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Brouillette, Liane

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Help Your Child to Thrive

Making the Best of a Struggling Public Education System

LIANE BROUILLETTE

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Preface



There are inherent contradictions built into public schools. The large number of students to be served forces school districts to adopt a bureaucratic structure. Taxpayers want assurances that their money will be well-spent, so school districts are organized to produce predictable results. However, predictable behavior is not natural to inquiring young minds. Children are born with widely varying talents and develop at differing rates.

Given these contradictions, how are public schools to live up to the expectations spelled out in state curriculum guidelines that specify what each child is expected to know and be able to do at the end of each school year? The short answer is that contemporary public schools focus on making sure all students achieve minimum levels of proficiency, as measured by standardized test scores. Social-emotional issues like motivation are largely left to the family. Therefore, much of a student's success depends on the relationships and preparation experienced at home.

From first-day jitters in kindergarten to the excitement of high school graduation, parents do what they can to help their child succeed. Yet it is difficult for parents to know where their help is most needed. This book warns that—since social-emotional development tends to get little attention in school—when families are not prepared to fill in any gaps their child's emotional growth may be impeded. This, in turn, can hamper a student's

development of social skills, industriousness, and the ability to cope with stress.

In practical terms, the narrow focus of public schools on preparing students to meet minimum standards of achievement means that parents must do more than just prepare their children to work hard, get along well with others, and handle unexpected setbacks. Families must also prepare children to be self-motivated and resilient. This book provides guideposts to assist parents in meeting these challenges.

Acknowledgments



“**H**ey, Mom. Why don’t you write something the average person could read without a dictionary?” Good question. Leave it to the younger generation to get right to the point.

As a college professor, I have long suspected that many people find the precise, careful language normally used in academic articles to be ... well ... boring. This comment from my own children confirmed it. Recently, though, I have had some success in using examples from popular culture to spice up lectures. I thought: why not try the same thing in a book?

Most of all, however, this book was brought to fruition as a result my husband’s patient urging to write something the general public would find useful: “The public pays for university research. Shouldn’t the average person benefit?”

I would, therefore, like to express my deep appreciation to my husband Jason and to my children Eric and Marie for their support and their suggestions for this book.

In addition, I would like to express my sincere thanks to my copy editor, Barbara Cohen, and to my research assistant, Ilona Missakian.

Finally, I would like to express my heart-felt thanks to Maureen Burns, the production editor of the *Journal for Learning through the Arts* and the Learning through the Arts and Sciences book series at the University of California, Irvine. You kept us all on track!

Chapter 1



Succeeding When Schools May Not

“**B**oy held in pot brownie incident,” announced a front-page story in a small suburban newspaper. Three 7th graders had gone to the principal’s office at their middle school, complaining of stomach problems. They were taken to a local hospital for observation. A 12-year-old boy was arrested on suspicion of bringing a drug-laced brownie to school.

Not far away, one of the most academically competitive high schools in the state was in turmoil. The school board was considering whether to expel almost a dozen students who had been implicated in a cheating scandal. Encouraged by a private tutor, students had used an electronic device often associated with industrial espionage to break into the school computer network. This allowed them to steal advance copies of tests and to change final grades.

Unfortunately, these are not isolated events. Learning about such incidents, parents may assume that local educators are “just not doing their job.” Yet, such problems are widespread. Why? While contemporary teachers are as well-qualified as their predecessors in the 1950s when such problems were rare, the social consensus that

helped teachers of earlier generations to enforce social norms has faded. The cause of this cultural change has been hotly debated. For families, however, there is a more immediate question: How can we help our child cope?

Newspaper stories tend to focus on the students at the center of a specific incident. What the news media miss is the cynicism fostered in young people whose peers repeatedly cheat, disrupt class, bully classmates, or experiment with banned substances with few consequences. Students who have struggled to live by ethical values can easily come to doubt these values.

