

Parenting Essentials

Seven Steps To Parenting Success

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Introduction

What does it mean to be a “good” parent? Is it just being a good disciplinarian, or something more? I think that most parents want it all; the ability to effectively discipline and also see their child develop towards his/her fullest potential, while having a close positive relationship. For most parents, being able to accomplish these goals simultaneously just seems impossible. This book will help you to understand why this is so difficult and how to ultimately achieve it.

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of the word, “discipline”? While you may know the “right” answer, the honest answer for most of us is - punishment. If you are called before a disciplinary review board, it’s never to reward you for something that you did that was good! It’s basically to decide what, if any, punishment you should receive for what you may have done wrong. Interestingly enough, the actual definition of the word “discipline” is: “to teach appropriate behavior”. We somehow add... “through punishment”.

The punitive concept of discipline is also embedded within our societal institutions. Through various rules and laws, we define what is acceptable behavior. Unfortunately, our justice system teaches us appropriate behavior exclusively through the use of punishment. If you drive too fast, you risk paying a fine. If you break the law, you risk going to jail. What do we do for the good citizens who behave appropriately? Nothing! Imagine your car being pulled over by a police officer and being given free movie passes for driving well. It seems silly and strange. Believe it or not, if done regularly, this approach would probably result in much more appropriate driving behavior than just punishment alone. It is simply human nature to emphasize the negative.

A basic thrust of this book is to challenge our view of discipline and of ourselves as disciplinarians. Even though it’s natural for us to discipline negatively, it’s simply ineffective and unhealthy. There are certainly times, however, when our children’s behaviors require negative consequences. The question is, can we approach discipline in a more balanced and effective fashion by utilizing positive attention/incentives as well. Remember that the bottom line is teaching appropriate behavior. In order for desirable learning to take place, the use of positive attention/incentives work like catalysts to increase our children’s appropriate behaviors.

Over many years of clinical practice, I have gradually refined specific parenting strategies that are highly effective over a wide range of behavior problems. As you will discover by reading this book, the parenting strategies offered are easy to use and will yield almost immediate benefits. This is because they all rely upon the tremendous power of parental attention. The techniques in this book are a composite of my accumulated professional experiences and training, as well as my personal challenges as a parent. For this reason I owe thanks to the many clients, colleagues, professors, authors, theorists, whose thoughts and efforts made this book possible. Most importantly, however, I owe thanks to my daughter.

While I have included actual case studies throughout this book, I have changed all of the names and anything that might identify them to protect the privacy of these individuals.

Chapter I. The Myth of the Perfect Parent

Parenting can be hell. Think about it. Parenting requires an adult to “control” and “correct” a child’s natural impulses and desires, for at least eighteen years! “Don’t do what you want, do what I say because I know best.” Good luck! This dynamic inevitability results in conflict, frustration and strained relations.

I am the proud father of an eleven year old daughter. There is nothing in my life that has given me more pleasure or a greater sense of purpose than being a parent. Nor has anyone assisted me in losing my temper more frequently and severely than my usually very sweet daughter. There certainly are unparalleled joys in being a parent, but parenting itself can be hell.

In contrast with the very real challenges of parenting are the idealized images that culture imposes upon our collective psyche. Images of super-nurturers, unfailingly patient and wise, always understanding and never losing their cool; always knowing what to say or do. Sound familiar? This is embedded in art, advertising, music, books, movies, and television. It’s even in those “mushy” greeting cards that children give parents on Mother’s/Father’s Day, thereby perpetuating the myth. Consider the typical Mother’s Day card and the more realistic version.

Typical Mother’s Day Card

Dearest Mom,

Words cannot express my thankfulness for all that you have done. Your unending patience, understanding and ability to make us laugh through the tough times, taught me so much.

While no one deserves a parent as perfect as you, I can only count my blessings and say...

Have a wonderful Mother’s Day!

Realistic Mother's Day Card

Mom-

Remember when I would do stuff that drove you nuts and how crazy you got? I mean like those times I would push your buttons and your neck veins would pop out? Remember? Anyway I do love you and appreciate most of what you did for me, but we sure had some wacky times when I was growing up.

Have a wonderful Mother's Day, you deserve it!

We internalize the myths of the perfect parent, developing unrealistic expectations of our parenting experience and ourselves as parents. As a result, parenthood not only supplies us with immense challenge, frustration and failure, but offers tremendous guilt as well! What a deal! This brings us to the first step towards becoming a more effective parent:

Step One

Go easy on yourself! Parenting is an impossible job to always do well.

As parents, the best we can do is try to screw-up less and enhance our emotional survival while enduring the challenges of parenthood. This is a very important point. **The “goal” of being a good parent is to try and screw up less.** It's impossible not to make mistakes because no one can always be successful at parenting. What's really crucial is being more realistic about the rigors of parenthood and open to more effective parenting techniques.

If you're like most people, you probably have a neighbor or acquaintance who appears to have an idyllic family existence: Smiling parents with obedient children, who seem effortlessly in control. Now that is abnormal! I bet that behind closed doors, there are problematic things going on; Dad's a cross-dresser or perhaps Mom's on heavy doses of Prozac. It's normal for family life to be a series of struggles and challenges. I've never met anyone, child or adult, who gave their parents “straight A's” on their parenting report cards. That's why we all strive to be better parents than ours were. Of course, it's not long before

we find ourselves saying the very things to our children that we hated hearing our parents say to us!

The key is to focus less on your parental imperfections and mistakes, while putting more emphasis on your efforts to improve your parenting skills thereby increasing the positive experiences of parenthood. This book will provide you with some of the tools necessary to do just that. The simple fact that you are reading this book is an indication that you care about your parenting skills and want to improve them. That in itself deserves recognition and entitles you to some sense of self-satisfaction. As we will see in the next chapter, it's natural for all of us to emphasize the negative and minimize the positive. It is very important, however, that you make a conscious effort to shift this pattern as it relates to your self-perceptions as a parent. Revel in your accomplishments and try to learn from your mistakes. Go easy on yourself.

It is also important to take care of yourself as a parent. This is especially true for at-home parents. It is quite common for working parents to underestimate the difficulties endured by at-home parents. They're little kids, what's the big deal? Being at home all day, everyday with your children can be a very stressful, tedious and draining experience. My daughter was born in late May. My industrious wife returned to work after just three weeks, despite a six week paid maternity leave. At the time I was a school psychologist and had the summer off. Given that I was also a child "expert", who better to take care of our newborn than me! I frequently videotaped my daughter that first summer. I didn't watch the tape until the fall. It was a great documentary of my daughter's early development and my emotional deterioration. By late August, I was making finger puppets into the camera and she wasn't even in the room! That's why I always advise parents, especially at-home parents, to take care of themselves as part of improving their overall parenting.

As a parent, you need to make time for yourself and relax by doing something that you enjoy. Even if it's just a couple of hours a week. Otherwise you're not going to have the endurance to handle all of the ongoing stresses of parenting. If not for yourself do it for your child. An overly stressed parent cannot be as effective and will lose their temper more often and make poorer disciplinary decisions. Similarly, it is important for parents to rediscover dating. Going out for a nice evening together to relax, and getting to know each other again is very important, even if it's just once a month. It's not being selfish, it's being smart.

Taking better care of yourself will help you to take better care of your children.

Chapter II. What Does a Kid Have to do to Get Your Attention?

Ever wonder why television news is almost always bad news? Think about it. Every local and national news program focuses on negative events. If it's so depressing to hear, why don't they have more "good news" stories, right? Simply stated, the reason is that it just wouldn't hold our interest and their ratings would plummet! Positive events just don't get and hold our attention like negative ones do. In fact, the more catastrophic the news story, the more we're glued to the screen! Consider this example: whenever there is an accident off to the side of the highway, traffic slows down. We even have a name for it; "Rubber Necking". Similarly, the worse the accident, the greater the desire to look and thereby the slower the traffic becomes. Now consider the opposite. When's the last time you heard this on the traffic report: "...And on the 405 northbound, we have some rubber necking due to an unusually beautiful sunset." Answer: never. While we would like to believe that the glass is half full, we all secretly know that it's half empty! Being optimistic takes effort. Being pessimistic comes naturally. This dynamic is apparent on every level of human perception. **Human beings are naturally negative.** We're negative about ourselves, our spouses, the government, people who we see as different, our possessions, everything! When you see a photograph or videotape of yourself, or hear your voice on an audiotape, what are your initial perceptions or thoughts? If you're like most people (if not all people) your initial thoughts are self-critical; "Do I really sound like that?" It's human nature. The only explanation I have for this phenomenon is that G-d has a strange sense of humor. It's a mystery. None the less it's a reality. A reality that profoundly impacts all facets of our existence, including the way we parent.

All children have basic needs. There are, for example, basic physical needs. All children require food, air, water and shelter. In addition, children have basic emotional needs. These include the need for nurturance and attention. Through the mechanism of parental attention, children derive their sense of being cared for. Recent bad news stories on children raised in Romanian orphanages attest to the devastating impact of insufficient caretaker attention on social and emotional development. Infants and young children who are persistently denied caretaker attention, invariably develop emotional difficulties and abnormal behavior patterns. These children often display a lack of social responsiveness. They often apathetically stare into space, lacking social interest, curiosity and spontaneity. In severe cases, these children also fail to thrive in terms of weight gain and motor

development. This condition is known as “Reactive Attachment Disorder of Infancy or Early Childhood”. Luckily, except in severe cases of neglect, these children can improve dramatically with the proper care. Indeed, for young children, parental attention is a necessary requirement for physical, emotional and cognitive development. Similarly, children will do whatever is necessary to fulfill this need and get their parents’ attention.

Now here’s the crazy part - because we are naturally negative, we unwittingly train our children to get our attention through negative behaviors! The very behaviors we disdain in our children are often fueled by our own negative attention. We accidentally create our own monsters! And we don’t waste any time. We actually begin this process at birth! We bring that bundle of joy home from the hospital and lovingly place it in that beautiful crib. Thanks to modern technology, some of us are fortunate enough to be able to turn on our baby monitors and listen to every sound. When our baby is quiet or cooing happily we feel reassured and go on with our daily tasks. When our baby cries, being loving parents, we quickly go in and attend to our child. Can you see any problems with this scenario? What is our newborn learning? It’s learning that when it wants our attention it has to cry! It’s not long before we have to learn to differentiate between the ever increasing types of crying our baby develops. Believe it or not, crying is often the first thing we teach our newborn to do! Not only do we create our own monsters, but we do it right from day one! Why? Because as parents we naturally focus on negative behaviors over positive ones. Remember that it’s human nature. This is also why older siblings usually increase their negative behaviors shortly after the addition of a child into the family. Newborns demand a great deal of attention, so siblings inevitably get less attention than before. The older siblings, then, do what they’ve already been taught to do. Want more parental attention? Just scream, hit, defy, or misbehave and parental attention is forthcoming. It works every time. Young children are naturally quick learners. We must be careful what we teach them. We teach our children, for example, to bother us when we’re on the phone! Yes, **we** teach them to do that. We rarely, if ever, give our children positive feedback when they don’t interrupt us, and always give them negative feedback when they do. Our children get so good at it that they often engage in behaviors that force us to get off the phone altogether! Another powerful negative attention feedback loop is complete. As crazy as it sounds, you must remember that it is natural for us to focus on the negative and reinforce these negative behavior patterns. This brings us back to Step One! Go easy on yourself! Parenting is an impossible job to always do well. It also leads us to the second and perhaps most important step necessary in becoming an effective disciplinarian:

Step Two

Focus more of your attention on positive behaviors and less on negative behaviors.

Catch your child being good.

This may also be the most challenging step because you're going against your own natural, human tendencies to do the exact opposite! The good news is that even small shifts in your parental attention will result in significant and often dramatic changes in your child's behavior. (In Chapter Six, there are several clinical case studies which will demonstrate the power of systematically shifting parental attention.) If you're like most parents, there are specific undesirable behaviors which you are frequently trying to correct in your child. You have seemingly endless "discussions" regarding these behaviors, try a variety of punishments, but to no avail. You may even find yourself saying to your child, "How many times have I told you...?" If you think about it, it's a crazy question to ask. After all, there is no correct answer! If your child correctly says, "146", my guess is that you won't be too happy with that answer. What you're really saying is, "I'm very frustrated because I keep telling you not to do this and you continue to do it anyway!" Clearly, whatever it is that you're doing is not working. Chances are that after the undesirable behavior occurs, you're giving your child negative feedback regarding it. At the same time, however, you're also giving your child your time and attention as a consequence of the undesirable behavior. As a result, you're actually reinforcing their undesirable behavior with your negative attention! It is difficult to believe that children would provoke a parent into giving them negative attention (e.g., yelling, punishment, etc.) but understand that if that's how we've taught them to get our attention, that's exactly what they'll do. **Remember, children need parental attention and will do whatever they have learned to do in order to get it.** That is why a key element to parenting success is teaching our children how to get our attention in more positive ways. The expression, "catch your child being good", sums it up. It doesn't even sound right to our ears! "Catch your child being bad" flows and sounds familiar. "Catch your child being good" sounds grammatically incorrect somehow! That's how foreign it is to our natural way of thinking as parents. It is precisely this mode of thinking that Step Two helps us to change.

For example, let's say you have two children who have trouble playing nicely together. While there are times when they do interact nicely, usually they end up fighting. What do you do? Chances are that when they scream and fight you go into the room and

lecture/yell/punish (negative attention). If you try to avoid going in, one of them inevitably seeks you out and draws you in, at which time you lecture/yell/punish (negative attention). During those rare moments when they are playing nicely together, you keep your fingers crossed and hope it continues. Not only don't you go into the room, but you probably tiptoe past the door so as not to upset the moment! This is where we make our biggest mistake. We neglect to take advantage of the opportunity to catch them being good. What you need to do is give them positive feedback (attention) about their desirable behavior. We usually only do the opposite. Therein lies the problem. Eventually, the majority of our parental attention is in response to our children's undesirable behaviors. Since this often fuels their negative behaviors, our problems usually get worse. The irony is that just a little positive feedback/attention goes much further than a great deal of negative feedback/attention in changing undesirable behaviors. In addition, this approach also impacts positively on our relationship with our children, as well as their feelings about themselves. (We'll consider issues related to self-esteem further in Chapter Seven.) The sad truth is that the vast majority of our verbal interactions with our children are negative. There have actually been several studies which document this phenomenon. In her excellent book *The Magic of Encouragement* (Simon & Schuster, 1990), Stephanie Marston cites a study by the National Parent-Teachers Organization. This study found that the ratio of negative to positive statements made by parents to their children was 18:1. That's eighteen negative statements to every positive one! Unfortunately the ratio in our own homes is equally problematic. The good news is that with a little effort, we can make significant improvements in the way we respond to our children's behaviors.

With young children, you can give them positive feedback in novel and fun ways. When my daughter is playing nicely with her friends, I try to go into her room and with a look of confusion say, "Oh my gosh!" Of course, all the children start looking guilty and concerned. Then I say, "This is unbelievable!" That's usually when someone spontaneously confesses to doing something unrelated. Then I say, "I'm just so proud of you guys; you're playing so nicely together! Thanks, I really appreciate it!" Everyone smiles and beams with pride. The lesson is being learned. When I'm going to prepare them a snack anyway, I try to make sure that it's after they've played nicely. I might say something like: "You guys played so nicely together, who's ready for a snack?" Since I'm going to make them a snack anyway, why not connect it with their positive behavior? This is another critical mistake that most parents make; wasting potential rewards by not connecting them to desirable child behaviors. (We'll look more closely at this issue in Chapter Four.) If I continue these efforts with my

daughter, even occasionally, eventually, she will seek me out to tell me how nicely she and her friends are playing together. I have now effectively taught her how to get my positive attention. Even the phrase “positive attention” sounds awkward, whereas the phrase “negative attention” flows. Scary, isn’t it? It is important to focus less on what your child does wrong and provide more attention when your child behaves appropriately.

“But if my child misbehaves, I can’t just ignore it!” No, and there needs to be negative consequences at times. **The key is to minimize your attention (and anger level) to undesirable behaviors.** Provide succinct minimal verbal feedback and whatever negative consequences result and that’s it. The time to lecture your child is later, at a calmer more neutral moment. You will be able to discuss it more rationally and with less anger, your child will be less defensive, and you will not be feeding into this negative attention-seeking behavior. (We’ll learn more about specific strategies to utilize in response to anger issues in Chapter Three.) In addition, the more frequently you’re able to remember to “catch your child being good”, the more motivated your child will be to behave appropriately and the need to provide negative attention/feedback will diminish.

As I was writing this chapter a friend of ours visited. She complained about her very strong-willed 3 year old son and his frequent defiance. She was pleased to report, however, that after his tirades and her negative attention, he would apologize to his mother and they would cuddle and make up. What is the problem with this picture? Think about the sequence of events; be defiant, get negative attention, and then get positive attention! No wonder he’s so strong willed! He’s getting tremendous reinforcement for his defiant behavior. Try to become more aware of these behavioral sequences. What precedes the negative behavior? What follows the behavior? In this case, the time to cuddle is only after some appropriate behavior. So when he arrives to kiss and make up, the parent might say, “I’m glad you’re sorry. Get ready for bed nicely and we’ll talk then,” or, “Let’s see if you can be a good listener until dinner and then we’ll cuddle”. Even more importantly, my friend needs to catch her child being compliant and provide liberal praise, cuddles, and positive feedback at that time. (In Chapter Four we’ll look further at consequences and their impact on behavior.)

The goal is to teach your child to get your attention positively. So what does your child currently have to do in order to get your attention? Remember that even small changes in shifting your attention from negative to positive will have immediate beneficial results. Consider some of the behaviors that you would like to see your child improve. Pick one behavior that you believe your child could easily improve with a little effort. Define in

your own mind the opposite or desirable behavior that you want to see more frequently. Write it down, being as specific about the behavior as possible. Make a deliberate effort to shift your parental attention (minimizing the negative and maximizing the positive). Try to catch your child being good; anytime you see the desirable behavior, provide positive feedback (e.g. "I see that you're doing your homework nicely, good job!"). Even if it's rare, there probably are times when your child engages in the appropriate behavior. Use your own words to describe your genuine feelings or thoughts. Add a hug or pat on the back if appropriate. At the same time, try to minimize your negative attention/feedback. If the long angry lecture never worked in the past, how will repeating it again help anyway? Try to appear disappointed rather than enraged. If needed, provide the appropriate negative consequence calmly and move on. Note the date and give it about three weeks. While this strategy may not be an instant cure, you will be surprised to find that a noticeable shift will occur in the frequency of the desirable versus the undesirable behavior. Try it and see!

Chapter III. I'm Getting Angry!

Anger and parenting go together so well, don't they? A parent who never gets angry is a parent who is...overmedicated! Let's face it, it's impossible to parent and not get angry. At best, you can strive towards getting angry less frequently and less intensely. This is a more realistic, while perhaps life-long, parenting goal. Given that, there are several effective techniques that can help us avoid ending up in that angry place. Particularly because your parental anger also functions as powerful negative attention and thus may reinforce the very behavior you're angry about! In my clinical practice, I've worked with many families where the parent(s) were highly negative disciplinarians. Many of them believed in it, because it was all they knew. None of them, however, felt good about their actions. Spanking, for example, is a widely debated issue in the area of parental discipline. My personal belief is that when we spank, it's more a function of our loss of temper than our child's behavior. The fact that most of us feel some guilt or shame after we spank our kids tells us that on some level we know it's wrong. I believe that spanking results from poor anger control in conjunction with a limited repertoire of parenting skills. To this end, I hope that this book provides more effective alternate strategies. On a personal level, I remember spanking my daughter two or three times when she was a toddler. I felt terrible about it and knew it was more a function of my own limitations than her behavior. It motivated me to increase my own repertoire of parental skills and practice what I was preaching. It also led me to create Step One!

Step Three

Reduce angry outbursts, which often fuel negative behavior, by using more effective communication techniques.

