles, but he wonders if his own kids—growing up in a seemingly more protective age when everyone wins the trophy and no one is excluded from the birthday party—possess the same well of strength from which to draw.

“My oldest is 11,” he says, “and when I was her age I used to make breakfast for three of my brothers. Sure, breakfast was just heating up water and pouring out packs of oatmeal, but *still*. I would get three kids ready for school, then myself. My mother and father would see us out, and look over my work. *OK! Andre's a little dirty here. You didn't wipe the*

So, are modern parents hovering too much and demanding too little, as popular sentiment suggests? Bradshaw unequivocally says *no*. “I would argue that life is more complex now than when we were kids,” she says. “Social media, television, video games—it's a really heavy cognitive load for children, who must make decisions as they navigate through this social media world. We're not buffering them too much. There's simply a higher level of risk kids are now exposed to, whether it's violence on TV, kids carrying weapons to school, or being faced with bullying, even in the cyber realm.”

As a father, Rock claims to be a disciplinarian, but nothing like his own folks. “I try to be strict,” he says. “But the circumstances aren't as grave. I grew up in the 'hood! Paying attention to authority was very important to my parents. I definitely got spanked, but the circumstances, especially for a black boy, [were different]. Not listening to authority? You could get shot by a cop! My kids don't live there, you know what I mean?”

He chuckles, then adds, “I don't have to be as strict. When we ran out into the street after the ball when my mother told us not to,



ROCK SOLID

Chris Rock is a lean, mean comedy machine—and he's often mistaken for a man much younger than his 48 years, due to his enviable physique. But is his workout a gut-bustingly good one?

“It's all cardio!” he insists. “Cardio is *everything*. No doctor ever said: ‘Oh, I can't believe he's dead! He's got those great abs!’”

Eating right, exercising, and aging with strength are no joke, says Pamela Peeke, MD, MPH, WebMD's fitness expert. While she agrees Rock is smart to integrate aerobic exercise into his regimen, Peeke advises the

of course we got a spanking. Because cars and buses and trucks could get you killed! You can run into my street now and get a ball. My strictness will come in later when the girls are in college. I'll crack the whip more then.”

With not one but two preteen daughters, Rock is preparing himself for the inevitable dating scene on the horizon. For a man who can get pretty graphic in his routines about sex and relationships, he's surprisingly mellow about what lies ahead. “I am *not* gonna flip out!” he insists. “If a guy comes in, well-mannered, holds out his hand, and gives me a firm shake, I'll be OK. Honestly. I mean, it's gonna happen! There's nothing you can do about it. All you can do is be a presence. Just being around stops a lot,” he says, setting up the punch line. “That's all you need. In New York they have cops on horseback. Tell me, what is that good for? It's good because when people see cops, they calm down. Because who the h--- can a cop catch on a horse?”

But, fellas, do be warned: “I got no problem, however, being the bad cop,” he says.

Of course, he does worry. Zahra has asthma and must also contend with a peanut allergy. “We had a toddler scare early [with her asthma], but she's doing great now,” Rock says. “No peanuts in the house—it's a peanut-free zone. I *love* a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, but I haven't had one in eight years.”

Anxieties notwithstanding, parenthood pleases this comedian to no end. “I love it all,” he enthuses. “I'm a fortunate man: I've got some money. Because we all know

Grown Ups 2 star to rethink his aversion to ab work.

Core strength is key to good health. “As men hit age 40 they begin to lose the hormone testosterone, which can lead to an increase in waist circumference and belly fat,” Peeke says. “Men don't need a perfect six-pack to be healthy. But they should aim for a

belly circumference of well under 40 inches—the 34- to 35-inch range is ideal.” Anything greater puts men at risk of high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, dementia, and certain cancers, including breast cancer and colon cancer.

Strong abdominals prevent back pain. “The stronger the abs, the stronger

the toughest thing about being a parent in general is providing for people who don't work.” He snorts at his own joke.

But it's obvious he's a total softie when it comes to his kids. “I've got way more patience than I ever would have had with boys,” he says of his daughters. “They're *sooo* emotional. My hostage negotiator skills are very attuned right now. Little things are humongous crises, and you gotta negotiate them down. Tears come at the drop of a hat, especially with my youngest. You gotta talk 'em through it a lot of times, and you can't get mad!”

My brother has all boys and they just break s--t all the time. They run, and things get broken. With girls, *feelings* get broken. Constantly. I'm not worried about bones! I'm constantly repairing feelings. There's no cast for feelings—love is the Band-Aid. I constantly have to apply love to broken feelings and hope they mend.”

So Rock's new movie, *Grown Ups 2*, isn't much of a stretch from reality, with its theme of Generation X adults reliving their own youths through the escapades of their New Millennium offspring? “We had a lot of fun,” he says, as he recounts reuniting with old pals Adam Sandler, Kevin James, David Spade, and Salma Hayek to film the sequel.

Of course, looking back and laughing at those tender years is easier when your very job is to make jokes. Fortunately for Chris Rock, it's he who gets to laugh last.

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