An invitation to Parental Awareness

The vulnerability of public schools and their students is increased by the sense of *learned helplessness* that is the flip side of cynicism. When people or animals experience uncontrollable events or situations, they learn to expect continued lack of control. A classic example is the elephant trainer who ties the leg of a young elephant with a grass rope. The elephant calf cannot break the grass rope and gives up trying. Years later, the adult elephant can still be tethered by a thin rope because it does not occur to him to try to break away. He has learned to *feel* helpless and therefore *becomes* helpless.

There is strong evidence that large numbers of students are unhappy at school. Each day an estimated 160,000 students refuse to go to school because they dread the physical and verbal aggression of peers. Many more students end up attending school in a chronic state of anxiety and depression because of verbal bullying from fellow students. In a few cases, peer harassment has eventually driven students to suicide.

How widespread are the problems? In response to a 2011 survey by the Centers for Disease Control, 25.6% of 9th to 12th grade students reported they had been offered, sold, or given an illegal drug on school property within the past 12 months. Among high school

students, 47.4% reported they had engaged in sexual intercourse; 8% of students reported they had been physically forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to; and 6.2% of students reported having had sexual intercourse for the first time before age 13.

Parents often feel helpless when their child complains about problems at school. Yet, when parents are able to organize around a shared concern, the resulting community initiatives can have a significant effect on youth behavior. Since 1991, the percentage of high school students who never or rarely wear seat belts has declined from 26% to 8%; the percentage of students who were in a car with a driver who had been drinking alcohol in the past 30 days has declined from 40% to 24%.

The goal of this book is to show parents how they *can* make a difference. Considerable emphasis will be put on fostering the quality of *resilience*, the ability to bounce back from stress or adversity. A key determinant of individual success is the ability to work through the emotions of disappointment, anxiety, and loneliness. Resilience is learned; it develops as people grow up and gain better thinking and self-management skills. Before exploring this issue in more depth, however, it will be helpful to take a closer look at what causes so many contemporary young people to be unhappy at school.

Gaining insight into your child's experiences at school

Since World War II, a profound change has taken place in the legal status of young people. Before the 1960s, it was assumed that the innocence of children required special legal protections. Then court decisions began to redefine the rights of children and adolescents to more closely resemble the rights accorded to adults. However, that new freedom had costs.

When student-on-student conflicts arise, a bully must now be caught in the act—or a witness must step forward—before punishment may be imposed. This means there are fewer checks

on students who are inclined to harass their peers. Savvy parents provide their children with social skills that help to inoculate them against the impact of this turbulent peer milieu. To gain a better understanding of the youth culture in which your child may be immersed at school, let's take a look at books and movies with which large numbers of young people have identified.

The fictional dilemmas explored in a popular young adult movie like *The Hunger Games* can provide insight into the mindset of its youthful fans. Such films can also serve as an easy starting point for parent-child discussions. Talking about a fictional character tends to be less daunting than discussing events that are closer to home. What shared adolescent experiences might have created a ready audience for a film whose plot revolves around teens being compelled to fight to the death for the entertainment of adults? As Stephen King observed in his review of the book, "The winner gets a life of ease; the losers get death."¹

Katniss Everdeen, the teenage protagonist of *The Hunger Games* has volunteered to take part in the "games" to protect her younger sister, who otherwise would have been forced to compete. Set in a post-apocalyptic North America, *The Hunger Games* explores themes of deprivation, helplessness, and oppression. Laura Miller has argued in *The New Yorker* that the attraction of the book trilogy upon which the films are based becomes intelligible if one thinks of the narrative as a fever-dream allegory of the high school social experience:

Adults dump teenagers in the viper pit of high school, spouting a lot of sentimental drivel about what a wonderful stage of life it's supposed to be. The rules are arbitrary, unfathomable, and subject to sudden change. A brutal social hierarchy prevails, with the rich, the good-looking, and the athletic lording their advantages over everyone else. To survive, you have to be totally fake. Adults don't

seem to understand how high the stakes are; your whole life could be over, and they act like it's just some "phase"! Everyone's always watching you...²

When Katniss is delivered into the arena where the "games" take place, she finds herself under constant surveillance by the hidden cameras that enable the grim proceedings to be televised nation-wide. How does that relate to adolescent experience? Cell phone cameras and text messaging have become so common among teens that the constant commentary on everyone's activities can feel like surveillance. The feeling of being watched may unwittingly be intensified by parental actions. Given the dangers of contemporary society, many children find themselves growing up under nearly continuous adult supervision. If parents provide no outlet for natural youthful yearnings for experimentation and adventure, the parents' desire to provide protection can inadvertently encourage risky or self-defeating behavior.