Mutual Time-Out. Whenever I lecture on parenting, most parents proudly tell me that one parenting technique that they frequently use is "time-out". It's so modern and progressive, right? Well, yes, when it's used correctly. Time-out is a behavioral technique that simply separates the child from whatever is stimulating the undesirable behavior, by putting the child in a neutral environment for a short period of time. The well-known rule is one minute for every year (e.g., a five minute time-out for a five year old child). That's the intent of time-out. That's not, however, how most parents utilize it. Typically, when a child

misbehaves in any way, they're told to go to their room for time-out, usually for a lot longer than a minute for every year. Let's face it, that's not time-out, it's good old fashioned punishment! Time-out is not meant to be a punishment, it's simply a way to disrupt the ongoing negative behavior. Furthermore, their room is anything but neutral. Typically full of toys and games, for most kids it's a fun place to be! Let's consider the behavioral sequence. A child misbehaves ---> parent gets angry (negative attention) ---> child has fun in room (reinforcement). Once again, we're actually training our child to misbehave! Here's an example of correctly using time-out. Two brothers, ages 3 and 5, are fighting and the parent separates them. One child is made to sit at the kitchen table and the other sits on a chair in the living room for three to five minutes to cool down and regroup. That's time-out!

When my daughter misbehaves and I feel myself getting angry, I use what I call "mutual time-out". I tell my daughter that I'm too angry to discuss the behavior right now. I suggest that she sit on her bed and think about what she did wrong, while I sit on my bed and calm down. Never once has she said, "No Dad! I want to discuss it right now!" When I sit down, I ask myself, "What is it that I want my child to learn?" Remember the definition of discipline; to teach appropriate behavior. After only a couple of minutes, I've calmed down and I'm clearer on what it is that I want her to learn. In the meantime, she's had a chance to consider her behavior as well. We can now discuss the behavior, discuss more appropriate alternatives and what the consequence(s) will be. Consider the behavior sequence: child misbehaves ---> listens to parent, goes to her room and thinks about her behavior ---> gets feedback/attention ---> gets consequence(s) for her behavior. Notice that the feedback/attention follows her appropriate listening/thinking behavior and there's still consequences for her negative behavior. If I'm really on top of my parenting game, I'll also try to catch her being good, using the more appropriate alternatives we discussed. Do I always handle my disciplining responsibilities this well? No way! Even knowing what I do, parenting is an impossible job for me to always do well because it's not natural to focus on the positive. I do try, however, to make positive steps in this direction. So try to make some ongoing efforts to use mutual time-out, but go easy on yourself!

The first thing to always do with parental anger is to calm down! This is also a good idea prior to determining negative consequences. Otherwise, you'll find yourself saying things like: "You're grounded for life!", or, "No TV for a year!". After you calm down and realize you cannot enforce what you have just said, you'll commute the sentence to something more realistic. What's the behavioral sequence? Undesirable child behavior --->

anger/yelling (negative attention) ---> not following through on what you said you'd do. So not only have you negatively reinforced the behavior, but you've taught your child that you don't follow through on what you say. OOPS! Parents often think that they must make immediate decisions regarding consequences. There's great wisdom, however, to briefly postponing your decision and giving yourself an chance to think about it.. You then have the opportunity to calm down and choose an appropriate and realistic consequence that you can enforce. It also gives you a chance to discuss it with your spouse. This allows you to avoid the other problem of rushing to disciplinary judgment; arguing with your spouse about the haphazard consequence you spontaneously determined, which makes both of you even more angry! Believe it or not, there's someone else who should have a voice in determining the consequence, your child!

(We'll discuss this idea of "empowerment" further in Chapters Four, Six and Seven.)

We can also avoid parental anger by being more aware of the way we communicate with our children. There are certain common patterns of parent-child communication, which unwittingly increase the likelihood of arguments and discipline problems. More specifically, I will focus on three areas of parent-child communication: asking vs. telling, debating and nagging.

Asking vs. Telling. Most parents encourage their children to speak in a polite respectful manner. One way that we try to do this is by our example. We call this modeling. Toward this end, we try to model appropriate language like using the word, "please". So when it's bedtime, we might say to our child, "Would you please get ready for bed now?" Sounds great doesn't it? The problem here is that we have unintentionally given our child a choice. We have asked our child, "would you get ready for bed?". It would follow then that our child could respond with something like, "Not right now, I'm busy". Technically speaking, this is a fair response to the question or request as it was worded, even though most parents would be, to say the least, dissatisfied with this response. Consider the significantly different meaning to this slightly altered statement, "Please get ready for bed now." Notice that in this example there is no question and no choice or option is implied. Please understand, however, that giving children choices is an important positive technique in helping children to learn to make good choices later in life. We just need to be sure that we're clear with the language we use and whether or not we intend to give our kids choices. If our intention is to tell our children to get ready for bed, there is no choice and the statement needs to be told not asked. Otherwise you open yourself up to a negative (and usually counterproductive)

argument about going to bed. Something that is easily avoided by using more thoughtful language.

Debating. A similar difficulty that we run into with our children is falling prey to never-ending debates. Now, once again, a spirited debate regarding negotiable issues can often be healthy and productive. Quite often, however, we find ourselves debating with our children about non-negotiable issues. In these cases, the results are always negative and destructive. The solution to this problem is to put effort into avoiding debates when the issue at hand is a non-negotiable one. Keep in mind, however, that children are experts at luring parents into debates. This is because they have nothing to lose! They believe that it can only improve their situation and therefore will make every effort to do so. From their perspective, then, it's understandable for them to try and proceed. The way for a parent to avoid this debating trap is actually quite simple; don't go for the bait and use assertive statements. An assertive statement acknowledges your child's feelings, while at the same time restates your position. For example, your child wants to stay outside and play when it is time for dinner. The verbal dance usually goes something like this:

Parent: "Billy it's time to come in for dinner."

Billy: "But we're in the middle of a game, can't I just play for five more minutes?"

Parent: "No Billy. Dinner's ready now. It's time to come in."

Billy: "But Joey's Mom said he could come in later."

Parent: "But she doesn't have dinner ready."

Billy: "Yes she does and she said she would heat his up later. Just five more minutes, please!"

Parent: "Well...I'm not Joey's parent, I'm yours. And I've worked hard preparing dinner and you need to come in."

Billy: "I'm not hungry. You said I don't have to eat if I'm not hungry."

Parent: "What? When did I tell you that?"

Billy: "At Grandma's last Thanksgiving. You don't ever remember saying things when it's something that's good for me!"

Sound familiar? Billy is doing an expert job at baiting his parent into debating the issue. A situation like this usually ends one of two ways. The child successfully manipulates/debates the parent into letting him do what he wants to do. Or, a nasty, negative, usually punitive

confrontation erupts. Neither scenario, of course, being productive or desirable. The more desirable outcome requires avoiding debates and assertively restating yourself. Let's revisit our example, this time utilizing our new approach.

Parent: "Billy, it's time to come in for dinner."

Billy: "But we're in the middle of a game, can't I just play for another five minutes?"

Parent: "I know that you'd like to play but it's time for dinner and you have to come in now."

Billy: "But Joey's mom said he could come in later."

Parent: "I understand that Joey's mom said he could come in later, but you need to come in now for dinner."

Billy: "I'm not hungry. You said I don't have to eat if I'm not hungry."

Parent: "I'll be happy to talk to you about that later, but right now you need to come in."

Notice that the parent consistently avoided being baited into the debate. In addition, the parent is using an assertive statement which acknowledges the child's point of view. I understand that you feel...but my position is... . This is a very effective communication technique to reduce arguments and reach resolution, not just with our children but with anyone. **People are more receptive to a different point of view when they know that their position has been respectfully acknowledged.** If you utilize these techniques effectively, you will find that your child will be more compliant with your requests. If your child is used to debating with you, it might take some practice to retrain your child. If you find that additional problems arise, the techniques below may also prove useful. Before moving on, however, it is important that we revisit step two: catch your child being good. How would you apply this rule to the above behavior problem? Remember we're looking for the "opposite" or desirable behavior. So when your child does come in for dinner (with less or no debating) as requested, it is critical that you thank/praise/provide positive feedback in a sincere, timely fashion. This is the most effective way to increase the chances of this behavior reoccurring in the future.

Nagging. Another common complaint is having to repeat requests an inordinate number of times before the child complies. What makes it even more frustrating is that not only are you frustrated with having to repeat yourself over and over, but you're also viewed as a nag! Believe it or not, this is another example of a child discipline problem that we parents

actually create ourselves! Children are smart. If we teach them that we are willing to repeat our requests ten times, why would they respond after the first or second request? It's as if your child is playing with a friend and you tell them it's time to clean up. As the friend begins to comply, your child might as well say, "We don't have to clean up yet; she's going to ask another 7 or 8 times. We still have plenty of time to play!" We accidentally train our children to ignore our initial requests! The solution to breaking your child's bad habit is to first break your own bad habit of repeating requests over and over again. There is an effective alternative to this approach. Minimize your repetition of requests and be clear with your child that their compliance is expected in a timely fashion.

If-Then Statements and the Mystery Consequence. Utilizing If-Then Statements and the Mystery Consequence will prove useful in reducing the number of requests you need to make. Make a conscious decision as to how many times you're willing to repeat your request. Keep in mind that no one is perfect, so expecting your child to always comply the first time is probably unrealistic. Let's say you can live with up to three requests. When you are making your third and last request there are two strategies you can use: an if-then statement or the "mystery" consequence. The if-then statement is simply: If you don't...(comply), then this...(negative consequence) will occur. What is critical here is that you use a realistic consequence that you can and will follow through on. Threatening and not following through with a consequence is worse than no consequence at all. I prefer using the mystery consequence. This is where the consequence is undefined. Your child is told that there will be a negative consequence, but the consequence itself is a mystery or unknown. The phrase I use with my daughter is "last chance". It works like this:

Dad: "Please clean up your toys."

Jessica: "OK." (Child continues playing for several minutes).

Dad: "Your toys need to be cleaned up now."

Jessica: "OK." (Child continues to play for a couple more minutes).

Dad: "This is your last chance. Please clean up your toys now."

I prefer using the mystery consequence because my daughter may prefer the potential negative consequence over cleaning-up. Then you're stuck! For example:

Parent: "No TV tonight!"

Child: “That’s OK, there are no shows on that I like anyway!”

Now what do you do? It usually goes from bad to worse. The mystery consequence always has the potential of being something more aversive than complying with the request. In addition, if you use this technique regularly, you’ll be surprised at how rarely you have to actually impose a mystery consequence altogether. You must be prepared, however, particularly initially, to follow through with an appropriate and significant consequence. Even more importantly though, remember to catch your child being good. So that whenever the toys are being cleaned up, be sure to try and provide positive feedback as well.

Chapter IV. All Behavior Has its Consequences

To better understand why children behave the way they do, we need to consider the consequences of their behaviors. This is particularly true because we are often unaware of the subtle yet powerful events which follow certain behaviors and dramatically effect the chances of their reoccurrence.

Generally, there are four types of behavior consequences: positive, negative, natural, and accidental. A positive consequence tends to increase the behavior it follows, whereas a negative consequence decreases the behavior. A natural consequence is an event which naturally occurs following a behavior. It may positively or negatively effect the reoccurrence of that behavior. A child stamping his foot in a puddle makes a splash, giggles, and does it again. In this case, the splashing water would be a positive natural consequence. The child who touches the hot stove rarely makes the same mistake again. One dubious benefit of a naturally occurring negative consequence—pain! Finally, an accidental consequence is an event which haphazardly occurs and may or may not increase or decrease the reoccurrence of the preceding behavior. For example, a naive toddler accidentally says a curse word and everyone laughs. It's less funny the second, third...tenth, twentieth time, but it's difficult to get the child to stop. The initial accidental consequence of laughter served to increase the reoccurrence of the behavior.

As parents we tend to underutilize positive consequences while over-relying upon negative consequences. As discussed in Chapter Two, we have a natural tendency towards the negative. Since we naturally focus more on our child's negative behaviors, we primarily rely upon negative consequences for these behaviors. This is very problematic for several reasons. It is well researched that humans, as well as other animal species, learn most effectively when positive consequences are utilized. In fact, if only negative consequences are utilized, learning is much slower and a variety of neurotic (e.g., anxiety, aggression, depression) symptoms develop. Punishment only tells us what we've done wrong. It is rewards or positive consequences that reinforce the desirable behavior and increase the chances of its re-occurrence. Positive feedback tells us what we're doing right. A more balanced approach, therefore, optimizes a child's opportunity to learn to behave appropriately. That is, after all, the true definition of the word "discipline"; to teach appropriate behavior. We somehow add... "through punishment" to this definition, thus limiting our effectiveness as disciplinarians. It is understandable then that parenting quickly

becomes difficult and frustrating due to our limited repertoire of (usually negative) teaching techniques. This is also why it is so common for parents to complain that they've run out of punishments! The problems become even more dramatic with older teenage children, who have received primarily negative disciplining throughout their childhood. They become "inoculated" to punishments and often end up ignoring their parents' demands altogether. Even worse, at times they become aggressive towards their parents, who have often overly relied upon negative physical discipline techniques.

Ironically, we not only are too reliant upon punishment or negative consequences, but we throw our rewards or positive consequences away! In a sense we turn potential rewards into accidental consequences. We take our kids to the playground, out to eat or to the movies, we read our children bedtime stories, play games with them, watch television together, etc. These are great things to do with our children, but we rarely connect these positive events with their behavior. We're great at punishing negative behavior, but we're terrible at reinforcing positive behavior! This brings us to our fourth step:

Step Four

Be more aware of the consequences which follow your child's positive and negative behaviors.

This is particularly true where negative attention is concerned. Even though negative attention (yelling, lecturing...) usually occurs after undesirable behaviors, it often paradoxically functions like a positive consequence and increases the reoccurrence of those very behaviors. As we discussed in Chapter Two, children need and will get their parents' attention, using whatever way they know best. In addition, children often feel powerless. It seems like everyone (parents, teachers, older children) constantly tells them what to do. Being able to push their parents' buttons makes children feel very powerful and is thus very reinforcing. Why do you think they get so proficient at it? Getting your negative attention, then, becomes a dysfunctional reward and fuels the negative behavior itself!

Now that we're all depressed and feeling hopeless...WAIT! The good news is that there are three ways to effectively reverse some of these difficulties: Minimize negative attention, stop wasting rewards, and provide positive feedback.

Minimize Negative Attention. The best example to illustrate the power of negative attention is tantruming behavior. With rare exception, tantruming behavior is directly

connected to, and primarily reinforced by, the negative attention it receives. There is a simple way that you can put this theory to the test. The next time your child is having a tantrum, calmly walk away. Does your child remain and continue tantruming or do they take their tantrum “on the road” and follow you? If they follow you, it means that the tantrum is for you, for your response or reaction. The more you respond (positive or negative) the more intense the tantrum becomes. It’s like an escalating dance that you both do together. Children eventually tantrum not because their emotions are out of control, but because of the parental reaction or consequences. That’s not to say that children are aware of these processes. It’s usually learned accidentally during the initial temper tantrum(s) which probably is a function of their overwhelming emotions. Subsequently, however, it becomes a function of the negative attention it receives, which then fuels the reoccurring tantruming behavior. That is why the elements of a temper tantrum are usually a collection of the most annoying behaviors a child can think of exhibiting. It’s negative attention- seeking at its ugliest!

The solution is to minimize your negative attention whenever possible. This does not mean that you are to completely ignore the behavior. When your child behaves inappropriately, provide a minimum amount of verbal feedback, making sure to include whatever warning or consequence is appropriate and try to move on. If more discussion is required, do it at a later, more neutral, time. Children will also be better listeners at a less heated moment. Don’t forget to also look for opportunities to catch your child behaving more appropriately in the future.

Stop wasting rewards. As parents, we do a staggering number of positive things with and for our children on a regular basis. Unfortunately, what we rarely do is put these positive occurrences to work for us as rewards. Try to become more aware of your own habit of doing positive things with and for your child without connecting it to desirable behavior. Take a moment and think of something positive that your child did in the recent past and connect it with the rewarding event or activity. Consider this simple example: It’s a nice day and you decide to take your child to the park. Here are two ways you could deliver the message: “Hey, it’s a nice day, let’s go to the park!” or “I really like the way you got ready for bed last night, let’s go to the park!” Take advantage of these frequently occurring opportunities to positively reinforce your child’s appropriate behaviors. In addition to effectively utilizing the activity or event (e.g., trip to the park) as a positive consequence for desirable (e.g., good bedtime) behavior, something else perhaps more important is also going

on. Look at your child's face; what you will see is a sense of pride and accomplishment. Not only is effective behavior training taking place, but your child is also developing a positive sense of self or a positive self-esteem. (We'll discuss the relationship between child discipline and self-esteem further in Chapter Seven.)

Provide positive feedback. As was previously discussed, providing children with negative feedback comes naturally, but providing positive feedback takes effort. It is, however, well worth the effort in terms of its results. **Positive feedback increases effective learning, improves self-esteem, and enhances the quality of our relationships.** As parents we often think it, but we don't usually say it. It is essential that we verbalize to our children what we like about their behaviors. This inevitably leads to their engaging in those behaviors more frequently. One common form of positive feedback is praise. We all need and want praise/encouragement. That is why it is so common for children to frequently present parents with their art projects to solicit their approval. There are those who believe that too much praise is bad. I have great difficulty with this notion. As long as the praise is sincere, appropriate and specific, I believe that it can only be beneficial. If your biggest problem as a parent is too much praise, then you must be doing very well! It is important, however, to focus the praise on the specific behavior or effort involved, not just on the child. Telling your child he is a good artist is not as motivating as commenting on a particular drawing or object within the drawing. It's simply more motivating and enhances skill development. So instead of saying, "You're a good boy for playing nicely with your sister," you might say, "You shared your toys nicely with your sister, that's great!". Giving specific positive feedback focuses the child on the specific behavior being encouraged. The other problem of course, is that if he doesn't play nicely with his sister then he is a "bad" boy; not the image that we want to convey. Both positive and negative feedback should focus on the behavior; not the child.

Empowerment

Providing your child with a voice in their own discipline plan is a form of empowerment. As parents, our natural tendency is to assert our power or control over our children. When our children try to undermine or question our authority, we typically react forcefully to maintain our position of power. These power struggles become even more volatile when our children become teenagers. We are also very reluctant to share our

authority with our children. This is often due to a fear of losing parental control. It is ironic because not sharing the power over discipline decisions, over time, eventually promotes disobedience and rebellion in teenagers.

When considering appropriate negative and positive consequences for your child, include their voice in the process. When appropriate, include some of their suggestions in your decision and work together towards improving their behavior. This is not to say that a family is a democracy. It is not. The family still functions as a monarchy. The parents are in charge and make the final decision. As a parent, however, you can still elicit your child's opinion and suggestions. This strategy results in a variety of benefits. First, empowering your child increases the likelihood of compliance. If your child has a voice in the plan, he/she is far more likely to put effort into its success. Tell your child that you're interested in his/her opinion and encourage your child to offer suggestions and ideas. Whenever possible, integrate their ideas into the discipline plan. For example instead of just imposing household chores, let them suggest or pick which chores they would prefer. If completing homework is a problem, encourage your child to help determine the best time, place, and procedures necessary to improve the situation. Secondly, the process creates more of a sense of being responsible for one's own actions. If a child has a voice in the discipline plan, there is an increased likelihood that the child will take more ownership of the behavior that is being discussed and consequently put more effort into changing it. (We will discuss the importance of teaching responsibility further in Chapter Seven.) It is also quite common that, when asked, children will impose harsher punishments on themselves than would their parents. If this sounds hard to believe, try it and see! When you're considering a punishment for your child's misdeeds, ask what they think the appropriate consequence should be. You may be surprised how punitive they are on themselves. Thus a third advantage of empowerment is that you can be perceived as a more benevolent dictator when you choose a consequence less harsh than what your child suggests! More importantly, you are nurturing your child's self-control, problem solving, and independent thinking skills. All of which are noticeably absent in aggressive, acting-out, rebellious teenagers. You need to gradually teach your child how to take increasing responsibility over managing his/her behavior, or risk a battle for control with a poorly equipped teenager. As we will see in Chapter Eight, utilizing empowerment strategies with teenagers becomes essential for effective parenting. Beginning this process at a young age will, in fact, pave the way for future success.

Step Five

Empower your child by including his/her opinion in discipline decisions. Wherever appropriate, include your child's suggestions in the discipline plan.

Chapter V. The Magic of Structured Activity Rewards

In the mumbo-jumbo of clinical psychology, every clinician has what's referred to as an orientation. This is basically the training philosophy of their graduate program. I was trained in a graduate program that emphasized a "cognitive-behavioral" orientation. Subsequently, the ideas expressed in this book are derived from a cognitive-behavioral framework.

Early in my professional career, I advised parents as my training dictated. I would say things like, "Be consistent" and "Ignore negative behavior". It wasn't very long before they would politely ask, "Dr. Hittelman, do you have any children of your own?" When I would respond that I did not have children, their eyes would glaze over and my advice was largely ignored. Frustrated, I went home to my wife and told her, "We must have a child, no one is listening to me at work!" My wife was very cooperative and we (she) eventually had our daughter. It was my daughter who really taught me what parenting was all about. As I evolved as a father and as a child psychologist, I began to realize that "behavior modification" was not as simple and straightforward as I was trained to believe it to be. The benefits were often short-lived and many subtle factors tended to sabotage the behavior modification plan. At the same time, it was becoming clearer to me that the common denominator in the vast majority of my "behavior problem" clients was parental attention. All of this led me to discover the magic of structured activity rewards.

When I first introduce the idea of using a type of behavior modification, parents often dismiss it by saying, "We've already tried that and it doesn't work; what else have you got?" This is because there are several common pitfalls which will effectively sabotage a behavior modification approach with children. These pitfalls include: using an overly complicated system (usually including grids and charts), choosing unmotivating "rewards", not including the child in the creation of the plan, no plan for phasing out the system, lack of clarity regarding the behaviors themselves, expecting perfection, bribing versus reinforcing and poor parental follow through.

The techniques outlined in the next two chapters are both simple and effective. In fact, the results are often immediate and dramatic. Chronic negative behaviors often improve within weeks! In addition, the technique can be used with a wide variety of undesirable behaviors. It is a structured approach which focuses the child on the desired behavior and provides fun activity rewards which are motivating to the child. As a result, the

child is also taught how to get parental attention in a more appropriate, positive fashion. This is very important, as most undesirable child behaviors are actually fueled by the parent's negative attention to those behaviors. To better illustrate this approach, consider the following case examples.

Alex, Age 6

Alex was a feisty, highly intelligent boy who was diagnosed with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and was on related medication. Children with ADHD display unusually high levels of inattention, impulsiveness, and hyperactivity for their age. As is often the case with very bright children, Alex was very manipulative. He had a history of aggressive behaviors which included biting others, as well as himself. What better way to get immediate and consistent negative attention! Alex's parents were seeking assistance for his increasingly unmanageable behaviors in school. His most recent exploit involved running out of the school building and climbing up a tree. When the school staff attempted to talk him down, he growled loudly!

During my first session with Alex, he explained to me that he liked biting himself when he was "bored and hungry". He smilingly reported behaving well in school "unless someone antagonizes me. Like if you antagonized me, I'll bite you!" Needless to say, I made every effort to stay on Alex's good side, as I'm sure others in his life felt compelled to do.

The next week, I met with Alex and his father, who informed me that the school began a point system to provide the parents with daily feedback regarding Alex's behavior. He could earn up to four points a day. We integrated this into our Structured Activity Rewards Contract (see Figure 1). As soon as Alex accumulated eight good behavior points, he earned a fun activity with Mom or Dad. To maximize motivation, we also included a "bonus for perfection". If Alex obtained four points every day in a school week, he got to choose an additional activity. The next week, parent reports indicated a good week in school, earning three points most days. This continued the following week and by the third week, Alex got his bonus for perfection. Because structured activity rewards allow highly manipulative children to be manipulative in a positive way, it is often quite effective. After five weeks, we increased the number of points required to twelve and eventually phased out the system completely.

Figure 1 .

Contract for Alex

When Alex gets 8 Good behavior points

Then he can choose a reward activity

Bonus!

If Alex has a perfect week

Then he can pick an extra activity.

Reward Activities

- Go to the lake
- Play a board game
- Play a card game
- Play Wiggle Bridge
- Play math games

Monica, Age 8

Monica was a socially sensitive, needy child who easily got into conflicts with her mother. Mom reported that Monica would experience anxieties/frustrations, take it out on her mother, who would then get angry at Monica. Later, her mother would feel guilty and try to make up. This scenario occurred repeatedly within their relationship. Consider how this behavioral sequence would result in and was being reinforced by so much negative attention.

One area of specific difficulty common to so many families is getting homework done. When it was homework time, Monica would engage in a variety of avoidant behaviors including: eating, fooling around, playing with her younger sister, etc. Her mother indicated that Monica would procrastinate until or through dinner and all the way up to and often past bedtime, requiring “hundreds” of reminders (or “yelling” according to Monica) to no avail. Mom tried “everything” including rewards like playing video games, which Monica loved, but then she would just rush through her homework in a haphazard fashion. Consequently, for the last year, Monica was not allowed to play video games during the week. In addition, Monica wanted to play with her friends after school, but couldn’t due to this time consuming negative homework ritual. This only compounded her social problems, by reducing her opportunities for needed socialization experiences.

We negotiated a Structured Activity Rewards Contract which addressed these issues (see Figure 2). If Monica did her homework well after dinner and before bedtime with no more than 3 reminders, she could play video games and be with her friends the next day. In addition, these good homework days would result in a fun activity with her mother or father. A week later, her mother reported that the contract was working “really well”, and Monica indicated that Mom was yelling less. While we addressed other therapeutic issues, homework continued to go well over the next 6 weeks at which time we were able to phase the contract out, as Monica had developed appropriate homework skills.

Figure 2.

Contract for Monica

When Monica does her homework well after dinner and before 8:15pm (no more than 3 reminders)

Then the next day Monica can play video games (1/2 hour) and play with her friends after school

Also 3 good homework day results in one of these fun activities:

Reward Activities

- Going out to ice cream
- Going bowling with Dad
- Dinner with Mom
- Playing video games with Mom
- Coffeehouse for tea and a muffin with Mom
- Softball with Dad
- Sleep over

Monica's signature

Mom's signature

Omar, Age 10

In our initial session, Omar presented as a respectful, well-mannered adolescent who was eager to please. He was referred for a very common problem which had manifested into a variety of unusual behaviors. His mother indicated that Omar was, “Scared of being alone and darkness. He needs to have somebody with him at all times when it’s dark”. Until age 3, Omar shared a room with his sister, who is one year older. “Then he became scared to sleep by himself.” This developed into a pattern of behavior in which Omar would initially fall asleep in his room and during the night, go into either his sister’s or parents’ room where he would remain until morning. Another set of behaviors also developed around the fear of being alone. Whenever Omar went to the bathroom or showered, one of his parents had to stand outside the door. In addition, Omar was fearful of going upstairs alone or washing the dishes downstairs alone. Keep in mind that these behaviors continued for many years. What precipitated their finally seeking treatment was Omar’s recent desire to go on sleepovers. It would have been awkward for Omar to ask his friend’s parents to stand outside the bathroom door! Despite his being highly motivated to conquer his fears, he was unable to break these behavioral patterns.

In our second session we discussed some basic cognitive-behavioral strategies to help cope with these fears. Omar learned a deep breathing technique to foster relaxation and created a calming statement of reassurance that he could repeat to himself. The following week we constructed a Structured Activity Rewards Contract (see Figure 3). We were able to move quickly in large part due to Omar’s motivational level. At his suggestion, we set a fairly challenging goal of 5 out of 7 “good” days. In addition, we added a “bonus for perfection”. Again, we utilized basic activity rewards with Mom or Dad. Two weeks later we met again and to my amazement, Omar proudly reported being successful every day! We revised the contract to 6 out of 7 days and one month later phased it out. Each subsequent week resulted in 6 or 7 good days. Once again consider the behavioral sequence. Consider the inordinate amount of parental time and attention that Omar’s problem behaviors resulted in. While it’s possible that the cognitive-behavioral techniques alone could have eventually gotten the same results, providing Omar with a way to earn positive parental attention insured rapid success.

Figure 3.

Contract for Omar

When Omar

- showers on his own (going upstairs with the door closed) 5 out of 7 days
- bathroom on his own (again with the door shut) 5 out of 7 days
- sleeps on his own (in own room and doesn't call anyone) 5 out of 7 days

Then Omar can choose one activity on Sunday

Activity

- | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| -Lake with Mom | -Go to mall with Mom |
| -Craft with Mom | -Gardening with Mom |
| -Build model with Dad | -Fishing with Dad |
| -Lake with Dad | -Bike ride with Dad |
| -Play catch with Dad | -Play a sport with Dad |

*****Bonus***** For a perfect week, Omar picks another activity

I have read and agree with this contract.

Omar's signature

Mom's signature

Dad's signature

Ryan, Age 5

Initial parent reports indicated that Ryan was a, “Perfect child for the first five years.” Four weeks earlier he had begun a new pre-kindergarten program. Since the first day of school, Ryan had been having increasing difficulties adjusting. It began with his dislike of a forty-five minute “sleepytime” toward the end of the school day. Ryan was not a napper and probably found sleepytime to be tedious and boring. His mother attempted to solve the problem by picking him up earlier, thus avoiding sleepytime altogether. To the parents’ dismay, his adjustment problems worsened. At this point Ryan resisted going to school at all, wanting only to be with his mother. Despite a prior history of positive and frequent socialization experiences, Ryan was having tantrums every morning before being forced to go to school.

Let’s stop for a moment and consider the behavioral sequence. Ryan’s initial adjustment difficulties result in leaving school early, to be with his mom. In addition, there were certainly countless talks with Ryan regarding his concerns, trying to soothe his fears. Not only do his adjustment problems increase, they now are unrelated to the initial issue of sleepytime. All of the adjustment difficulties do, however, have one thing in common. They all resulted in parental attention. While the parents may not be yelling or punishing, it is still negative attention in that it fuels and even escalates the undesirable behaviors.

After sharing my negative attention theory, Ryan’s parents were doubtful that this could apply to their son based upon his very well-adjusted first five years. Despite this, they agreed to try utilizing structured activity rewards and we created a contract for Ryan (see Figure 4). Ryan’s parents telephoned me prior to our two week follow-up appointment. They were pleasantly surprised to report that Ryan’s difficulties had dramatically improved and they would call back to reschedule if problems reoccurred. I spoke with them sometime later on a different issue and was told that their son’s school adjustment problems were much more infrequent (i.e., normal).

Figure 4.

Contract for Ryan

When Ryan has a good school morning (crying only in room, no grabbing Mom before school)

Then Ryan gets a Happy Point

2 Happy Points = 1 Reward Activity

Reward Activities

- Go out for pizza with Dad
- Go to grocery store with Dad
- Play a game with Dad
- Bike ride with Mom
- Go out with Mom/Dad for ice cream
- Go out with Mom/Dad for Chinese food

Bonus 5 Good Mornings = Clock

Jason, Age 11

Jason was also diagnosed with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Through prior therapeutic contacts and a good response to medication, his symptoms were kept under control. Jason's father had a variety of medical conditions which he had suffered with and, to his credit, learned to cope with fairly well. Approximately three months earlier, Jason's father had a sudden mysterious attack which left him temporarily paralyzed and seemingly, catatonic. His family, who was with him at the time, feared he was dead. While he completely recovered hours later, it was certainly a traumatic experience for everyone. This was particularly true for Jason. Ever since this incident, Jason insisted on constantly being with his father to make sure that he was all right. As his father put it, "He just won't leave me alone!" It had gotten to the point where Jason insisted his dad sleep with him in his room every night. Even the garage, which used to be Dad's private sanctuary was now always shared with Jason. While Jason and his dad previously always had a close relationship, he was driving his dad crazy!

This case is a good example of a very common behavioral process. Jason's initial concerns and behaviors were completely appropriate and understandable. The unanticipated consequence, however, of a significant increase in parental attention inadvertently fueled the behavior to a more dysfunctional level.

We agreed to utilizing a Structured Activity Rewards Contract, but given the dynamics of the case, all of the reward activities were with his father (see Figure 5). In our two week follow-up, his father was ecstatic to report eight good days. One month after initiating the contract, their relationship was returning to normal and both were forgetting to monitor the contract. In this case the system was successfully phased out "naturally".

Figure 5.

Contract for Jason

When Jason gives Dad his space for a day

- Not bother Dad in Garage after 8:00pm
- Dad sleeps in his own room

One warning per day for first week only!

Then Jason earns 1 Point

3 Points = 1 Activity Reward

Activity Rewards

- Buy a model
- Go fishing
- Go mineral mining
- Work on a project in garage
- Go to park, throw ball around
- Fly/work on a model plane
- Work on a model
- Rent a video game
- Play a board game

I read and agree with this contract

Dad's signature

Jason's signature

Taylor, Age 8

According to Taylor's parents, he "always" had a problem complying with their requests. They described him as, "very impulsive", "overemotional" and stated that he "tantrums whenever we discipline him". Even when he did comply it usually required at least 6 reminders and often, endless debates.

A review of Taylor's school records and early developmental history indicate that at age three he was diagnosed with speech/language delays and had a history of frequent ear infections. A pre-kindergarten screening noted specific weaknesses in auditory memory (remembering what you hear) and receptive language (understanding what is said to you). Taylor benefited from ongoing speech/language therapy and was reported to currently be within the normal range for his age. While "not listening" is easily one of the most common child disciplinary issues, it is quite possible that Taylor's noncompliance was initially a function, at least in part, of his real language difficulties. I hoped that an effective structured activity rewards contract would give him the extra motivation needed to break these very early habits and foster new skill development.

We negotiated our Structured Activity Rewards Contract (see Figure 6). For each parental request, Taylor was allowed one reminder. Three good days would earn him an activity reward. At our two week update session, Taylor had earned eleven good days out of fourteen. I was pleasantly surprised with his progress. Considering his developmental history, his parents were also very pleased with his progress, but did mention that he often waits for his one reminder. To address this issue, Taylor and his parents added a bonus reward of money, which reportedly Taylor wanted more than anything, for needing no reminders. Preferring activity over monetary rewards, I reluctantly agreed to this revision (see Figure 6). The following week Taylor had accumulated six more good days, three of which were bonus days of no reminders. Mom confided that the days without reminders took so much effort on Taylor's part that she had succumbed to the fact that he just needs a reminder or two. His success continued and we phased out the contract after five weeks.

Figure 6.

Contract for Taylor

When Taylor does what is parents ask him to do all day

Then Taylor will earn one (1) point

Reminders! Taylor is allowed one (1) reminder for each request

Three (3) points = one(1) activity reward

Bonus!! 1 Day no reminders = 25cents/3 in a row = \$1

Activity Rewards

- Go for a drive to see a relocated friend
- Draw or paint with Mom
- Build something with Dad, like racetrack
- Go to a movie with Mom or Dad
- Play Monopoly with Dad
- Go to Blockbuster to rent a movie or game
- Go out to eat with Mom or Dad
- Go out for ice cream/frozen yogurt

I have read and agree with this contract

Taylor's signature Mom's signature Dad's signature

Matthew, age 6

In 1992, a significant earthquake rocked southern California at approximately 5:30 in the morning, waking most of us. Matthew, like most children (and adults!) became quite frightened. To help Matthew feel more secure, his parents allowed him to spend the remainder of the night with them in their bed. In my opinion, this was a completely appropriate response. The next night, Matthew awoke at 2:00 am and asked to sleep with his parents again due to his continuing earthquake fears. As you may have guessed, this pattern continued for days which turned into weeks. Consider the behavioral sequence which, of course, culminates in enormous parental attention. Attention which, while initially quite appropriate, was now fueling Matthew's earthquake anxiety behaviors. Keep in mind that Matthew's fears were also initially appropriate. Inadvertently fueled by parental contact/attention, his fears became more severe and maladaptive.

Matthew's parents reported that he was always a worrier. He was even easily startled as an infant. Consequently, Matthew may have also been more predisposed to having anxiety difficulties.

As our initial session was ending, I began to feel somewhat anxious myself as I was going away on a two week vacation the next day and Matthew's parents were desperate. With great reluctance, I agreed to meet with Matthew later that day and quickly formulated a Structured Activity Rewards Contract with the family. I like to work quickly, but not that fast! We were, however, able to complete our contract later that day. The system encouraged staying in his bed, but even if he came in once, he was still rewarded (see figure 7). If he came in more than once, his parent's would simply help him back to bed. He could not, however, stay in his parents' room. Right before the family left, Matthew looked up at me and his eyes watered up. He then quietly said, "I don't think this is going to work." At that moment I was afraid that because I had moved too quickly, he would be right. At our two week follow-up session, we reviewed Matthew's progress. During the first five days, Matthew visited his parents repeatedly on three nights and only once on two nights (thus earning two points). Then to everyone's amazement, Matthew remained in his room the following nine nights! Matthew proudly indicated that he did wake up on some of those nights but was able to deal with it on his own. We then proceeded to revise/phase out the contract (see Figure 8).

I met with the family two years later about some compliance difficulties and was told that there was no reoccurrence of these earthquake anxiety/behaviors.

Figure 7.

Contract for Matthew

When Matthew stays in his bed all night

Then he will get 3 smiley faces

If Matthew only gets out of bed one time

Then he will get 1 smiley face

Activity Rewards (5 Smiley faces)

- Wild Animal Park
- Sea World
- Zoo
- Ice skating
- Buy and play with bow and arrow
- Marine Museum

Figure 8.

New Contract for Matthew

When Matthew stays in his bed all night

Then he will get 1 star

Activity Rewards (5 Stars)

- Wild Animal Park
- Sea World
- Zoo
- Ice skating
- Buy and play with bow and arrow
- Marine Museum
- Go to a movie
- Stay up 1/2 hour late
- Bowling
- Go to tide pool

Cindy, Age 7

Cindy presented as a sweet, friendly child whose eyes sparkled when she smiled. In reviewing her case history with her parents, she seemed to almost be the perfect child. Cindy adjusted “extremely well” to school, which she still “loves”. Her interactions with peers were observed to be “excellent”. Her parents also indicated that she was “very responsible” and she even willfully helped with chores! You may ask, “Why bring her to a psychologist?”

Cindy was referred for chronic bed wetting. She was toilet trained at age two and had no accidents until age five. For the last two years, however, she wet her bed almost every night. Cindy’s father left very early each morning for work. Prior to leaving, he would check on Cindy. If she wet her bed he would wake her up, change her sheets, and put her back to bed. Her medical history indicated frequent urinary tract infections, which were probably a contributing factor. At age six, Cindy went to a urologist for a comprehensive medical evaluation and was even placed on medication for a year. Despite this, however, her frequent bedwetting continued. Not sure what else to do, the urologist sent her to me.

At that time the most effective treatment for bedwetting was a device called a “Pad and Bell”. To use the device, the pad is placed under the bed sheet and is attached to a bell next to the bed. Any moisture that touches the pad completes a circuit which activates a loud bell. The theory is that this trains children who are usually heavy sleepers, to be more aware of the body sensations that wake us up when we have to go to the bathroom at night. (I’ve always wondered how this classical conditioning tool affects its subjects later in life. When they hear a door bell, do they get the urge to go to the bathroom?) I discussed this approach with Cindy’s parents and located a pharmacy which sold the pad and bell device.

Prior to purchasing the pad and bell, I suggested that we assess motivational factors by setting up a Structured Activity Rewards Contract. I explained to Cindy’s parents that I didn’t expect the contract to help much, but I wanted to see if increasing her motivation would have any effect at all. We also explained to Cindy that we’d try it and if it didn’t work, it was no big deal. We constructed a contract that included daily rewards and bonus rewards for multiple dry nights (see Figure 9). We met a week later and to everyone’s surprise, Cindy was dry five out of seven nights! The following week she was dry seven nights straight! During the next week, Cindy only had one wet night. At this point we began phasing out by modifying the contract (see Figure 10). Cindy was also required now to change her own sheets. Approximately six weeks after initiating the contract, we phased it out completely.

One month later, Cindy continued to have all dry nights. I couldn't help but wonder if the daily one-on-one attention from Dad each morning inadvertently fueled the behavior.

Interestingly enough, her parents began to notice an increase in attention seeking /defiant behaviors from this seemingly "perfect" child. While she was staying dry at night, she was getting more "pissed-off" during the day! We addressed these issues in subsequent family therapy sessions.

Figure 9.

Contract for Cindy

If Cindy has a dry night

Then she can choose 1 daily reward

Daily Rewards

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| -Lunch at school | -Time alone with Mom or Dad |
| -Later bedtime | -15 minutes in parents' bed |
| -Dad's seat for dinner | -Sleeping on the floor |

Bonus! 2 Dry nights = 1 Bonus

3 Dry nights = 2 Bonuses

4 Dry nights = 3 Bonuses

Bonus Rewards

- | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| -Nails with Mom | -New notebook |
| -Mom cleans her room | -New markers |
| -Front car seat on weekend | -New book |
| -Bath with Mom | -Mermaid cards |
| -Ice cream with Dad | -Having a friend over |

I have read and agree to this contract

Dad's signature

Cindy's signature

Figure 10.