But, what evidence is there that actual high school students find the local youth culture to be problematic? The quote below comes from an essay written by four male teens:

To many adults it may seem that high school kids are not serious about school, but maybe it's because their attention is consumed by two simultaneous pressure-cooker systems—endlessly constricting, endlessly enervating. First, they must push constantly for performance in class and on tests. Second, they are caught in a social game.³

Playing the “Great Game of High School”

The essay quoted above was featured in the influential book, *Schools that Learn*. Regarding the social game being played at their high school, the teens asserted:

Parents, teachers, and administrators may claim that every student has the same opportunities, is accorded the same respect, or plays by the same rules, but we aren't, and don't. Adults may think that they are stressing academics, but they're not. Instead, the adults of the system have colluded in setting up [the game's] hidden rules; and [the game's] practices mirror the game that they play out in the 'real world.'⁴

Mapping out the opposing interests and values of the major cliques at their school, the teens envisioned the primary social groups as occupying the four points on a compass. On their map, the group called *preps* occupy the “north”, *freaks* the “east”, *Gs* (derived from “gangsta”) the “south”, and *hicks* the “west”. Membership in these groups shaped how students dressed, acted, and moved within the school. The largest social chasms existed between groups that occupied opposite ends of the north/south or east/west axis; subgroups that blended the values of two neighboring groups tended to form at the northeast, southeast, southwest, and northwest points of the compass.

Different groupings may prevail at other schools. Yet there is considerable evidence that the “Great Game of High School” exists in public schools across the United States. Stanford anthropologist Penelope Eckert spent three years exploring the social hierarchies that existed at several Detroit-area high schools. She argued that the favoritism shown by administrators to students in a group like the “preps” was based on a shortage of resources for school activities.

Therefore activities like student council were competitive. So, a social hierarchy developed that was made up of less than 5 percent of all students. These students decided what dances would be held, who would do the decorations, what fund raising events would be held for the prom, etc.

This high school social hierarchy posed daunting challenges for working class teens who wished to escape a low-income future. Many gave up trying to achieve academic success when they realized the cost of leaving their social group and how much about themselves they would have to change to be accepted elsewhere. Students who were able to make the transition—and ultimately go on to develop successful careers—ran the risk of feeling that they did not fit in anywhere. For such students, feelings of belonging that are rooted in strong family connections can play a key role by staving off anxiety and encouraging emotional resilience. But how did the peer culture at American high schools come to exert be such a dominant influence?

Impact of court decisions undercutting the “in loco parentis” doctrine

In the decades preceding World War II, the extension of *in loco parentis* (“in the place of a parent”) authority to educational institutions was a conspicuous feature of the United States educational system. However, when the Supreme Court granted eighteen-year-olds adult privileges in 1971, the disciplinary authority that educational institutions wielded began to wane. In 1975, the Court held in *Goss v. Lopez* that the suspension of high school students for alleged disruptive or disobedient conduct required some sort of notice of charges and a prior hearing. In dissenting from the original Supreme Court opinion, Justice Lewis Powell warned:

The State’s interest . . . is in the proper functioning of the public school system for the benefit of *all*

pupils and the public generally. Few rulings would interfere more extensively in the daily functioning of schools than subjecting routine discipline to the formalities and judicial oversight of due process.