New Contract for Cindy

When Cindy has two dry nights

Then she can choose 1 special reward

Special Rewards

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| -Lunch at school | -Time alone with Mom or Dad |
| -Later bedtime | -15 minutes in parents' bed |
| -Dad's seat for dinner | -Sleeping on the floor |

Bonus! 3 Dry nights = 1 Bonus

4 Dry nights = 2 Bonuses

5 Dry nights = 3 Bonuses

Bonus Rewards

- | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| -Nails with Mom | -New notebook |
| -Mom cleans her room | -New markers |
| -Front car seat on weekend | -New book |
| -Bath with Mom | -Mermaid cards |
| -Ice cream with Dad | -Having a friend over |

I have read and agree to this contract

Dad's signature

Cindy's signature

These case histories attest to the powerful impact of systematically shifting parental attention from negative to positive. It is important to point out, however, that these seemingly simple contracts were carefully constructed to maximize their chances of success. The next chapter will provide you with everything you need to know to construct an effective Activity Rewards Contract for your child. The key element to this system is the use of parental attention which fuels the child's motivation to practice the desirable behavior(s).

Step Six

Use your most powerful reward to systematically shape your child's appropriate behaviors - your time and attention.

Chapter VI. Creating Your Own Activity Rewards Contract

In this chapter you will be given step by step instructions on how to construct your own Activity Rewards Contract. It is important, however, to first understand the purpose of this strategy. The most common parental misconception about behavioral contracts is that they are a form of bribery and a parent shouldn't have to "pay" their child to do what is expected of them. The purpose of the contract is not to bribe your child to behave appropriately. Remember that a bribe is a payment for doing something wrong, not right. More importantly, the purpose of the Activity Rewards Contract is to ensure initial practice of the behavior(s) that we are encouraging the child to learn. While initial practicing of a new skill is essential to the acquisition of that skill, it is often difficult and awkward at first. Think about when you first learned how to drive. The first time you got on the freeway was overwhelming and you were probably doubtful that you would ever be able to master it. After practicing this skill, however, you now occasionally pass your exit on the freeway because the skill has become so automatic. When we learn to drive, our internal desire naturally motivates us to improve through practice. **Motivation and practice are essential ingredients towards learning new skills and behaviors.** For children needing to improve their behavior, however, there is often an initial lack of motivation and subsequent practice of the skills required. Using structured activity rewards solves this problem. In addition, using parental time and attention as the primary incentive serves to enhance the parent-child relationship and improves the parent's overall discipline technique. The system, then, attempts to retrain both child and parent. As you will see, it is basically a structured way to catch your child being good.

Structured activity rewards can be used effectively with children generally ranging in age from approximately two to thirteen years. For children under the age of two, the previous strategies discussed in Chapters Two and Four can easily be adapted to their age level. For teenagers, a modified approach is outlined in Chapter Eight.

While the system itself is quite simple, there are a variety of subtle factors which can potentially sabotage the Activity Rewards Contract. That is why it is important for you to follow the step by step instructions provided. These sequenced steps have been carefully constructed over years of clinical trial and error. Your careful adherence to them will assure maximum benefit.

1. **Decide on the specific target behavior.**

Before deciding on the specific behavior to be modified, you must first be able to answer the following questions: What are the specific observable elements of the behavior? If properly motivated, does my child have the ability or skills necessary to improve this behavior?

In order for the contract to be effective, the specific behavior must be clearly defined in both the parent's and child's minds. When you are initially considering a specific behavior, it is extremely useful to observe both the appropriate and inappropriate behavior when it occurs. Specifically, look for the various elements of the overall behavior and write them down. Let's assume, for example, that your target behavior is using good table manners. Chances are that the term "good table manners" will be defined differently by you and your child. Therefore, it is important to consider the specific elements of this behavior which may include: using utensils not hands, saying please and thank you, not playing with your food, etc. Once you have an exhaustive list of these behavioral elements, note which ones are most important to you and initially focus on just those. Otherwise, what usually happens is the child focuses on certain elements of the behavior while the parent repeatedly points out additional elements that are also expected. This inevitably results in everyone becoming angry and frustrated, thus sabotaging the efforts made. That's why the request to "clean your room" often results in parent-child conflicts; dramatically different definitions of what it means to clean your room. I remember many related conflicts with my daughter after she discovered the previously empty space under her bed! Pushing everything imaginable under her bed, fit her definition of a clean room. Whenever I set up a behavioral contract with parent and child, I always make sure that they agree on a clear and precise definition of the target behavior. You need to do the same. But now is not the time to discuss the behavior with your child. That comes later.

It is also important that your child possess the potential skills and abilities necessary to improve the target behavior. This is another reason to first observe the target behavior, particularly the desirable or appropriate execution of the behavior. If your child is able to complete their homework appropriately, even if it's rare, they apparently do have the potential skills and abilities to appropriately complete the task. If, on the other hand, your child has Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and cannot focus for more than five minutes at a time, the target behavior needs to be modified in order to make it realistic and achievable. It is also important to keep in mind that developmentally, children's abilities and skills increase as they get older. It would be naïve, therefore, to have the same expectations

of a seven and ten year old. If your child is clearly lacking in a certain skill area, then you must first focus on only that skill as the target behavior. Using the above example, the initial target behavior could be: successfully focusing on homework for at least six minutes at a time. The other exception is, as we will discuss further in Chapter Nine, if the child has significant emotional problems which override their sincere desire to comply. While this does occur, in my clinical experience it is rarely the case. Most often, in fact, children do have the prerequisite skills and abilities for the desirable behaviors, they simply lack the motivation and practice. It is quite common, for example, for parents to sheepishly report that their child's inappropriate behavior problems at home are non-existent in school. I always view this as a very positive indicator because it demonstrates that the child does have the prerequisite skills and abilities necessary; they just lack the motivation to practice these behaviors at home!

Once you have clearly defined the elements of the target behavior and determined that it is achievable for your child, you're ready to proceed to the next step.

2. Brainstorm fun activities with your child.

It is crucial to have this discussion with your child at a nice time when you're both getting along well. Discussing this right after the undesirable behavior has occurred is not the right time. Remember that this technique focuses on positive attention and desirable behavior. The atmosphere within which we want to have this discussion also needs to be positive. Otherwise, instead of being an active, positive participant, your child will be negative, defensive and reluctant. That is why we continue to postpone discussing the target behavior until later. Remember that because parenting is an impossible job to always do well, we must use every tool at our disposal! So...you're both sitting at your favorite fast food restaurant, enjoying various toxic delights. You begin the conversation by saying, "You know what? I think we need to do more fun things together!" After your stunned child gets up off the floor, you continue by saying, "Let's write down as many fun activities as we can!" It is crucial here that you make every effort to get these ideas from your child, not yourself. This is another common mistake that parents make. They think of rewards for their kids because they know them so well. Believe it or not, there are simple, fun activities that you did with your child in the past that they loved and you probably don't even remember. There were several examples of this in Chapter Five; Alex wanted to go to the lake, Monica wanted to go to the coffeehouse with her mom for tea and a muffin, Omar wanted to build a model with Dad, Ryan wanted to go food shopping, Jason wanted to work on a project in

the garage, Taylor wanted to build a racetrack, Matthew wanted to go to the Marine Museum, and Cindy wanted to sit in Dad's seat at the dinner table! All of these activities are simple, easy to do and most importantly, highly motivating, but would have eluded their parents had we not asked the children themselves. So encourage your child to think of as many fun activities as possible.

If there are siblings, it is important that whenever possible the activity only include that child and parent. This ensures that the child will receive maximum one-on-one attention and not have the experience diluted or sabotaged by a brother or sister. If siblings get jealous, set up a separate contract for them. Even the "good child" has something to work on! If, however, the target behavior involves sibling interaction, then the contract can be for both or all the children. The reward can be a group reward, earned cooperatively by the children.

Encourage brainstorming by writing all of your child's ideas down, even if they're unrealistic. If their ideas are all too expensive, time-consuming, etc. write them down but you might say something like, "All right, but what about activities we could do every day?" After your child is out of ideas, offer some of your own suggestions but don't push them on the child. If they approve of your ideas, write them down too. After you are both out of suggestions, go back and, with consideration and tact, remove the ones that are clearly unrealistic. You then want to go over the remaining list and ask your child, "Which ones are great and which ones are just OK?" Hopefully, you will be able to refine your list to at least 6 - 8 great activities. If all is going well, your child will be excited and eager to do those fun activities. Now is the time to discuss the behavior.

3. Discuss the specific behavior with your child.

Using the information that you have previously gathered regarding the specific elements of the target behavior, you are now ready to introduce the overall strategy to your child. You want to present the idea in positive terms and empower the child by asking if it sounds like a good idea. For example, you might say something like this, "I really want to do those fun things with you too, but you know how angry I get when you (undesirable behavior)? Well, I want to help you with that. How about if we make a deal? If you try harder to (elements of target behavior) then I'll (fun activity list)!" If you've proceeded correctly thus far, your child should be eager to participate at this point. If your child is hesitant, try to elicit the reason behind the hesitation and provide the reassurance needed or make the necessary modifications.

4. **Negotiate the terms of the contract together.**

The two most common parental mistakes made at this point are expecting perfection and overcommitting yourself. If your child appropriately completes his homework one out of five days, it's unrealistic to immediately expect five out of five. So to say, "If you do your homework well all week, on the weekend we'll do a fun activity", is probably a recipe for anger, frustration and failure. Make sure your expectations are realistic, not perfectionistic. Similarly, be realistic about your ability to do your part. While it's great to say you'll give your child an activity reward every day following the target behavior, assuming he/she does well, you will frustrate them by not following through. I typically suggest one activity reward for two to four "good days" and no, they don't have to be "in a row". If for some reason the specific behavior requires shooting for perfection or consecutive days, you can add them as bonuses (see Figures 1, 3 and 6).

It is important to be clear about your goal. As you can see from the previous case histories, many of these behaviors are exaggerations of what would be considered "normal". It's normal for children to be defiant, annoying, fearful, or angry. The goal then is not to "cure" the child, but to **reduce the frequency and intensity of the undesirable behavior**. It's normal for children to resist doing their homework occasionally, but it's a problem when it results in nightly fights that go on for hours. It is important, therefore, to be realistic about the goal and more specifically your expectations. This is also true regarding reminders. Initially, I usually suggest that the child be allowed at least one reminder. This is also included in the contract.

The actual format of the contract is quite simple. A sample of a blank Activity Rewards Contract is provided in Figure 11.

Figure 11.

Contract For (Child's name)

If/When...Target behavior (elements of behavior)

Then...Earns 1 (Point, Star, Happy face, etc.)

(Points/stars/happy faces, etc.) = 1 Activity Reward

Activity Rewards

- | | |
|----|----|
| 1. | 5. |
| 2. | 6. |
| 3. | 7. |
| 4. | 8. |

Bonus, if any

Reminder rule, if any

I have read and agree with this contract.

Child's signature

Parent's signature

Parent's signature

The contract can be hand written. It doesn't need to be fancy, just clear. The contract usually lives on the refrigerator door. In any case, it should be accessible to parent and child. For younger children, you can use a simplified version with drawings or pictures. Encourage the child to make it with you. Several years ago a couple in a parenting class I was teaching had a volatile 2 ½ year-old who loved trains. They creatively adapted the techniques to meet their needs. They drew a train track with three 'stops' and at the end were basic drawings of different fun activities. They cut out a train and for each morning that their son didn't hit, the train moved to a station. After three good days he chose a reward activity. He completely understood and they had great success! Above all else, keep it as simple and clear as possible.

5. Review the contract together and make corrections where needed.

This is your opportunity to go over what you've written down with your child and make sure that it is clear and agreeable to both of you. Even if your child indicates that it is understood, have your child explain to you how it works. This is the only way that you'll know it's understood. If anything needs to be changed or clarified, now is the time to do it.

In addition, this is a good time to discuss the activity rewards. Your child needs to understand that you may not always be able to give them their first choice and that you'll try to do it as soon as possible but probably not immediately.

6. Read and sign the contract.

If the child is old enough to write their name, I would suggest that everyone involved sign the contract. While signing the contract is, of course, largely symbolic, it does create a sense of commitment. It also increases the chances that all who are involved have actually read it.

7. Encourage success; be the "good coach".

Remember that our typical response would be to say very little on good days and too much on bad ones. Be aware of this and put deliberate effort into encouraging your child. Think about the good coach at the Olympics. If their gymnast fell off the high bar, would they say, "How many times have I told you to grab on tight?" Obviously not! They want to encourage successful performances in the future, not discourage their athletes and reduce their confidence. Try to be the "good coach" with your child using statements of encouragement like: "Good luck with your contract today, I really think you can do it!" or "I

hope you have a good day today, I'm really looking forward to going to the park with you!", etc. If your child has a bad day, you might say: "I think tomorrow is going to be a good day!" If it's possible, start your child off with their first good day on the day you initially complete the contract. This is a great way to immediately shift into a more positive mode and increase your child's optimism regarding their ability to earn their reward. Encouragement will increase your odds and theirs for success.

8. Monitor progress.

It is important to keep a record of your child's progress. I recommend a simple calendar with one box for each day. Since we are focusing on the positive, mark only the good days with a check, star, sticker, happy face, etc. Simply leave the other days blank. If possible, have the child keep track of their performance, with your assistance. Put a line through the good days which are traded in for activity rewards. In addition to managing the contract, record keeping can also be useful in uncovering patterns. Maybe Mondays are particularly difficult. If so, consider why that may be and what can be done to improve it. In addition, the checks, stars, happy faces often become rewarding in and of themselves.

9. Follow-up as soon as possible with activity rewards.

Whenever I set up a behavioral contract I always try to meet with the family one to two weeks later for a follow-up session. This allows me to assess their progress and revise the contract as needed. On rare occasions the child simply has not put any effort into performing the target behavior. This may be due to the activity rewards not being motivational enough, which can be discussed and revised. The more frequent problem, however, is that the parents simply have not followed through. In these cases, the behavior contract may back fire, increasing the child's anger and disobedience. That is why it is critical for you to be realistic regarding the activity rewards that you agree to and responsible with your commitment to provide the activity reward as soon as possible. Otherwise, using the Structured Activity Rewards Contract is probably not going to benefit you or your child. On the other hand, making a time investment in your child's life will enhance your relationship with or without a behavioral contract. In any case, following through will motivate your child to improve his/her behavior and improve the quality of your relationship. I can't think of a better way for parents to use their time than that.

10. Revise the contract as needed.

Once you both sign the contract, any revisions must be done together. And, if at all possible, mutually agreeable. I usually suggest an initial time-limit of one to two weeks. At that point you can decide together to continue, discontinue, or revise the contract. When reviewing the child's progress with the contract, initial emphasis is placed upon the child's accomplishments or efforts. Following this, any troubleshooting of difficulties can be pursued collaboratively. The goal here is to work cooperatively on making any needed changes to the contract in a mutually agreeable way.

11. When appropriate, phase out the contract.

After 4 - 6 weeks of good progress, it is important to begin phasing out the contract. Remember that the goal of the activity rewards contract is to motivate the child to practice the target behavior. After 4 - 6 weeks of good progress, the child can begin to be expected to demonstrate the desired behavior without the same level of incentive. Thus we begin phasing out the contract by increasing the number of good days required to earn the reward activities. In Chapter Five, Figures 8 and 10 are examples of revised contracts. Usually after 2 - 3 weeks of revised contracts, the system can be phased out completely. While parents are often worried about their child's reaction to this, the child is typically proud of his/her accomplishments and willing to phase out the contract. If the child is anxious to continue, setting up a new target behavior can be considered. It is important to phase out the contract, as the practiced behavior is now expected and no longer dependent upon the incentive or reward. If the contract is not phased out, then the child may eventually conclude that the only reason to engage in the desired behavior is to earn the reward. In addition, the reward will eventually become old and uninteresting as it loses its novelty. This is often referred to as the "Novelty Effect".

It is also common to see the contract phase out "naturally" after 4 - 6 weeks of improved behavior; the new skill simply becomes a part of the child's behavioral repertoire and everyone begins to "forget" about the contract altogether. This is not a problem, as long as the child has acquired the new skill through practice. It is still important, however, to continue to spontaneously try and catch your child being good when engaging in the target behavior.

While it requires some effort on your part, the benefits of structured activity rewards are worth it. Just take it a step at a time and the chances are good that you will be pleased with the results.

Chapter VII. Building Self-esteem by Teaching Responsibility

As parents we all want our children to have high self-esteem; a positive concept about themselves. In clinical practice, self-esteem is one of the most common parental concerns. How to improve a child's self-esteem, however, can often be an elusive challenge. There are many books about self-esteem, along with a number of theories on how self-esteem develops. As you may have guessed, I have my own view of self-esteem and its development. Unlike some of the discrete behaviors that we have discussed thus far, self-esteem is not an attribute that can be quickly modified or improved. That is because our self-esteem develops, or evolves, slowly over the course of our lifetime. So while it's never too late to work on improving self-esteem, you may not observe the benefits immediately.

At its heart, self-esteem is primarily a compilation of sensory feedback that we receive from our environment regarding ourselves. To a large degree, for example, we see ourselves through the eyes of those around us. Particularly those whose opinions are valued by us. Intertwined with self-esteem is what is known as self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is our sense of our own performance on various tasks or competence in different life circumstances. So, for example, my self-efficacy as a psychologist is fairly high, because I've experienced many successes in my career. My self-efficacy as a water skier, however, is quite poor because my limited experiences have been ...well...let's just say it didn't work out! The totality of my experiences of success and failure contribute to my overall concept of self or my self-esteem. To summarize, then, self-esteem is the collective feedback that we receive from our environment, others, as well as ourselves, regarding our adequacies and successes in the course of our lives.

For children, the initial and perhaps most significant providers of feedback are, as you may have guessed, parents. I would suggest that ultimately our most important responsibility as parents is to foster within our child a positive self-image. Before you start feeling too guilty, however, keep in mind that children also receive feedback from many other sources in their environment. Some of these sources are: Peers, siblings, teachers, relatives, neighbors, events, in addition to their own perceptions of themselves and their performance in the world. Consider, for example, children who are learning disabled. It is quite common for learning disabled children to have problems with their self-esteem. Why? Primarily because the feedback that they receive regarding their performance from their environment (school) is one of poor performance and failure. Despite the best of

intentions from parents and teachers, learning disabled children experience frustration and performance difficulties on a daily basis. Does this mean that all learning disabled children are doomed to have low self-esteem? Definitely not. In my twelve years as a school psychologist, I had the opportunity to work with and evaluate hundreds of learning disabled students. Despite their challenges, many of these students had a high degree of self-esteem. Consider the following examples.

Jaret, Age 11

Jaret was a boy who had a history of difficulties in school. Intellectual testing revealed a below average IQ, due in part to significant learning disabilities. While it is unclear that IQ tests are true measures of intelligence, we do know that they highly correlate with academic success. In other words, a child with an accurately low IQ score will have difficulty in school. Jaret's parents were very dedicated to helping their son and put great effort in assisting him as best they could. Despite this, however, they were limited as to how helpful they could be with his school success. While Jaret always found schoolwork frustrating, he demonstrated good athletic potential. His parents wisely observed and nurtured his athletic skills. He continued to improve and was active in hockey and football. Jaret was an asset to his teams and received many accolades (positive feedback). His experience of his athletic successes helped to compensate for his academic failures and significantly contributed to his overall self-esteem.

Mitchell, Age 10

Mitchell, who attended a private school for children with severe learning and emotional problems, was referred to me by his teacher for constantly blurting out inappropriate jokes during class time. Mitchell was a unique child and had very unusual ideas about himself. He strongly believed that he had special super human powers and was chosen by God to one day be the ruler of his own kingdom. He was consumed by these delusions and spent most of his free time methodically planning out every detail of this future world. I hypothesized that Mitchell's self-esteem in reality was so poor, that he needed to escape to this fantasy world where he was the center of his imagined universe. Not surprisingly, his jokes were often quite obtuse and poorly received. I needed to devise a treatment intervention in which Mitchell would be motivated to improve his classroom behavior and find more appropriate ways to secure peer acceptance and approval.

Coincidentally, I had recently completed a stand-up comedy adult-education class. In our initial session, I introduced myself and then showed him a videotape of my “graduation performance”. Mitchell was mesmerized by the strong audience reaction that I received (I neglected to mention to him that the audience consisted of every friend and relative I had). In any event, I suggested to him that if he worked with me on improving his classroom behavior, I would help him develop a comedy routine for the school’s talent show. His behavior dramatically improved and, despite his parents’ reservations regarding my unusual approach, he went on to perform his routine with great success. We developed a close relationship and while I could never shake Mitchell of his delusional thinking, he did promise me a position of great prominence in his future kingdom. More importantly, this opportunity gave Mitchell a memorable non-delusional success experience which helped improve his feelings about himself. I spoke periodically with Mitchell and his family over the years. Unfortunately, despite trials on various medications, his delusional thinking continued into young adulthood. The important point however is that even with all of his problems, Mitchell was able to improve his feelings about himself through this very real success experience.

Tony, Age 11

Tony, a fifth grader, was referred to me for his three-year re-evaluation as required by special education law. As is often the case with learning disabled students, his testing profile revealed significant weaknesses, as well as relative strengths. In Tony’s case, his most severe deficits were in language areas, which are unfortunately the primary learning skills required in school. He had unusually high scores, however, on visual-motor tasks. Not surprisingly, Tony loved to take things apart, and, unlike myself as a child, was able to put them back together again with great ease. His parents reported, for example, that he had taken apart, repaired, and rebuilt their lawn mower! Unfortunately, these kind of motor skills are not part of the elementary school curriculum which is based heavily on language skills (i.e., reading, writing, spelling, etc.). Tony’s parents were concerned about his self-esteem. I urged them to involve him in as many visual-motor activities as possible. These might include: woodworking, model building, bicycle repair, Legos, puzzles, etc. This would increase Tony’s opportunities for success experiences as well as positive internal (self) and external (others) feedback, thereby helping to improve his overall self-esteem.

These examples highlight the importance of success experiences and their contribution to higher levels of self-esteem. A feeling of pride in our accomplishments is a key ingredient to developing a positive self-image. Like the learning disabled, all of us have a range of skill levels and abilities. Everyone has unique strengths and weaknesses. This holds true for children of any age, as well as adults. Focusing on our successes and trying to be accepting of our failures and limitations, contributes to higher levels of self-esteem. As parents there are a variety of ways that we can increase our child's opportunities to experience success.

Step Seven

Improve your child's self-esteem by helping to create success experiences.

One way to increase your child's opportunities for success, is to follow the suggestions outlined in this book! Positive discipline strategies provide your child with a variety of potential success experiences. Focusing on behavioral successes through the use of positive feedback, activity rewards, etc., allows these experiences to be an investment in your child's developing sense of self. As parents we often experience feelings of love, pride, excitement, and joy about our children and their accomplishments. Unfortunately we infrequently verbalize these feelings to our children. It is important to put those feelings into words and share them with your child in the way of feedback about their behaviors, efforts, and successes. Parental pride is wasted if not shared on some level with your child.

Consider the impact of predominantly negative discipline strategies on a child's self-esteem. Given the usual ratio of low positive / high negative feedback, our children are perhaps doomed to experience feelings of low self-esteem. While this is clearly unintentional on the parent's part, the problematic results seem inevitable. It is important to keep in mind, however, that children do require negative feedback from time to time for their inappropriate or undesirable behaviors. So then, what is the solution? The solution is to balance the negative feedback with the addition of positive feedback whenever appropriate. When the vast majority of external feedback is negative, our self-esteem clearly is at risk.

Another way to help your child develop higher self-esteem, is by teaching your child to provide internal positive feedback. This is when your child provides himself/herself with positive feedback about their own behaviors, efforts, and successes. This is accomplished, in part, by internalizing what is said by others. For example, if you're often told by significant others that you're a good baseball player, there's an increased likelihood that you will

eventually internalize that feedback. “I believe that I am a good baseball player”. Another approach, however, is to process and help your child develop positive self-statements. Let’s say your child cleans up his/her toys without being asked. Hopefully, you remember to catch your child being good and provide positive feedback. In addition to that you can help your child internalize this experience with positive self-statements by processing it together:

Dad: Tommy! Thanks for cleaning up your toys all by yourself; I appreciate it!

Tommy (smiles): You’re welcome.

Dad: How does it make you feel when you clean up without me reminding you?

Tommy: OK, I guess. I’m happy that you’re proud of me.

Dad: Are you proud of yourself?

Tommy: I guess.

Dad: Why?

Tommy: Well, because I did it on my own without you asking.

Dad: That’s right! So besides me being proud of you it’s also a nice feeling to be proud of yourself.

Tommy: Yeah, I guess so.

While younger children may have difficulty understanding relatively complex concepts like self-pride, it’s useful to stimulate these thought processes. It’s like planting healthy seeds which, with nurturance, will develop and grow. Encouraging your child to generate and internalize positive self-statements will enhance their developing self-esteem. It is also important to feel good about our efforts even if we do not succeed or accomplish our goals. This is why, for example, when I assist parents with their children’s school motivation, I recommend focusing on the child’s effort more so than their grades. The old notion of “just trying your best” continues to be a wise concept to adhere to. So the next time you look at your child’s report card, besides focusing less on the C’s and D’s and more on the A’s and B’s, concentrate on the “effort” column. My belief is that motivation is much more important than intelligence in school success, as well as success in life.

When our feedback to our children is primarily negative, there is little opportunity to internalize positive self-statements. One consequence of this is that we develop difficulties in accepting compliments from others. We may do something successfully and people congratulate us, yet we don’t really feel an internal sense of accomplishment. It is the result

of years of predominantly negative feedback from our environment that we then internalize. No wonder compliments make so many of us suspicious!

It is often the case that, because so much of their feedback is negative, children develop strategies to avoid taking responsibility for their behavior. This is actually an effort to protect their tenuous self-image from further assault, like an emotional survival mechanism. The most common avoidance strategy is what is known as projecting blame. Children are notorious for blaming others for their mistakes. Excessive avoidance of responsibility for one's behavior can result in a number of problematic issues. In the most extreme cases, avoiding self-responsibility often leads to incarceration. Jails are full of irresponsible people with low self-esteem who blame others for their predicament. The more common problem with avoiding responsibility for one's behavior is not learning from one's mistakes. Since it's not your fault in the first place, you have nothing to correct!

Using positive discipline techniques naturally fosters a sense of responsibility in our children for their behavior, along with pride in their accomplishments and an enhanced self-esteem. In addition, the higher one's self-esteem, the easier it is to accept responsibility for faults and mistakes. Only after we accept responsibility for our behavior can we truly take pride in or change it. It all works together. That is why teaching children responsibility through effective positive discipline techniques serves to improve their behavior as well as their overall self-esteem.

To identify additional ways to improve your child's self esteem, let's take a closer look at the elements that are involved in behaving responsibly: knowing and following the rules, making independent judgments, and problem solving skills.

Knowing and following the rules. Children are not born knowing the rules. We have to teach them and there are usually many rules to learn; clean up after yourself, don't hit others, do your homework before you play, be in bed by 8:30, etc. Parents often assume that their child knows better, when they are often unclear about some of the rules and why they're important. At a nice moment, have your child verbalize what some of the specific rules are and discuss them together. This is the best way for a parent to be clear about their child's understanding. It is also wise to prioritize and, where possible, minimize the number of rules in order to maximize your child's understanding of these rules and their importance. Too many rules blur their relative importance. Focus your child on the important ones. By using appropriate positive and negative consequences as we have outlined previously you will optimize your child's learning and following of the rules.

Making independent judgments. There are several ways that we can foster good independent judgment skills in our children. As was previously discussed, the concept of empowerment provides children with the opportunity to be part of the decision making process regarding discipline issues. Empowerment directly impacts on the development of independent judgment skills. Eliciting your child's thoughts regarding their behavior and supportively processing their ideas, provides the foundation from which their independent judgment skills will grow. Similarly, providing children with choices when appropriate instead of making their decisions for them also allows children to exercise and develop their own judgment skills. Finally, trying to catch your child making good judgments and reinforcing it with positive feedback is like providing water for their independent judgment seeds to blossom.

Problem solving skills. Like any other skill, problem solving skills are learned. While most parents expect their children to be good problem solvers, they often put little direct emphasis on teaching basic problem solving to them. More frequently, we tend to solve our children's problems for them. When I work with children on developing effective problem solving skills, I introduce them to the following five step approach:

1. Identify the problem. We have all had the experience of being upset but unsure what we're upset about. We cannot solve a problem unless we can first identify what it is. So we start by identifying exactly what the problem is.
2. Generate as many solutions as possible. After identifying the problem, encourage the child to generate or brainstorm as many alternate solutions as possible. It is at this stage that poor problem solvers falter. A poor problem solver often utilizes the first solution they think of, which isn't necessarily the best solution available. As we've previously discussed with brainstorming technique, encourage your child to first generate as many ideas as possible before adding your own. To stimulate this process, initially suggest some silly and/or clearly inappropriate solutions and add them to your list.
3. Determine the probable outcome of each solution. We then go down the list, guess what the probable outcome would be and write it down next to each potential solution.
4. Choose the best solution and implement. By comparing the various probable outcomes, it usually becomes clear what the best solution is. At this point we are prepared to actually implement our best solution to the problem at hand.

5. Evaluate the outcome. If the outcome is positive, we have competently solved the problem. If the problem continues, try another solution. Sometimes our most well thought out solutions simply don't work as effectively as we've anticipated. When this is the case, we return to our alternative solutions list and implement the next best solution based on its probable outcome.

Teaching your child this strategy will provide your child with the tools necessary to increase their problem solving skills. Encouraging your child to practice these sequenced skills will increase the probability of your child internalizing these skills and eventually using them automatically.

While self-esteem development is complex and elusive there are certain strategies that you can utilize to enhance your child's positive view of self. In addition to being highly effective, the positive discipline strategies outlined in this book also serve to nurture your child's self-esteem. Increasing your child's sense of accomplishment in their behaviors, efforts, and successes, increases their sense of responsibility for their actions and promotes positive feedback from others as well as themselves regarding their adequacy and performance.

Chapter VIII. What About Teenagers?

Utilizing the techniques previously discussed with younger children will help to greatly reduce disciplinary problems during the teenage years. But, what about teenagers? In this chapter we will consider parenting issues with teenage children. A variety of strategies particularly useful with teenagers will be offered. In addition, we will review the seven steps and how they specifically apply to older children. But first, the bad news.

If you have previously depended upon negative discipline strategies with your now teenage child, chances are that you have been experiencing increased battles regarding control. Control over adhering to the rules of the house (specifically study habits and school performance, household responsibilities, appropriate language/respect, curfew, etc.) and control over personal choices (including choice of clothes, music, friends, use of free time). The issue of control is almost always at the heart of the problem whenever a teenager is referred to me for treatment. This referral issue is so common, in fact, that there is even a specific diagnostic category pertaining to it; “Oppositional Defiant Disorder”. The symptoms of Oppositional Defiant Disorder include: active defiance of adult requests or rules, highly argumentative, often confrontational, frequent loss of temper, deliberately annoys others, hostile and angry. These behaviors usually begin between the ages of eight and twelve, peaking in the teenage years. The child or adolescent usually justifies these behaviors as a response to unreasonable circumstances at home. It is also noteworthy that the disorder is evident primarily with parents or others that the child knows well. Consequently, these behaviors may not be observed outside of the home in places like school or the psychologist’s office. It is invariably an intense struggle for control between the adolescent and their parents.

The good news is that there are effective strategies which can help you to dramatically reduce your conflicts with your teenage child and avoid potentially hostile confrontations. As you will discover, the strategies and issues discussed previously continue to be quite relevant. We simply need to adapt some of these techniques in order for them to be successful with the teenage child. The most significant difference between the preadolescent and the adolescent is the shift in function of parental attention. While we can use parental attention/involvement as a reward incentive for children, teenagers often perceive time with Mom or Dad as an aversive punishment! As a result of a variety of complex developmental changes, adolescents shift from parents to peers for their attention

and feedback. This is a scary shift for parents, who experience a significant reduction in their influence/control over their child's behaviors. For the adolescent, the teenage years are a time to reduce emotional dependence on parents and ultimately become an independent individual. To be an effective parent of a teenager, you must first understand that this shift is both important and necessary. Instead of fighting over control issues, we must provide teenagers with opportunities to learn self-control. Instead of battling over our teenagers' irresponsible behaviors, we must encourage them to take more responsibilities over their decisions and actions. The strategies that I have developed over the years, specifically geared toward effective parenting of teenagers, are all based upon these principles. These include: choosing your battles, the shift from dependence to independence, control versus advice, the school of hard knocks, and when to just listen.

Choosing your battles. While choosing your battles is always a smart parenting technique, it is essential in reducing conflict with your teenage child. Otherwise, life often becomes a series of arguments and confrontations. In addition to being a very unpleasant way to live, it blurs the relative importance of the specific issues involved. Frequent battles also reduce the likelihood of effectively resolving any of the issues being discussed. If the behavior problem is relatively minor, you can provide direct, calm feedback without necessarily imposing a consequence. More importantly, catch your teen being good; make an effort to provide positive feedback when your child behaves appropriately. Even though your teenager is no longer looking for as much of your time and attention, your approval is still very important whether they act like it or not. If the issue at hand is major and you do need to provide a consequence, empower your adolescent by involving him/her in the discipline plan. If possible, do it at a less volatile time to promote a more productive discussion. Teaching parents to choose their battles with their teenager is often a pivotal treatment strategy.

Frank, Age 17

Frank lived in a small apartment with his mother. His parents were divorced and he had little contact with his father. Frank was referred by his mother for escalating violent outbursts at home, which included: Yelling, cursing, punching holes in walls and throwing objects. In our first session together, Frank complained that his mother was a “neat freak” and often overreacted to problems that “didn’t even exist”. Frank voiced a sincere desire to see a reduction in their conflicts, but felt that his mother often provoked him. Combining individual and joint sessions, we focused on increasing mutual understanding and choosing battles more selectively. After seven sessions, Frank and his mother were able to coexist more peacefully. They still had their conflicts, but the frequency and intensity were significantly reduced.

It is normal for teenagers to be rebellious and argumentative. Choosing your battles will help both you and your child more easily survive the teenage years.

Shifting from dependence to independence. It is important to remember that the shift from dependence to independence is the normal developmental progression from adolescence to young adulthood. As parents, we need to teach our teenagers how to behave more responsibly and yet not make their decisions for them or oppose their efforts to take control over their lives. Ideally, we want to nurture their responsible independence.

Jeff, Age 19

Throughout his early schooling, Jeff’s mother did everything she could to help him succeed academically. Being a teacher herself, she knew what was expected of her son and tried to keep him on track. Over the years she found herself having to do more and more, as her son did less and less. Jeff, who was quite bright, would typically do well at the beginning of the school term. As the school year would progress, however, his grades would drop and he would narrowly avoid failing some classes by the end of the year with the help and guidance of his mother. After graduating high school, Jeff moved away for college. His mother contacted me after he failed all of his college classes at the end of his sophomore year. Unfortunately, the shift from dependence to independence in Jeff’s teenage years was stifled by his mother’s well-intentioned involvement.

The best strategy to promote a healthy shift from dependence to independence is regular and frequent use of empowerment. As you may recall from Chapter Four, empowerment involves giving your child a voice in their own discipline plan. When dealing with teenage children, using empowerment strategies becomes even more important. As children grow older, parents need to place more and more of the decision making responsibilities on them. As parents we are often reluctant to do this because we fear that our children will use poor judgment and make mistakes. While this may be true, how else will our children eventually learn to make good decisions? We learn through trial and error. Our children need to make mistakes along the way so that they may (hopefully!) learn from them. It's tough to say who this process is more difficult for, parent or child, but that doesn't change the fact that it is necessary to foster good independent thinking skills and responsibility. To help illustrate this point, let's use the previous example of Jeff and his mother. Imagine that fateful telephone call from Jeff.

Jeff: Hi Mom, it's Jeff.

Mom: Jeff, Hi! Is everything OK? How's school?

Jeff: Everything's fine. Well, actually everything's fine...except school.

Mom: What do you mean? I thought everything was going well. Did you get your grades?

Jeff: Yeah, I did. (pause)

Mom: And?

Jeff: And I didn't do as well as I hoped to do.

Mom: What do you mean? Did you fail any of your classes?

Jeff: Ugh, yeah, I did. Actually, I'm really sorry Mom, but I failed...all my classes.

Mom: You what! All year you said you were doing OK! How could you fail all of your classes?

Jeff: I don't know. I'm sorry.

Mom: I can't believe this! Well, let's see... You need to go to each of your teachers and see if there's anything you can make-up or an extra report or something! Will you do that tomorrow?

Jeff: I don't know; I think it's too late for that---

Mom: You think it's too late? If you were thinking more, none of this would have happened! Now do what I'm telling you!

Now, clearly Jeff was at fault for failing his classes, but what has this conversation accomplished? Jeff's mother wants to help in any way that she can and tries to give him a plan of action. Even if all of his teachers let him do additional work to pass, how has that helped Jeff to become a more responsible student and independently resolve his difficulties? Jeff's dependence on his mother to rescue him only becomes even stronger. Now let's consider the same phone call utilizing empowerment to promote Jeff's independent thinking skills and responsibilities.

Jeff: Hi Mom, it's Jeff.

Mom: Jeff, Hi! Is everything OK? How's school?

Jeff: Everything's fine. Well, actually everything's fine...except school.

Mom: What do you mean? I thought everything was going well. Did you get your grades?

Jeff: Yeah, I did. (pause)

Mom: And?

Jeff: And I didn't do as well as I hoped to do.

Mom: I'm sorry to hear that.

Jeff: I'm really sorry Mom, but I failed in all my classes.

Mom: You failed all your classes? That's terrible! But you don't have to apologize to me; they're your grades. What are you going to do?

Jeff: I don't know.

Mom: Well, I guess you have a lot to think about.

Jeff: What do you mean?

Mom: Well, I mean you need to figure out exactly what happened this year and where to go from here.

Jeff: I know I do. I'm just feeling so confused.

Mom: Well, if you want to talk about it, I'd be happy to listen...

Either way, the fact remains that Jeff failed all of his classes. The issue really is whether or not Jeff will be able to learn from his mistakes. Using an empowerment strategy, like the one above, fosters a process of taking responsibility for one's actions and hopefully learning not to repeat the same mistakes in the future. In hindsight, Jeff's mother realized that she was too helpful for too long. Ideally by about fifth grade, children need to assume responsibility for their academic tasks. Using homework as an example, it is the child's

responsibility and the parent is available to help only if requested by the child. It is time for the parent to shift from “homework controller” to “homework advisor”.

Control versus advice. As our adolescent children shift from dependence to independence, we as parents need to shift from controlling to advising. The most important reason for this is that your child needs to learn to make his/her own decisions to function effectively as a young adult. In addition, the more controlling the parent, the more likely the teenager is to rebel and eventually defy the parent. In this scenario everyone loses. The parent is frustrated and the child loses the opportunity to get useful advice from someone with a lot more experience in life and truly only their welfare in mind. In reality, a parent has very little control over an older teenager’s behavior. You can’t control their school effort, the friends they choose, the places they go, etc. If you try to maintain control, it’s often a recipe for disaster. It’s time to rethink your parenting approach and your overall goals for your child. Consider this fairly frequent and extremely difficult parental dilemma: a high school student with little to no academic motivation, who is in danger of failing most or all classes. The parents are usually at their wit’s end, because they have exasperatingly discovered that they can’t force their teenagers to do their school work. It is simply no longer within their control. My treatment solution is always the same, encourage the teenager to take control of their academic life and teach the parents to shift from control to advice. The teenagers must now find out about educational alternatives within their school district and make some decisions. Their parents can offer advice but the decision rests with the teenager. If they consider dropping out of school (which is extremely rare) then it is understood that they must get a job and contribute financially to the household. In many cases, the teenager enrolls in an alternative education program and their academic motivation significantly increases. Often they end up missing their old school and eventually transfer back. Even in these cases a lot of productive learning has taken place and the family dynamics are significantly improved. If you want your child to learn responsibility, you may need to offer your best advice and let them learn from their mistakes.

The school of hard knocks. If you follow my advice regarding empowerment and fostering responsible independence within your teenage child, it is quite likely that they will visit the school of hard knocks. Stated another way, your teenager will inevitably make

mistakes and suffer the consequences. Except for life-threatening or other extremely harmful mistakes or consequences, this is a productive learning experience for those smart enough to learn from it. As parents we naturally want to protect our children and help them avoid making the mistakes or suffering the consequences. In the long run, however we may be doing them more harm than good.