As Justice Powell warned, the unintended result of requiring public schools to focus on procedure has been the gradual undermining of the ability of educators to exercise professional judgment. The impact was magnified by the fact that the 1970s was an era when the youth culture had made it fashionable for students to question authority. Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, summed up the problem: “All you need is one kid who sits in the back of the room shouting put-downs at other students to guarantee that very little learning takes place.”⁵

In the ensuing years, federal legislation has largely eliminated the *in loco parentis* authority of schools (with the exception of “zero tolerance” policies relating to possession of weapons and drugs). The court-mandated emphasis on procedural correctness has deprived teachers and principals of the authority to respond to difficult situations in a timely manner. In the words of a junior high principal who had lived through this shift in disciplinary policy: “Twenty or thirty years ago kids who habitually misbehaved were easy to distinguish and we could do something about it immediately. Today I have to build a record.”⁶

Feeling that the procedures required to enforce classroom discipline were too onerous, many teachers took no disciplinary action except in egregious cases of student misconduct. The effect on classroom learning is described in *The Shopping Mall High School*, which looked at the type of teacher/student interactions that were taking place in many schools by the mid-1980s.

The advent of “The Shopping Mall High School”

In *The Shopping Mall High School*, authors Powell, Farrar, and Cohen compared the teen-centered American high school to a shopping mall where adolescents could pick and choose the classes they wanted with little obligation to study subjects that did not appeal to them. The authors focused on the 70 percent of students who were included in neither the special programs high schools developed for highly motivated students nor in those for “at risk” students:

Few characteristics of the shopping mall high school are more significant than the existence of unspecial students in the middle who are ignored and poorly served. Teachers and administrators talk a great deal about the problem.⁷

One reason the “unspecial student” could slide through with only a cursory knowledge of the subject matter was the existence of classroom treaties that allowed the “unspecial” to avoid work. Little was usually expected of these students and little was done to change their lot.

For the middle students, a school’s neutral stance on pushing students has the effect of making minimum requirements maximum standards.⁸

U.S. public schools had become caught in a contradiction. There were laws that made school attendance compulsory. Yet, once students were in the building, there was comparatively little teachers could do to compel a high level of performance. Most students progressed through the school system, passing from grade to grade, whether they choose to do much in the way of schoolwork or not. A few had to repeat a grade. On the whole, however, penalties

for academic failure were far lower than in European and Asian educational systems where a rigorous school-leaving test determined whether or not a student qualified for a diploma. Since the 1980s, many U.S. states have instituted exit examinations for high school graduation, but these tests tend to focus only on enforcing minimum standards of achievement.

In Europe, the teacher's role at an academic high school resembles that of a coach; the teacher helps students acquire the knowledge and skills needed to pass a school-leaving test administered by an external government agency. In contrast, American teachers must serve as both instructor and judge—not just teaching but also passing judgment on the adequacy of each student's academic performance. Once a student receives a passing grade for a semester's work, the student is assumed to have mastered that content.

The American teacher's dual role has resulted in a subtle (or not-so-subtle) negotiation process, in which students attempt to “wear down” the teacher, subtly bartering good behavior for passing grades. This process gives rise to the informal “classroom treaties” described in *The Shopping Mall High School*. At the national level, the impact of these classroom treaties became visible in falling achievement levels and lower standardized test scores.

Public reaction to “A Nation at Risk”

Publication of the report, *A Nation at Risk*, by the National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983 stimulated anxiety that a “rising tide of mediocrity” was threatening U.S. preeminence in commerce, science, and technology. The report asserted: “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.” What evidence was there to support this claim? In the first grade the math skills of American and Asian children were similar. Yet, by fifth grade, the gap in achievement had

expanded to where there was virtually no overlap in the scores of American children and their peers in Japan, China, and Taiwan. By eleventh grade, only 14.5% of Chinese and 8.0% of Japanese students attained scores below the *average* American score.