Jeff, the nineteen year-old student who failed all his college classes, met with me for several sessions during the summer following his troublesome sophomore year. His primary motivation was to appease his mother and get a letter for his school adviser, indicating that he had attended counseling. The college allowed him to return to school “on probation”. This meant that he needed to pass all of his classes for the next year to remain in school. Jeff started the following term off well but slipped back into his old ways and failed two classes. Despite his hopes for leniency, he was kicked out of school. Several months later Jeff telephoned me. He indicated that he followed up with my recommendation for counseling near his school and was also realizing how good he had it as a student. He was having to work full-time now, thanks to his mother’s efforts of shifting from dependence to independence. He’s due to return to school in the fall and I believe that his “transfer” to the school of hard knocks will dramatically increase his chances for success. His mother has also learned to make positive changes. She now offers emotional support and “optional” advice, instead of trying to solve her son’s problems for him.

When to just listen. As parents we naturally want to help our children with their problems. So when your eight year-old runs into the house crying about a fight with some friends, you try to understand what happened and offer suggested remedies. The more you try to suggest, the more upset your child becomes! Eventually, to your complete confusion, your child runs out screaming, “You just don’t understand!” What just happened? This sort of scenario occurs frequently with children of all ages. The reason that children get upset with parents is because they don’t really want someone to solve, advise, remind, or teach; what they really need is someone to simply listen. Someone to listen to how they felt and what they experienced. Solutions, advice, reminders and lessons can come later. If you really listen, you can also better understand your child’s feelings, thoughts and motives, which will certainly make you a better advisor.

While the issue of listening is useful with children of all ages, it becomes critically important with teenagers. Given the high frequency of conflicts and arguments with most teenagers and their parents, very little listening occurs. This is particularly true of uninterrupted listening. More often what begins as listening quickly sidetracks into advice,

disagreement, and conflict. In addition, because teenagers interact more with peers and less with parents, opportunities for any family conversation become far less frequent. Finally, teenagers are a higher risk group for a variety of serious problems including: drug and alcohol abuse, unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and suicide. Despite the obvious magnitude of these issues, many parents simply avoid discussing them. Avoidance is clearly the least effective strategy. Another common and often equally ineffective approach is lecturing. When lectured to, children usually get defensive and tune you out. So then, what do you do? In order to promote a productive discussion, begin with listening. At a calm moment, introduce the topic and ask for your child's thoughts on the subject. Instead of beginning the conversation with: "It's important that you know about the dangers of drugs and alcohol...", consider instead: "There's so much discussion and concern about drugs and alcohol, what do you think about it?" Listening is a way of communicating respect. Lecturing implies an assumed lack of knowledge or ignorance. That's why children often become defensive and avoidant in response to lecturing. This is especially true of teenagers who are secretly crying out for parental respect for their independent judgments and choices, as their developing sense of autonomy emerges.

Whenever I work with oppositional teenagers, I always begin with listening. Before any efforts are made to resolve the conflicts at hand, I first listen carefully to the parents and teenager separately. Once I'm clear on their respective positions, we meet as a group. During this meeting I instruct everyone to only listen and not to discuss or argue about what is discussed. After each family member finishes a point, I ask the other(s) to repeat what they have heard. I try to make sure that everyone's issues are presented. This is often a very emotional process and new information is invariably shared. It is quite common for the conflicts to begin to improve, simply as an outcome of this process. Consider the following case studies:

Jim, Age 18

Jim both turned eighteen and abruptly moved out of his father's house the day before our first session. Jim's parents divorced when he was quite young and he moved out of his mother's and into his father's house when he was thirteen. His father remarried a woman who brought two younger daughters into this now blended family. In our first individual session Jim voiced great resentment and anger concerning his stepmother, feeling left out of his father's "new" family. It wasn't until our fourth family session that Jim was able to verbalize these feelings and have both his father and stepmother really listen. This

evoked a tearful response from his father who acknowledged his preoccupation with making his second marriage work, perhaps in retrospect at the expense of his relationship with his son. Subsequent to this eventful session Jim moved back into his father's home and, while they still had problems, the dynamics within the family improved significantly.

Andrea, Age 16

Andrea was having severe conflicts with her mother who reported, "At sixteen she feels she should be able to do what she wants!" Andrea ran away from home three times within the previous year. While she voiced anger at her mother for being "nosy" and "controlling", she also stated that she just wanted her mother, "To really listen and not give her advice or opinions". Efforts to improve their communicating by improving listening skills helped Andrea and her mother improve their relationship.

There are several listening techniques which will help you to be a more effective listener. If you find yourself offering good advice or feedback and your child appears more angry or frustrated, try shifting to listening. Focus on the feelings and try to empathize instead of minimizing, arguing, or ignoring. If your child doesn't identify the feelings, guess at them and reflect back what you're hearing. This helps children to identify, express, and vent their feelings, instead of acting them out. Remember that advice, solutions, reminders, or lessons can come later.

Now we are in a better position to revisit the Seven Steps to Parenting Success as relates to the teenage child.

Step One

Go easy on yourself! Parenting is an impossible job to always do well.

I'll say! I often reassure parents of teenagers by telling them that it's less a matter of parenting well and more one of survival!

Step Two

Focus more of your attention on positive behaviors and less on negative behaviors. Catch your child being good.

This step also applies well to teenagers. While they may not be as interested in your time and attention, your teenage child is now looking for your approval and trust. It is parental approval and trust which function as positive feedback regarding the teenage child's shift from dependence to independence. The "positive" behaviors that a parent now needs to focus on include developmentally appropriate ones such as: exercising independent thinking skills effectively, exhibiting good self-control, being responsible, following curfew and other house rules, and demonstrating appropriate independent study skills. While it is our natural instinct to focus our feedback on the negative (e.g. poor self-control, irresponsible behavior, breaking the rules and poor study habits), the teenage years are a critically important time to also provide positive feedback and catch your teen being good! In clinical practice this is always a key ingredient to treatment success with teenagers and their parents.

Step Three

Reduce angry outbursts, which often fuel negative behavior, by using more effective communication techniques.

Another step that is more important than ever with teenagers. In addition to the communication techniques previously discussed, I would also include the strategies reviewed in this chapter: choosing your battles, the shift from dependence to independence, control versus advice, the school of hard knocks, and when to just listen.

Step Four

Be more aware of the consequences which follow your child's positive and negative behaviors.

This step is less applicable to teenagers, in large part because parents rarely witness most of their behaviors, positive or negative! A more useful revision of this step for teenagers would be to help them be more aware of the consequences which follow their own positive and negative behaviors, to foster increased responsibility and sound independent thinking skills.

Step Five

Empower your child by including his/her opinion in discipline decisions. Wherever appropriate, include your child's suggestions in the discipline plan.

Another step that is more critical than ever with teenagers. Of course, efforts of empowering teenagers can go beyond just discipline decisions. Efforts can be made to empower teenagers with decisions that impact their daily life on every level, as they prepare for their independence as adults. Try to frequently give your teenager increasing opportunities to demonstrate their independent thinking skills, as they show increased levels of responsibility.

Step Six

Use your most powerful reward to systematically shape your child's appropriate behaviors - your time and attention.

For many older teenagers, parental time and attention goes from being a reward to a punishment! This is not always the case for younger teens. **Mandy** was a fourteen year-old who was referred for declining grades in her freshman year in high school. To increase her academic motivation we constructed a Structured Activity Rewards Contract which rewarded increased study time with fun activities with her mother (see Figure 11). This was still quite motivating for Mandy and along with additional family and individual sessions, her school grades and study habits improved.

As teenagers become older, however, parental activity rewards become less motivating. This does not mean that contracting is less effective, just that the incentives must change. The way to determine the ideal incentives is simply to assess what is currently motivating to the older teenager. For example, there are several common teenage motivators which include: allowance, everything to do with driving, and curfew restrictions. **Rick** was six months away from taking his driving test. While his father had previously promised him a car, Rick's grades were faltering as was his father's car-buying motivation. We set up a simple incentive contract focusing on these issues to give Rick the added motivation and focus that he needed in school (see Figure 12). **Patrick**, a fifteen year-old,

seemed to have frequent arguments with his parents over household chores. Instead of forcing Patrick to do certain chores, we gave him a list to choose from. We then set up an allowance reward which encouraged Patrick to complete his chores without reminders (see Figure 13). While other issues presented themselves, the contract effectively neutralized time consuming conflicts over chores and allowance. **Misty** was a precocious thirteen year old, going on twenty-five. She was referred for frequent temper outbursts at home. Misty wanted a lot more freedom and independence than her mother felt was appropriate. To encourage Misty to practice her newly learned anger control techniques, we created an incentive contract which rewarded her temper control with peer socialization activities (see Figure 14). Immediate and progressive improvements in Misty's behavior were observed. Finally, **John**, fifteen years of age, was referred for a variety of rule violating behaviors at home and in school. We began by focusing on curfew issues. While John was allowed to stay out till 11:30 PM on weekends, he often violated this rule as well. On several occasions he stayed out all night without letting his parents know. There were even incidents where John was away for several days at a time! We negotiated a clear contract regarding curfew which specified the precise consequences for any violations (see Figure 15). Now if John broke the rule, he knew the consequences and could no longer yell at his mother for being unfair. We had plenty of issues to deal with in this case, but contracting helped us to reduce these conflicts one at a time.

While it requires some additional creativity, behavioral contracting can be an effective discipline tool with older teenagers.

Figure 11.

Contract for Mandy

Mandy will study 3 hours during the week (Monday - Thursday) and 2 hours on the weekend (Friday - Sunday).

When Mandy gets a positive progress report on Friday,

Then Mandy can choose one of the following activities with Mom:

- Go to a movie
- Go bike riding
- Go bowling
- Go shopping
- Go out to eat
- Go to the beach

Mandy's signature

Dad's signature

Mom's signature

Figure 12.

Contract for Rick

1. **If** Rick has at least a 3.2 by April 1,
Then Rick can take his driving test.

2. **If** Rick has at least a 3.2 by the end of the school year,
Then Rick and Dad will shop for a car at the end of June.

3. **If** Rick has a 3.3 by the end of the school year,
Then Rick and Dad will shop for a car a week after school ends.

4. **If** Rick has a 3.4 or higher by the end of the school year,
Then Rick and Dad will shop for a car right after school is over.

I have read and agree with this contract.

Rick's signature

Dad's signature

Figure 13.

Contract for Patrick

When Patrick does his chores, which are:

- Putting away the dishes
- Taking out the trash
- Keeping his room clean
- Mowing lawn/trimming yard as needed

With only 1 reminder per chore = \$10.00

With no reminders = \$12.00

With more than 1 reminder = minus \$2.00 per reminder

I have read and agree with this contract.

Patrick's signature Mom's signature Dad's signature

Figure 14.

Contract for Misty

When Misty controls her temper all day,

Then Misty earns (1) one point.

(5) Five points = (1) One weekend activity

(20) Twenty points = Car trip to visit friends in old neighborhood

Weekend Activities

- Go to favorite coffee house
- Go out with friends
- Invite friends over

I have read and agree with this contract.

Misty's signature

Mom's signature

Figure 15.

Curfew Contract for John

John understands that he is expected to be home by 11:30pm on Friday and Saturday nights.

If John will not be home by 11:30pm,
Then he will telephone beforehand.

For each additional hour that John is late, he will receive 1 day of grounding.

If John stays out all night without permission,
Then he will be grounded for 2 weeks (each additional day = an additional 2 week period of grounding).

I have read and understand this contract.

John's signature

Mom's signature

Dad's signature

Step Seven

Improve your child's self-esteem by helping to create success experiences.

Once again, a slight modification will make this step more appropriate for older children: improve your teenager's self-esteem by empowering him/her to create their own success experiences. For example, consider my initial meeting with **Brett** and his parents. They immediately referred to their fifteen year old son's recent obsession with the electric guitar. Previously a quiet boy who excelled academically, Brett seemed to be changing in ways that frightened his parents. He was talking back more, his grades were somewhat lower than usual, and he was spending a great deal of time practicing with his newly formed rock and roll band. After ruling out drugs and alcohol, it became clear that Brett's parents were having difficulty with his effort to shift from dependence to increased independence. While Brett also needed help to learn how to do this more appropriately, he was basically trying to do what was developmentally correct. Utilizing the empowerment strategies outlined in this chapter, the family made quick progress and were able to work through their difficulties. Keep in mind that teenagers must now begin to define their own "success experiences". So if your fifteen year-old son wants to perfect a song on his new electric guitar, negotiate on the volume and...get earplugs!

In terms of self-esteem, it is important to note that simply providing positive feedback regarding your teenage child's efforts to become more independent and responsible will accelerate positive self-esteem growth.

Chapter IX. When the Best Parenting Techniques Fail

Effective parenting is at best an inexact science. As I have gained experience in the field of parent training and parent education, I have been able to refine the parenting strategies offered in this book. I am very satisfied with their success rate, in that the majority of families experience significant improvements in a relatively short period of time. The fact remains, however, that in some cases, utilizing these strategies alone does not initially produce the desired behavioral changes. What do you do then, when the best parenting techniques fail?

In this chapter we will examine the most frequent reasons why potentially effective parenting techniques do not succeed. In addition, we will consider effective strategies to address these concerns. To be a good child psychologist one must also be a good detective, particularly when seemingly effective parenting strategies are not working. Even these failures can serve as clues in explaining the continuation of the child's undesirable behavior(s). While there are several potential areas of investigation, it is first useful to troubleshoot and refine our parenting techniques.

Troubleshooting the Behavioral Plan

When an effective parenting strategy fails, it is important to first determine if the specific strategy which was employed was used correctly and troubleshoot accordingly. For example, when I'm utilizing a structured activity rewards contract with a family, it is often necessary to review and modify the behavioral plan after the first week or two. When troubleshooting a structured activity rewards contract, the following questions need to be answered: Is the child clear about the precise behavior(s) desired? Are the parents' goals realistic for the child? Are the reward activities motivating enough? Is the parent following through with the reward activity in a reasonable time period? Are there other competing natural or accidental rewards (e.g., negative attention) that are fueling the undesirable behavior? Remember it is often a good idea to simply ask the child for their opinion as to the source of the problem. Have this discussion, however, at a positive or neutral time and not in the heat of the moment. After identifying potential reasons for the failure of the behavioral plan, revise the contract or strategy accordingly to see if it is beneficial in obtaining the desired results. If your modifications prove successful, then you have

effectively corrected the problem. If, despite all of these efforts, behavioral difficulties continue then other issues must be considered.

As a result of my experience and training, I am confident that positive behavioral parenting techniques are the most effective that the science of psychology has to offer. The case studies outlined in this book attest to their dramatic benefits. This does not mean, however, that these behavioral strategies are a cure-all for every child behavior problem. There are other factors which can override any parenting strategy and must be considered when effective behavioral parenting techniques do not fully succeed. These factors are often the result of issues within the individual child and/or issues within the family. It is important to understand, however, that there is some degree of dysfunction within every individual (child) and every family. To some degree, for example, we are all depressed, anxious, afraid, paranoid, etc. That's why students in abnormal psychology classes overdiagnose themselves; we can all relate to the various psychiatric symptoms to some degree. People who are clinically depressed are not sullen at times, they are extremely sad and hopeless most of the day nearly every day. Consequently, the impact of the individual and/or family issues on the child's behavior(s), is in proportion to the degree of the dysfunction or disturbance that exists. It is also important to note that in most cases the degree of individual and/or family dysfunction is usually not severe enough to completely derail effective parenting strategies. Let us consider the main issues within the individual child and/or family which can compromise our best parenting efforts.

Issues Within the Individual Child

When effective behavioral parenting techniques fail, other issues must be considered and the individual child must be assessed further. Potential areas of concern must be ruled out. A good place to start is with the child's emotional life. Remember we are looking for fairly significant degrees of disturbance or dysfunction. If the behavioral concerns are fairly new or recently exacerbated, it is important to assess other possibly-related changes as well. Does the child appear severely depressed? Anxious? Angry? Defiant? How are these factors exhibited and in what situations? Are these emotional features apparent to others outside of the home? Have relatives, neighbors and/or friends also observed these behaviors? Another important area to assess is the child's school functioning. Two issues to consider within overall school functioning are academic performance and emotional/social behavior. How do teachers view the child emotionally, socially, and academically? How does the

student behave in and out of class? Are the student's grades declining? A third area of concern, particularly with teenagers, involves drug and alcohol usage. It is essential to rule this out as a contributing factor to their undesirable behavioral changes. Let's examine these three areas of concern within the individual child in more detail.

Significant Emotional Factors. Within the emotional life of every individual are varying degrees of emotional discomfort or difficulty. This can be a function of personality features, situational life experiences, and complex genetic/physiological factors. When the degree of emotional discomfort is great, our daily adaptive functioning is compromised. This is true for adults as well as children. It is often assumed that children do not experience significant stress in their young lives and many adults underestimate the potential existence of stress-related emotional disturbance in children. In clinical settings, we are called upon to treat younger children for a variety of emotional difficulties. Beginning in adolescence and continuing through the teenage years, there is a significant increase in more severe symptoms of emotional disturbance. The most common symptoms include active defiance of authority, explosiveness, a depressed or irritable mood and social withdrawal. In more severe cases these symptoms are ongoing and effective parenting strategies are compromised. It is quite common for the situation to get progressively worse as parents' efforts to regain their authority fail. This is often because the underlying emotional issues go unaddressed. As parents, we must resist our natural tendency to simply react to our children's defiance and make efforts to better understand it. At a relatively neutral time, it is often helpful to initiate a non-threatening dialogue with our child to better understand the source of and emotional qualities behind their undesirable behavior. It is important to remember that children often "act out" their feelings as compared to expressing them. That is why for children and adolescents, the diagnostic criteria for depression includes frequent irritability in lieu of an apparent depressed mood more commonly observed in adult populations. When we have this discussion with our children, we need to encourage them to try and identify their emotional experience by using feeling words. To get their attention and focus them on this task, I often tell clients (both adult and child) that they need to use the "F word" more! They're usually quite shocked initially as you can imagine, until I say, "No, not that word, the word 'feel'." It is also important to focus on listening and understanding, not advising and problem solving. One of the reasons that psychotherapy is so effective is the curative power of simply putting feelings into words. Until we are able to identify and express our feelings, we are helpless to do anything about them.

Whenever I begin working with a new child, I usually begin with some kind of behavioral contracting. I do this for two reasons. The most obvious reason being that in the majority of cases behavioral contracting improves the situation quickly and effectively. The second reason is for diagnostic purposes. If a well constructed behavioral contract fails, then other significant factors are probably underlying the undesirable behavior(s) and need to be assessed. To better understand how significant emotional factors come into play, consider the following case studies.

Dennis, Age 14

Dennis was referred for counseling as a condition of his probation. He was caught recently with a friend vandalizing a local business. His natural mother gave him up for adoption at age one to his adoptive mother who was also his aunt. Over the next ten years of his life he was sent back and forth between different relatives who were unable to handle him. At age eleven he returned to live with his aunt where he continues to reside. Dennis has never met his natural father who was incarcerated. His adoptive mother reported that Dennis, “has a temper that he has a hard time controlling. He will burst out at you without warning. He is also very moody.” Unfortunately, Dennis’ adoptive mother had financial and emotional problems of her own and was currently on medication for a mood disorder. While effective parenting strategies alone obviously could not resolve all of Dennis’ issues, ongoing counseling along with his adoptive mother’s efforts helped to significantly improve his very challenging situation. As Dennis slowly began disclosing his feelings about some of the traumatic experiences of his earlier childhood, his anger outbursts became more infrequent. In addition, his motivation to engage in criminal mischief significantly diminished.

Jeremiah, Age 14

Jeremiah was an adolescent referred for a variety of concerning behaviors. At intake, his mother noted the following concerns: “bad language, violent outbursts (physical, too), taking complete control of household, terrorizing mother and siblings, losing concept of time and not functioning properly, became obsessed with cleanliness.” Clearly, Jeremiah’s behaviors were severe and concerning. Approximately one week after our first session, Jeremiah’s behaviors escalated to such a dangerous degree that he needed to be hospitalized.

Against his wishes, Jeremiah was put on medication and continued in weekly therapy sessions. While behavioral contracting alone obviously could not address all of his needs it

did assist us in clearly structuring the main issues (see Figure 16). While his behavioral difficulties continued, we were able to significantly reduce the frequency and intensity of his aggressive outbursts. This was the result of numerous individual and family therapy sessions, where a therapeutic alliance with Jeremiah was slowly established and his parents were assisted in regaining control of their household.

Figure 16.

Contract for Jeremiah

Destruction of Property

If Jeremiah destroys property,
Then he must repair or pay for repairs.

Physical Violence

If Jeremiah physically hurts anyone,
Then an assault charge will be filed.

Medication

If Jeremiah takes his medication,
Then Jeremiah can live at home.

If possible, Jeremiah's parents will gently remind him of these rules.

I have read and understand this contract and agree to it.

Jeremiah's signature

Mom's signature

Dad's signature

Phoenix, Age 13

Phoenix was recommended to be in counseling by the school vice principal after a one week suspension for fighting. His parents reported that he had an “attitude problem” since fifth grade. These problems had escalated and he was receiving failing grades in school. While Phoenix denied alcohol and drug use, he also refused drug testing. In addition, Phoenix was a gifted athlete who excelled in surfing. Due to his poor performance, Phoenix was not allowed to go surfing during the week. We began by constructing a behavior contract (see Figure 17). Initially we saw some improvement but Phoenix’s progress was short-lived. His school efforts diminished and he refused to attend therapy sessions. His behavior became increasingly defiant and when I last spoke with his parents they were considering placing him in a residential program. Despite our best efforts, a more intensive treatment program was required to address Phoenix’s behavioral difficulties.

Figure 17.

Contract for Phoenix

When Phoenix brings home a good progress report (good behavior, good homework) in P.E., Math and English on Friday,

Then Phoenix can go to the beach and surf after school the following week.

Mom will try to drive twice a week with one day notice.

I have read and agree with this contract.

Phoenix's signature

Mom's signature

It is clear that the severity of behavioral problems in children vary along a continuum. These case studies illustrate some of the more challenging examples of severe behavioral issues which are resistant to simple treatment interventions. It is also important to note the ages of these children and the fact that these problems were fairly chronic, becoming increasingly severe over a period of years. While we will never know for sure, earlier professional intervention may have helped to keep these issues from worsening to such a severe degree. We will consider the question of when to seek professional help in more detail at the end of this chapter.

Academic and Developmental Difficulties. Changes in academic functioning are often an indicator of underlying emotional/behavioral issues. Don't be afraid to contact your child's teacher(s) and inquire about current academic, social, and emotional functioning. Since teachers often spend at least as much time with children as their parents do, their professional impressions and observations can be invaluable in assessing a child's current functioning.

During my twelve years as a school psychologist, I evaluated hundreds of children in an effort to identify why they were exhibiting problems in school. These referrals were generated by teachers, parents, and other school personnel. A psychological evaluation consists of a number of psychological tests whose results assist us in determining the precise nature of the problem. It was very common to receive referrals of children who appeared unmotivated and "lazy", thus performing poorly academically. Despite very similar symptoms (e.g., "doesn't care about schoolwork, doesn't complete assignments, stares out the window", etc.) the source of the problems were often dramatically different from one case to another. In some cases the children did exhibit poor achievement motivation and consequently didn't put adequate effort into their school work. In these cases behavioral contracting usually addressed the problem quite well. In other cases, however, testing revealed significant learning disabilities which directly compromised the child's ability to learn. These children appeared unmotivated and lazy because after trying their best time and again in school, they would repeatedly fail. Over time, they just naturally stopped trying and simply appeared unmotivated to their teachers and parents. For these students, behavioral contracting or other effective parenting strategies would not and could not by themselves address their underlying learning problem(s) that exist. Depending on how long this goes on undiagnosed, a variety of behavioral and emotional difficulties inevitably emerge. That is why it is important to look at a child's school functioning as part of the total picture in

assessing their overall difficulties. At the same time, unfortunately, it is quite common for child therapists to overlook a child's academic functioning in their assessment procedures. In my opinion, anytime a child who is exhibiting difficulties in school is referred for counseling, it is the therapist's professional responsibility to make contact with the teacher and review school records. Otherwise, possibly undiagnosed learning problems will continue to fuel the problem and effective treatment will certainly be compromised. Consider the following case study.

Don, Age 14

Don was referred after being expelled from school. The school district expelled him for threatening another student with a knife. Given this background information, I was surprised to find that Don was a quiet, meek young man with no prior history of any aggressive behavior. I asked his mother to provide me with all of his school records, which she did. As I reviewed his records, several interesting facts emerged: While Don's academic grades were always weak, he consistently scored very low in mathematics. His behavior in class was always noted to be "good" to "outstanding". At the request of his pediatrician, a private psychological evaluation was completed two years ago which identified possible learning disabilities ("attention deficit disorder") and recommended a neurological evaluation. The neurological evaluation indicated some abnormalities. At the time, Don's mother submitted both of these reports to the school, which were apparently deposited in a filing cabinet and forgotten. Finally, in an administrative statement from the school, the "knife" was described as a "Toy Samurai type knife approximately two inches in length". As a result of reviewing his school records, a very different picture emerged: a quiet student who had a significant learning disability which went unrecognized by the school district for years, finally vented his frustration with a toy knife on a fellow student who chronically teased him. I offered to accompany the family to Don's expulsion hearing at his school district. Unaware of the prior psychological and neurological test findings, the school officials were prepared to expel Don for the remainder of the school year. Weren't they surprised when I presented my findings! Realizing that there were other factors involved, the school district reconsidered its recommendation for immediate expulsion. They were quick to do an updated psychological evaluation of their own which confirmed the previous diagnoses and provided Don with much needed special education services. As Don began benefiting from these services, his school performance improved. He continued in individual and family counseling to address his emotional and behavioral difficulties. Had I

not reviewed Don's school records, I would have probably missed the boat in terms of addressing both his emotional as well as academic needs. Providing psychological counseling alone would have yielded limited results.

In addition to school history and academic functioning, developmental issues also need to be considered when assessing the individual child. An experienced, competent child psychotherapist always begins with obtaining comprehensive background information about the child. Included in this process are questions regarding developmental milestones. Information is obtained regarding the approximate age of the child at the time of initial sitting up, crawling, standing, walking, saying words, speaking in complete sentences, dressing, drinking from a glass, toilet training, etc. In most cases these developmental milestones are reached within normal limits and do not play a major role in assessment and treatment. In some cases, however, there are significant developmental delays which can be crucial variables in helping explain current behavioral difficulties and mapping out a successful treatment plan. The following case studies provide good illustrations of the importance of developmental factors.

Billy, Age 3

Billy was a cute, energetic toddler, who was referred for defiant, aggressive behaviors. Parent reports indicated that Billy was highly intelligent and usually well behaved. He was prone, however, to severe, angry outbursts which were creating difficulties both at home and at his pre-school. His preschool teacher indicated that Billy would often scream and hit other children. At home his parents tried using time outs and spankings, which only seemed to make things worse. I shared my parenting strategies with them and suggested they try to catch Billy being good, help him express his feelings more appropriately, minimize negative attention, etc. Given Billy's age, we set up a marble jar activity rewards system. Similar to the structured activity rewards, Billy earned his fun activity with Mom or Dad when a small jar was filled with marbles which he earned for desirable behaviors throughout the day at home and in school. Despite all of these techniques, his anger outbursts continued. My first session with Billy was an interesting one and several behavioral observations would prove quite useful. As an experienced child psychologist, I pride myself on quickly establishing rapport with young children. I was quite surprised, therefore, at Billy's initial reaction to me. I entered the waiting room, saw Billy sitting there next to his father, and said, "Hi! You must be Billy! Ready to play and have some fun?" I was happy to see that Billy smiled as he

jumped out of his seat. Unfortunately, he quickly turned around and ran out of my office door! A first! His Dad retrieved him and we went into my office. After a few minutes, Billy easily separated from his father and we played. I observed that Billy played nicely, exhibiting good motor skills, and seemed to understand everything that was said to him. He did, however, seem to get frustrated easily, could not accurately identify colors, often repeated words that I said, and displayed weak articulation (pronunciation) skills. I began to wonder about Billy's expressive language skills. His understanding of language seemed adequate, but his ability to verbally express himself clearly appeared weak. If Billy had a developmental delay in expressive language, it could explain why he was so easily frustrated. I recommended that the parents have Billy evaluated by a licensed speech/language pathologist to accurately assess his speech/language skills. His parents immediately followed up and the evaluation did find significant expressive language and articulation deficits. Billy began regular speech/language therapy and it wasn't very long before his language skills improved and his behavior problems dramatically diminished. Clearly no parenting technique or behavioral contract could address his needs and resolve his behavioral difficulties.

Jaret, Age 14

Jaret, who we briefly discussed in Chapter Seven, returned to see me three years later. He was now fourteen years old and appeared highly frustrated with school and depressed. Due to Jaret's below average IQ, school had always been a struggle. He was now in his first year of high school and told me of his plans to go to Junior College after he graduated. When I asked Jaret what he would like to change about himself he replied, "Get A's without trying". His parents indicated that he seemed highly frustrated with school and didn't like being there. It appeared to me that Jaret's emotional problems might be a function of excessive school demands placed upon him. I recommended that we meet with school officials to review his current special education program. At this meeting we were able to de-emphasize some of the academically tracked classes and add more vocational programs. While Jaret's desire to attend Junior College was an admirable one, the school has a responsibility to prepare him for life after high school. Given his intellectual limitations, realistic job skills needed to be focused upon. In addition, this program would allow Jaret to experience a higher degree of success, and less frustration. Once again, focusing on parenting strategies alone would not have comprehensively addressed Jaret's developmental and academic issues which were at the heart of the problem.

Whenever there are any academic or developmental concerns, the first step is to obtain a comprehensive evaluation performed by a qualified professional. To choose the appropriate professional, it is helpful to have a sense of the specific problem. If, for example, your child seems to have hearing difficulties, it is important to obtain an evaluation by an audiologist. If on the other hand, your child displays visual difficulties, a consult with an ophthalmologist would be appropriate. If, however, you are unsure of the source of the problem, a good place to start is with your pediatrician. Another option is to consult with an experienced child psychologist who is qualified to do psychological testing. The standard battery of tests assess a wide area of skills and abilities. It is quite probable, that if done correctly, the results of the psychological evaluation will often point you in the right direction. Finally, you may also qualify for testing by the school psychologist at no cost to you, if your child's academic, emotional and/or social problems are pronounced. In any case, discussing your concerns with your school psychologist may be a good place to start. We will look further at when to seek professional help later in this chapter.

Alcohol and Drug Abuse. The most common fear parents express is their fear that their child may one day experiment with drugs. It is often the focal point of concerns regarding peer pressure issues as well. That is because we all know of the profound and often disastrous changes which substance abuse causes in individuals. In children we observe changes in dress, attitude, school performance, eating and sleeping habits, judgment, volatility, etc. Unfortunately, all of these changes are also quite common in normal adolescent and teenage populations! Despite this challenge, it is important that drugs and alcohol be ruled out when assessing the child's emotional/behavioral difficulties. It is imperative for several reasons. First and foremost, are the obvious physical and emotional health dangers involved in substance abuse. Second, if regular substance abuse is occurring, no parental strategy or therapeutic technique will ultimately be able to address the underlying cause of the outward emotional/behavioral difficulties observed. Finally, identifying the problem is a prerequisite to obtaining the appropriate substance abuse treatment needed.

In my clinical experience, active substance abusers are clearly the most difficult clients to work with effectively. After identifying that there is a substance abuse problem, the challenge often becomes motivating the client to seek treatment. Substance abusers are typically in denial of the severity of their problem and very resistant to any treatment that would require abstinence. Parents, therefore, are often forced to place their children in

treatment programs against their will. The problem then can become the child fighting the treatment and subsequent potential relapse upon release from the program. Consequently, as a therapist, my job often becomes chipping away at the client's resistance to seek treatment and maintain abstinence. The earlier you are able to intervene, however, the better your chances of success. Early assessment and diagnosis is therefore quite important.

If you have suspicions about possible substance abuse and your child denies usage, try what I call, "The drug litmus test." First research the availability of low cost clinics/insurance plans which offer drug testing. You can obtain this information by contacting your insurance company and looking in the telephone directory under "Medical Clinics". Then, at a calm moment, share your continued concerns with your child, even though they're probably unwarranted (as your child has previously denied usage). Then ask your child to submit to a simple test today, just for your reassurance. If your child is willing to go, chances are that your concerns are unfounded. It is still a good idea, however, to follow through with testing. If your child defiantly refuses to go, then perhaps your concerns are not so silly after all. At this point you may need to insist on drug testing and/or professional intervention.

The best way to avoid this traumatic experience altogether is to focus on utilizing effective parenting techniques early in your child's life which foster good communication and a healthy relationship. That is not to say that it is the parents' fault if their child abuses drugs or alcohol. There are certainly many cases where "good kids" make poor choices where drugs and alcohol are concerned. At the same time, however, the majority of substance abuse clients in my own clinical experience have also had a history of chronic parent-child conflicts and other significant family problems..

Issues within the Family

In addition to significant emotional concerns within the child, issues within the family also need to be addressed. Generally, the family system functions as a unit. Therefore, dysfunction within any individual family member will usually impact emotionally on the rest of the family members to some degree. In some clinical cases the behavior problems which the child initially presents are actually a function of other highly dysfunctional issues within the family unit. The child is then considered merely the "identified patient" as the true patient is another family member and/or the family system

itself. In these cases, family intervention is usually indicated, along with individual treatment as needed. Once again, effective parenting strategies by themselves will probably not be sufficient.

There are a variety of issues within the family which can negatively impact upon the individual child and result in undesirable emotional and behavioral changes. I have identified the five most common dysfunctional issues within the family that I have observed in my own clinical practice. This is by no means an exhaustive list and is completely subjective on my part based upon my clinical experience. Let us now consider the following family issues: Significant emotional issues within the parent/sibling, substance abuse within the parent/sibling, marital dysfunction, divorce issues, and unmet emotional needs.

Significant Emotional Issues within the Parent/Sibling. We are all vulnerable to significant emotional difficulties. Parents are no exception. When parents are experiencing severe emotional problems, their children are often directly or indirectly effected. These children may then act out their resulting feelings of anger, anxiety, depression, etc. That is why it is important to also consider the functioning of family members, when effective parenting techniques fail. If the child's undesirable behaviors or emotional difficulties are primarily a function of another member's emotional difficulties, treatment focusing on only the child will yield limited benefits at best. Clearly the impacted parent needs to address some of their own emotional issues, perhaps by seeking treatment, in order to then begin resolving the problems within the family system. Consider the following clinical case studies.

Brandon, Age 7

Brandon was referred for, "Problems controlling his anger. He has outbursts at school and has also been stealing." His parents also reported that Brandon saw a school counselor a couple of times, who advised against physically punishing him. Despite this, however, it appeared that spanking continued. I, too, strongly suggested alternative discipline strategies in place of physical punishment. We created a structured activity rewards contract for Brandon aimed at improving his school behaviors (see Figure 18). During the first week, Brandon behaved well three out of five days. Despite this, Brandon continued to appear agitated and shared with me that, when his parents were angry with him, he felt that they didn't love him. Shortly thereafter, Brandon's mother requested to meet with me individually. During this session, she shared some of her own history as a child.

Her parents divorced when she was three and her mother remarried two years later. Unfortunately, her stepfather was an "abusive alcoholic" who had a raging temper and caused her great pain and suffering. She then tearfully admitted that she was, "Tired of everyone making me so mad...I lose control...I need help dealing with my rage". In addition to the mother's individual issues, there were significant marital conflicts. Clearly, behavioral contracting alone could not address Brandon's behavioral problems. The parents entered into marriage therapy, while Brandon's mom got individual treatment for her anger control problems.

Figure 18.

Contract for Brandon

When Brandon has 2 good days at school (Being nice to others, listening to the teacher, no hitting, no stealing),

Then Brandon can choose one activity reward.

Activity Rewards

Play catch with Dad

-Go fishing with Dad

Go to the park

-Go out to eat

Golfing

-Special playtime at home

I have read and agree with this contract.

Brandon

Mom

Dad

Jeffrey, Age 8

Jeffrey was referred by his mother, who voiced concerns regarding his, “Uncontrollable tantrums, mood swings, self-criticism, and a general state of being unhappy most of the time”. Jeffrey was the oldest of four children. His mother, age 25, seemed somewhat overwhelmed with her family and homemaking responsibilities. While Jeffrey exhibited no behavior problems in school, his mother indicated that at home, “He stresses out over everything”. We began by creating a structured activities reward contract. Jeffrey appeared highly motivated to earn one-on-one time with his mother, who Jeffrey stated cleaned the house, “A million times a day”. Not so unusual for a young mother of four children. Our contract focused on his mother’s chief complaint which was Jeffrey’s “talking back”. Parent reports indicated that Jeffrey talked back daily. Therefore, our initial goal was three good days to gain his reward (see Figure 19). After two weeks, Jeffrey earned seven good days, which was a great start. We agreed to continue the contract. In our next session, Jeffrey’s mother, who appeared quite stressed, abruptly announced that she was discontinuing the contract because she had no time and besides his brother was jealous. Despite suggestions to address the sibling rivalry and time commitment issues, Jeffrey’s mother continued to oppose utilizing the behavioral contract. I asked Jeffrey’s mother to meet with me individually to discuss this further and to share my concerns regarding her high level of apparent stress. When we met individually, Jeffrey’s mother shared some of the many pressures in her early life and the recent escalation of her day-to-day difficulties. We talked about the obvious, yet tremendous challenges of raising four young children and maintaining all of the household responsibilities. I shared Jeffrey’s comment regarding his mother’s cleaning the house, “A million times a day”. His mother smiled wearily and disclosed that he wasn’t all that far off from the truth. As we spoke, it became clear that his mother suffered from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). This condition first appeared when she was about eighteen years old and progressively got worse. Currently she spent many hours a day, every day, cleaning the house. This included, for example, vacuuming her whole house twice a day on a daily basis. No wonder her son was constantly presenting with negative attention seeking behaviors at home! Between having three siblings and his mother’s constant cleaning, what other choice did he have? It also further clarified why his mother had no time to work the contract. His mother was helped to realize that the best way to resolve her son’s behavioral/emotional problems was to acknowledge her disorder and seek treatment.

Figure 19.

Contract for Jeffrey

When Jeffrey doesn't talk back when asked to do something all day,

Then Jeffrey gets 1 point.

Warning! Jeffrey gets one warning per day.

3 points = 1 Reward Activity with Mom

Reward Activities

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| -Play a board game | -Go to ice cream store |
| -Go fishing at the lake | -Go on a nature walk |
| -Go to the park and play | -Bake something |
| -Read a story together | -Play basketball at school |
| -Go to a movie | -Collect shells at the beach |
| -Build Legos | -Go bowling |

I have read and agree with this contract.

Jeffrey

Mom

These actual case studies dramatically portray the challenges of effective parenting when a parent is also suffering from significant emotional difficulties. Similarly, if a sibling is experiencing severe emotional/behavioral problems, other family members are also

impacted. In my clinical experience, however, emotional disturbance within a parent typically has a much more profound impact on their child's behavior and emotional life. Once this becomes evident, it is then the therapist's responsibility to try and lead the parent into treatment. Ultimately, however, it is the parent's decision whether or not to follow through. This can be a particularly difficult issue when it becomes apparent that the parent's emotional problem is related to substance abuse.

Parental/Sibling Substance Abuse Issues. While teenagers are usually the focus of substance abuse concerns, drug and alcohol problems are present in all age groups. Parents, therefore, are no exception. If the problem is severe, effective parenting is clearly compromised and some degree of child maladjustment is inevitable. The greatest challenges are identifying the problem and motivating the individual to seek treatment. The issue of denial, once again, is often a major obstacle. Just as parental substance abuse often fuels significant dysfunction into the family system, sibling substance abuse can also negatively impact the system. In either case, appropriate substance abuse treatment is essential.

Marital Dysfunction. In my estimation, some degree of marital dysfunction is to be expected in the best of marriages. Severe marital dysfunction, however, often yields toxic results to the family system. Most notably, child behavior problems are almost always present. There are many reasons for this. The most obvious being that the child is acting out feelings of insecurity, anger and fear. On a more subtle level, children often misbehave to shift the focus away from their parents conflicts and onto themselves. If the parents are busy dealing with the child's problem behaviors, there is less time for them to argue amongst themselves. Furthermore, this often unites the parents in a common cause, i.e., dealing with their "child's problem". Once again, the child becomes the identified patient when, in fact, the real problems are within the larger family system, more specifically the marriage. Consider the following case study.