The nations where scores on international tests were highest had a national curriculum driven by standardized tests. Political pressure grew for greater implementation of standardized testing in the United States. State legislatures tightened graduation requirements and mandated high-stakes tests, which could be used to judge the effectiveness of public schools. Yet, the standardized tests mandated in the U.S. differed from the testing regimes in the highest-scoring nations. Most U.S. tests were “high stakes” only for the schools. The school careers of students taking the tests were unaffected by the results. There was little incentive to try hard. But, since schools *were* penalized for bad performance, schools started teaching to the tests and narrowing the curriculum so as to focus on those topics that were most likely to be tested. As a result, many American students graduate with little knowledge of history, geography, art, or music.

Aware of these constraints on public schools, proactive parents learn to be tactful but knowledgeable consumers of educational services, supportive of teachers but prepared to act as their child’s advocate when needed. Since public schools in the U.S. were originally set up to make sure all citizens possessed basic knowledge and skills, there is a tendency to focus on getting all students to a minimum level. Advanced courses are offered, but not required. Parents can play a key role in encouraging their child to achieve beyond the minimal level. However, the most important support provided by parents is not academic in nature.

Proactive parenting is a shared quest to develop each child's unique capabilities.

Albert Einstein once observed that education is what remains after one has forgotten what one learned in school. Few adults now remember the geometrical proofs or historical dates they learned from textbooks. What stays with us throughout life are the skills and attitudes that we absorb on a deeper level, those that become an on-going part of our repertoire of behavior. Much of this learning takes place at home. Proactive parents understand the fundamental importance of helping children build a strong foundation in six key areas, through:

- Developing confidence
- Building human connections and a feeling of belonging
- Learning from consequences
- Nurturing emotional intelligence
- Acquiring a sense of agency
- Making wise decisions.

A chapter will be dedicated to each of these qualities. The goal of raising healthy and confident children is within reach. However, in our media-saturated culture, the school-age children of even very careful parents can be inadvertently exposed to demoralizing influences. So, it may be helpful to begin with some common pitfalls of which parents should be aware.

***The role of effective parents:
Not necessarily what you'd expect***

Parents who believe they should always put their child first show a misunderstanding of how young people learn. The “helicopter parent” who hovers over a child, catering to the child’s every need,

does the child no favors. Children who grow up seeing their parents serving as taxi drivers, delivery service, alarm clock, and financial analyst—all at the same time—see that their parents are not taking care of themselves. When these children get older, many will also place themselves last.

The first duty of parents is to set a good example. What does this mean? Children do not learn about healthy behavior from lectures. Young people learn to establish healthy personal boundaries and priorities from role models:

The way they handle fighting frustration, solving problems, getting along with other people, language, posture, movements—everything is learned by watching the big people in their lives. Their all-seeing eyes are scoping out our actions, from learning to talk to learning to drive.⁹

No parenting guide is perfect, but *Parenting with Love and Logic: Teaching Children Responsibility* (2006) by Foster Cline and Jim Fay provides an effective set of strategies for raising self-confident, motivated, and resilient young people. Cline and Fay make two points that surprise many people: 1) many of the most disrespectful and rebellious kids come from homes where they are shown love, just the wrong kind of love; 2) parents who insist on strict adherence to rigid rules tend to raise children who are followers because they never learned to make decisions for themselves. Your child will encounter both types of peers at school.

The first group includes children of helicopter parents who hover over their offspring and rescue them whenever trouble arises. These parents are forever running homework or permission slips to school. They are always pulling their children out of jams. When they see their children hurting, they hurt, too. So, they bail them out, swooping in and shielding their children from teachers, playmates, or anyone else who seems hostile. Unfortunately, the long-term effect

is to produce children who are unequipped for the challenges of life. The most obsessive helicopter parents become fixated on creating a perfect world for their children by launching them into adulthood with the best of credentials. Often such students look impressive on paper, with high grades, extracurricular activities, awards, and honors. Mistakes are swept under the table.