Derek, Age 11

Derek presented with a variety of parental concerns. Most recently, he hit his mother repeatedly in the shoulder when she refused to let go of his arm after a conflict erupted. While he did have a history of defiance and anger outbursts, there were no prior physical episodes. In addition, Derek had become very controlling. He would often interrogate his parents about their whereabouts, activities, exactly when they were returning

home, etc. These behaviors were fueling a variety of conflicts and problems within the family. We utilized contracting (see Figure 20) which worked quite well initially. In time, however, Derek's behavior problems shifted. He now was focused on hunger strikes when he wouldn't get his way. In addition, he was having phantom stomach aches which would keep him out of school and quickly disappear later that day. This phenomenon of shifting behavior problems is sometimes referred to as "symptom substitution". When symptom substitution occurs, it usually means that a deeper underlying emotional problem is fueling the various behaviors which are merely symptoms of the underlying issue. In subsequent sessions it became clearer that his father's anger control problems as well as chronic marital dysfunction indirectly fueled Derek's behavioral difficulties. This also explained Derek's maladaptive need to take control of his parents and ultimately their relationship. Unfortunately Derek's father refused to address his own anger issues, which limited our efforts to comprehensively treat Derek's behavioral problems.

Figure 20.

Contract for Derek

When Derek has a good day; not angry or expresses his anger appropriately (write or say) **AND** listens to parents' requests,

Then Derek earns 1 point.

Warning! Derek can have one warning per day.

4 points = 1 Reward Activity

Reward Activities

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------|
| -Go out to lunch | -Go bowling |
| -Go to the park | -Wash the car |
| -Go to the movies | -Rent a movie |

I have read and agree with this contract.

Derek

Dad

Clearly the solution to significant marital dysfunction issues is to first be aware of the role that marriage problems can play in fueling undesirable behaviors in children. Second if there is significant motivation by both parents, efforts need to be made to resolve their marital difficulties. Remember that conflict is a natural part of any relationship; it's how we resolve our conflicts that results in marital success or failure. If marital therapy is an option, it is important that both husband and wife feel comfortable with the marriage therapist. Seeking professional help, will be discussed further at the end of this chapter.

Divorce Issues. Divorce is becoming an increasingly common experience for children and their families. Experts say that by the age of eighteen, most children will have experienced divorce. While the phenomenon of divorce is becoming more commonplace, the emotional experience of divorce is still very difficult for the children affected by it. The current research literature on divorce indicates that children may emotionally re-experience divorce issues as they move through different developmental stages. Consequently, the old notion to treat divorce as a one-time crisis has changed. We now know that children may periodically need help coping with divorce issues long after the actual event. For example, children of divorce often revisit issues of monogamy, trust and intimacy as they develop an interest in dating. The degree of dysfunction leading up to and following the divorce impacts the child's overall emotional adjustment. Most studies, for example, point to interparental hostility as the best predictor of children's adjustment later in life. Consequently, the more arguing and hostility between the parents leading up to and following the divorce, the poorer the child's emotional adjustment will be.

A child's emotional adjustment to divorce issues, therefore, is another possible source of undesirable behavior problems. The emotions that divorce brings out in children can be very difficult to manage, both for the child and the parent. It can also be difficult work for the child psychologist, working with the child individually. Several years ago I was working with three separate children who were all having difficulty coping with their parents' divorce. I met with each of them individually and, even though they were comfortable with me and enjoyed attending their sessions, it was very difficult for them to really vent about their divorce-related concerns. One day, mostly out of frustration, I wondered if putting them all together might encourage the therapeutic process. I reviewed the research literature and created a six session support group program aimed at addressing the major emotional issues most commonly experienced by children of divorce. Another therapist referred a

fourth child to the group and we proceeded. A brief description of each of the participants is provided below.

Mikey, Age 8

Mikey was referred specifically to help him deal with his parents' 1½ year separation and upcoming divorce. He appeared to be a timid, somewhat depressed boy who kept his thoughts to himself. In individual sessions, Mikey offered minimal verbal responses and appeared quite troubled. In addition, his parents had significant emotional problems of their own, which compromised their overall functioning as well as parenting ability.

Katherine, Age 9

Katherine was referred for a variety of oppositional behaviors. In addition, Katherine also frequently verbally abused her mother regarding their divorce, even though her parents had divorced over six years prior when she was only three. During our treatment sessions, Katherine was quite verbal if not outspoken but she refused to deal with her hostile feelings towards her mother.

Alan, Age 11

Alan was referred for poor school performance and an overall poor attitude. Alan's parents divorced five years prior. Alan initially lived with his mother. After his mother remarried, Alan had trouble with his step-father. Consequently, he went to live with his father two years ago and has had infrequent subsequent contact with his mother. His father also remarried and currently Alan was having trouble getting along with his step-mother. During our individual sessions, Alan passively sabotaged all of our behavioral contracting efforts by continuing to be completely irresponsible and was unable to offer any explanation. What did become clearer during our sessions was Alan's underlying collective anger towards his natural and step parents.

Vanessa, Age 11

Vanessa was seen by another therapist for two years. Her mother terminated counseling one month prior to the start of our divorce group. Vanessa's parents separated a

year earlier, after being married for twenty-two years. During the year of separation, Vanessa gained twenty pounds. Vanessa's therapist indicated that it was very difficult to get her to talk about her family issues and her feelings. I had no prior contact with Vanessa until our first group meeting.

Beginning with our first group session, it became clear that these children were really benefiting from the support group format. As the sessions progressed, poignant issues and experiences that never surfaced in months of individual counseling sessions were being spontaneously offered as the children shared their stories with each other. Mikey shared his secret desire that his parents would reunite and his hope that his mother would "take one more shot at it". Katherine was able to acknowledge her underlying resentment towards her father for remarrying and her jealousy of his new son. Alan recalled that on the night his parents told him they were getting divorced he misbehaved for the sitter and always felt that it contributed to their decision. Vanessa actually assumed a leadership position in the group, sharing her frustration regarding spending less time with her father. At the end of the program, it was apparent that the children had all benefited. In fact they voiced great disappointment when the group came to an end.

I am currently privileged to be collaborating with a local school district which is piloting an after-school divorce group program for children in third through fifth grades. It is amazing to see how powerful these programs are in providing children with an opportunity to vent some very difficult feelings and learn how to cope more effectively. While these programs are not as widely available as they need to be, it is worth the effort to try and locate support groups for these children.

Unmet Emotional Needs. As we have discussed previously, we all have basic physical needs that are required to sustain life. Namely, the need for food, air, water and shelter. At the same time we have specific emotional needs which are essential to our overall psychological well being. As children our primary emotional needs revolve around the need for love and nurturance. If a child experiences an ongoing absence of love or nurturance from their caretaker(s), emotional disturbances and maladaptive behavioral patterns are sure to emerge. In addition, unlike physical needs, emotional needs are subjective. So that even if love and nurturance are in the hearts of parents, which is usually the case, children may not subjectively perceive this and thus it doesn't register. This is also part of the high price paid for an over-reliance upon negative/punitive parenting strategies. It's tough to sense love

from someone that's frequently yelling at you! In some clinical cases, unmet emotional needs, whether real or imagined, are at the heart of the observed emotional/behavioral problems. That is why the structured activity rewards are so powerful. Regardless of the specific behavior that is being addressed, the reinforcement ensures positive parent-child interaction and therefore presents the opportunity for a sense of love and nurturance to occur. Children's need for love and nurturance fuels the practice of the desired behavior. There are times, however, where behavioral contracting is not enough, such as when the experienced unmet emotional needs of the child are too great. This can occur for many different reasons. The most obvious being some form of emotional neglect on the part of the parent. In my clinical experience, however, this has rarely been the case. More commonly this is a function of the parent being a poor communicator of their genuine positive feelings towards their child. This can also occur when there are severe traumatic disruptions within the family system. Examples of severe traumatic disruptions include: divorce (particularly hostile and ongoing), severe emotional/physical illness of a family member, and death of a family member. During and after these events, children often require "an extra dose" of love and nurturance. Unfortunately, due to the circumstances at these times, a reduced amount of love and nurturance is usually all that's available. Consequently, there is fertile ground for emotional and behavioral problems to develop. To better illustrate this point, consider the following case studies.

Cory, Age 9

Cory was referred by his mother for a variety of disruptive/defiant behaviors both at home and in school. At school Cory was the class clown, often distracted from his work and acting silly. At home he was constantly making strange faces and noises, repeating things and ignoring his mother's requests. She reported that, "He has to be threatened before he does anything" that she asks him to do. His mother also admitted that she gets so angry that she periodically hits him after losing her temper. Unfortunately, Cory's father died 2½ years earlier of a heart attack. While Cory attended and benefited from a children's grief support group, he was still struggling with his father's death.

In our first session, Cory appeared sullen and somewhat anxious, as evidenced by frequent facial twitches. He minimized his behavioral problems at school and seemed to project blame on his mother and younger brother for his problems at home. He admitted that he still had unresolved issues concerning his father. Apparently Cory's father was quite inactive and smoked heavily. As a result, Cory blamed him for causing his own heart attack.

Cory also believed that if his father had cared more about his family, he would have taken better care of himself. To help him improve his behavior at home, I suggested to Cory that we create a structured activity rewards contract and discussed potential activity rewards. While Cory appeared only mildly interested in the idea, he agreed to give it a try.

In our next session, Cory and his mother negotiated a behavioral contract to reduce some of the problem behaviors at home (see Figure 21). I met with them again the following week and while Cory had five good days, his mother neglected to provide an activity reward. We discussed this and agreed to continue the contract.

Figure 21.

Contract for Cory

When Cory does not make faces, noises, repeat things over and over for a whole day with his entire family,

Then Cory gets 1 point for each good day.

Warning! Cory gets one warning per day.

4 points = 1 Reward Activity

Reward Activities

- | | |
|---------------|--------------------|
| -Arcades | -Fun Castle |
| -Play cards | -Bowling |
| -Rent a movie | -Go to a movie |
| -Go fishing | -Pick a restaurant |

Bonus!! 30 Points = Sporting event!!

I have read and agree with this contract.

Cory

Mom

We met one week later and while Cory continued to do well with the contract as did his mother in providing the activities, he still seemed unhappy and agitated. I requested time alone with Cory and we quickly got onto the topic of his mother.

Cory: "I hate her!... She yells at me all the time and is stupid!"

Me: "Do you think that your Mom likes you?"

Cory: "I doubt it!"

Me: "Do you think she loves you?"

Cory: "I doubt it!"

Me: "She never tells you that she loves you?"

Cory: "She used to say it a lot more."

Aha! Child psychologists live for moments like this! In that single sentence Cory's underlying need for his mother's love and nurturance became abundantly clear. She used to say she loved him a lot more, but since his father's death she was probably quite harried and overwhelmed and didn't say it or demonstrate it as much as she had before. Cory therefore perceived it to mean that either his mother didn't love him as much as before or maybe not at all. This, at a time when he was struggling with the abrupt discontinuance of his father's love as a function of his death. Not to mention that he was convinced that if his father had really loved him, he would have taken better care of himself!

Once aware of the underlying issues, Cory's mom was easily able to overtly provide her son with what was covertly there all along, her genuine love and affection. We also revised our contract to shift focus onto Cory's compliance to his mother's requests (see Figure 22). Needless to say, Cory made significant progress quickly. His behavior problems both at home and in school were much less frequent. It was also dramatic to see the significant reduction of his facial twitches and general anxiety, not to mention an increase in smiling!

Figure 22.

Revised Contract for Cory

When Cory is a good listener with his Mom,

Then Cory gets 1 point for each good day.

Bonus! One extra point for 3 days in a row.

4 points = 1 Reward Activity

Reward Activities

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|
| -Arcades | -Rent a movie |
| -Fun Castle | -Go to a movie |
| -Ice skating | -Go fishing |
| -Play video game
(15 - 30 minutes) | -Pick a restaurant |

30 Points = Sporting event!!

I have read and agree with this contract.

Cory

Mom

Laura, Age 11

Laura was brought in by her mother at the suggestion of Laura's maternal aunt. The primary referral issues were Laura's anger and social isolation. While Laura denied the problem, her mother had observed increasing anger outbursts, reporting that "it seems like she has a lot built up". Laura directed her anger at her mother and maternal grandmother who also resided with them. Apparently Laura never met her natural father. Her mother also remarried and divorced. Laura's step-father has infrequent contact with her, often little more than birthday cards. While Laura had a very close relationship with her maternal grandfather, he died suddenly two years ago of a heart attack at the age of fifty-six. In addition to all of this, her grandmother was diagnosed with terminal colon and liver cancer. Laura had a lot of reasons to be angry! Socially, Laura "stays in the house, doesn't go out, has few friends, watches TV, listens to music".

Over the next three months, I met with Laura both individually and with her mother. Her grandmother's condition progressively worsened and placed additional demands on the household, particularly for Laura's mother. As Laura was able to verbalize her feelings and focus on goals to improve her social life, her anger and social isolation diminished.

Laura returned five months later, accompanied by her aunt. I began by speaking just with Laura. She updated me on what had transpired since our last session. Unfortunately, her grandmother had died two months earlier. Laura had also gotten word to her father that she wanted to meet him. Unfortunately, he refused. On a positive note, she did get to meet her older half-sister from her father's earlier marriage. In addition, her grades continued to improve and socially Laura boasted about a boy who was interested in her at school. I then included Laura's aunt in our session. Her aunt reported that she felt Laura was lonely and needed someone to talk to. I asked about Laura's mother, "I barely see her!" Laura exclaimed. Her aunt went on to explain that in addition to a busy work schedule, Laura's mother seemed to go out a lot, subsequent to the grandmother's death. This was easy to understand, given the increasing demands that the grandmother's illness had placed upon Laura's mother. As we continued to speak Laura began to weep and stated, "I just feel left out". We discussed the importance of Laura's expressing these feelings to her mother.

Five days later I met with Laura and her mother. In that short time things had changed dramatically. Shortly after our previous session, Laura actually wrote down her feelings and called her mother at work to read them to her. While her mother knew that she wasn't spending enough time with Laura, she was unaware of the depth of her daughter's emotional pain. Over the weekend they had ordered a pizza and watched their favorite

shows together. The next day they went out to dinner. Laura's mom agreed that they would talk more together after she comes home from work and do something together every other weekend, as Laura had a friend who often slept over.

In the final two sessions I had with Laura she was a different person. Much more content and giggly, she told me about a variety of school friends and one boy in particular who was interested in her, "He's Italian!" she exclaimed. In addition, she spoke with excitement about various school projects, including a successful oral report which she gave recently.

Once again, a dramatic positive shift in emotional and behavioral disturbances occurs once the unmet emotional needs issues are uncovered and addressed. These case studies also highlight the importance and profound impact of positive parental feedback and attention.

When to Seek Professional Help

When the best parenting techniques fail, it is wise to consider seeking professional assistance. There is no shame in seeking outside help, given that parenting is an impossible job to always do well! In addition, seeking professional help is a reflection of your concern and your effort as a parent to help resolve your child's difficulties. When you observe significant symptoms, like the ones described in this chapter, the sooner you obtain professional help the better. Putting it off only exacerbates the problems and makes them more difficult to resolve quickly.

Many people hesitate to seek psychological treatment, fearing that it will go on forever with no guarantee of improvement. This is rarely the case. In many instances one to three consultations is sufficient in addressing basic parenting issues. Even if more in-depth treatment is involved, you can expect to see some improvement within six to ten sessions. If the problems are more chronic and severe, ongoing or intermittent treatment may be necessary. A competent professional should be able to discuss these concerns with you after doing an initial assessment, which usually takes one to three sessions to complete.

There are a variety of counseling professionals to choose from. These include: psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, marriage family and child counselors, and clergy. Of course, I am partial to licensed psychologists in part because they have the most formal educational training in psychotherapy issues and techniques, but mostly because I am one!

Ultimately, however, you need to pick someone who you and your child can work with effectively.

Let's consider more carefully how you can choose the right professional for your child and family. Due to cost concerns, it's usually a good idea to first research your health insurance benefits for psychological services. If you are covered, you need to follow the procedures outlined by your specific insurance plan. It is also important to seek someone who has experience working with children of similar age and who have similar problems. Remember that you are the customer. Make sure that you ask questions and are satisfied with the answers. Similarly, if your insurance company refers you to a specific health care provider, it is your right to request another provider if you are dissatisfied. If you do have a choice, ask someone you can trust if they could recommend a counselor. When you initially meet with the counselor ask questions. Ask about their professional training, experience, specialty areas, orientation, and their specific treatment plan for your child and family. Remember that in every profession, some are better than others. Make an effort to find someone who is competent and skilled, someone that you and your child feel good about. It is also important to remember that it's what goes on between sessions that counts. One hour a week with no follow-up by you and/or your child will probably not yield significant results. Working as a team will dramatically increase the chances for a positive outcome.

Final Thoughts

I often joke with parents that the reason we don't offer parent training before people have children is that they wouldn't have any! Most of us enter parenthood naively, only to be quickly jolted to reality by the unending challenges that confront us. Our initial goal of enjoying our children becomes increasingly sidetracked by frequently occurring disciplinary problems that demand our attention. The overall goal of this book is to effectively help you reverse this process and reduce your discipline problems by using efficient parenting strategies which increase positive interaction and enable you to enjoy your children as originally planned.

As a psychologist, there is no greater professional joy than positively impacting the life of a child and the relationships within the family. Having a parent approach me in the grocery store and say: "You probably don't remember me but I heard your parenting talk and tried some of your suggestions and they worked great!" does wonders for my own self-esteem. It is therefore for ultimately selfish reasons that I wrote this book. I hope that by reading it, some new seeds will be planted in your mind that will grow into more effective parenting strategies and a happier, healthier family life. The toughest part is getting started. Even if you're doubtful about some of the ideas presented, give them a try. You may be surprised to discover how powerful their impact will be on retraining not only your child, but also yourself as a parent.

You will also be much more successful if both you and your spouse work as a team. It is not a good idea, however, for you to tell your spouse how to improve their parenting skills. I am a parenting expert, yet my wife can be quite resistant to my parenting "suggestions". This is because "advice" is often experienced as criticism (e.g., "Let me tell you what you are doing wrong"). Instead, encourage your spouse to read this book on their own. Afterwards, you can discuss it together and collaboratively work on your joint gameplan. It is also beneficial to provide each other with positive feedback regarding your respective efforts. If you anticipate that your spouse will be resistant to reading this book, consider Step Six (Use your most powerful reward to systematically shape appropriate behaviors - your time and attention). Think of some "activity" that would motivate your spouse and offer it as an incentive for their efforts!

At the end of the book, I've provided a list of the Seven Steps to Parenting Success (Appendix 1) and the step by step instructions for constructing your own Activity Rewards

Contract (Appendix 2). These are meant to be cut out and placed somewhere as a visual reference and reminder. So regardless of what your mother told you, it is all right to cut **these** pages out of the book!

I hope that you have enjoyed reading *Parenting Essentials* and are able to effectively use the techniques provided. More importantly, however, remember to enjoy your children! It may be hell at times, but being a parent is truly something to treasure. There's nothing else like it in the world!

Appendix 1

The Seven Steps to Parenting Success

1. Go easy on yourself, parenting is an impossible job to always do well.
2. Focus more of your attention on positive behaviors and less on negative behaviors. Catch your child being good.
3. Reduce angry outbursts, which often fuel negative behavior, by using more effective communication techniques.
4. Be more aware of the consequences which follow your child's positive and negative behaviors.
5. Empower your child by including his/her opinion in discipline decisions. Where appropriate, try to use your child's suggestions.
6. Use your most powerful reward to systematically shape your child's appropriate behaviors - your time and attention.
7. Improve your child's self-esteem by helping to create success experiences.

Appendix 2

Step by Step Instructions to Create Your Own Activity Rewards Contract

1. Decide on the specific behavior.
2. Brainstorm fun activities with your child.
3. Discuss the specific behavior with your child.
4. Negotiate the terms of the contract together and write it out.
5. Review the contract together and make corrections where needed.
6. Read and sign the contract.
7. Encourage success; be the “good coach”.
8. Monitor progress.
9. Follow-up as soon as possible with earned activity rewards.
10. Revise the contract as needed.
11. When appropriate, phase out the contract.