Realizing that their children will enter a competitive world, helicopter parents want to give them every advantage. Some will attack anyone seen as a threat to their child's impeccable credentials. A favorite tactic is to declare their child a victim, initiating a verbal barrage that eventually wears down teachers and school administrators who attempt to set high standards for achievement or behavior. Learning from this example, children of such parents learn to blame others for any lack of success. Only later do these children learn that a perfect image and a spotless school transcript are no substitute for the stamina to reach one's goals through effort and determination. But the children are not the only victims. Achievement itself becomes devalued when school officials, intimidated by parental pressure, shrug off substandard performance.

Peers are also affected by the manipulative ethos of fellow students whose sense of entitlement pushes them to try to undermine or attack peers who might pose a threat to their social status in the group. Often, these are students who have learned to focus on the appearance of success, as opposed to a deeper sense of accomplishment. These same students often try to dominate peers within their own group by insisting on adherence to certain norms of behavior.

A second group of peers have parents who resemble drill sergeants, intent on teaching their children how to act correctly in all situations. The effect is to deprive children of experience in making decisions for themselves while they are still young, when the cost of bad decisions is usually low. Even though such parents assume that their child "will know how to act right," when such children

reach their teens they sometimes make disastrous decisions. They may also be very susceptible to peer pressure, having been trained to subordinate their own judgment to the views of others. In school, such students tend to have trouble working independently.

We have already touched on a third group of students, whose parents may be described as “proactive.” Like other parents, proactive parents feel pain when their child is hurting. They want their child to succeed. However, instead of trying to shape a child’s behavior in accordance with an external set of rules, proactive parents support their child by recognizing the archetypal human emotions behind what the child says. Perhaps another child has threatened to cut off a friendship. The parent responds to the ache behind the child’s words, observing: “It hurts when someone says they don’t want to be your friend anymore. You must feel sad.” The parent knows that the first priority is not to supply a ready-made answer but to keep communication channels open by listening to the child with an open heart.

Parents should not put themselves first at the expense of their children. However, it is important to remember that “good” parents do not always put themselves last, convinced that no sacrifice is too great. When a school-age child only takes and the parent only gives, the overall relationship is not healthy; it is a *one-way* street. Children benefit when parents model striving for a win-win situation. In healthy relationships, giving is a *two-way* street. The parent drives the child to soccer or to play dates; the child contributes by taking responsibility for some household chores. Everyone benefits.

Putting Yourself in Your Child’s Shoes

The quiz below is designed to help parents discover whether, when feeling rushed or frustrated, they may have inadvertently responded to their child in ways that could, over time, begin to undermine the child’s sense of self-reliance. Quickly jot down your

answers. Then we will discuss possible differences between parental intentions and the feelings an interaction might trigger in a child.

1. Do you find yourself calling after your child, saying “Don’t forget... (your lunch, homework, jacket),” or perhaps demanding “Why can’t you ever... (be on time, make your bed, etc.)?”
2. Have you found yourself losing patience as your child fumbles with a new task (tying shoes, preparing his or her own lunch) and then intervened, thinking, “It will be faster if I just do it!”?
3. Do you find yourself stepping in when your child is unsure of how to handle a challenging experience, insisting, “This is why it happened” or “This is what you need to do the fix it”?
4. Do you find yourself sometimes demanding that your child “Pick that up!” or “Put that away!”?
5. Have you caught yourself skipping over what your child accomplished—the toys *were* picked up or the trash *was* taken out—and commenting only on what was *not* done (dirty dishes on the table)?
6. Have you ever caught yourself asking: “How many times do I have to tell you...?”

Each question focuses on a misunderstanding that can arise when an adult forgets what it is like to be a child. Perhaps you remember such moments in your own childhood. As you dashed for the door, a parent called: “Don’t forget your lunch!” You were irked because you could not remember the last time you forgot your lunch. Or, after you forgot to do a task, a frustrated parent demanded “Why can’t you ever _____?” You squirmed uncomfortably, unable to answer. In *Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World*, H. Stephen Glenn and Jane Nelson describe how unthinking remarks from frustrated adults may affect a child. The following discussion draws on their analysis.

How might the adult have handled the forgetfulness described in Question 1 more effectively? What if, instead of assuming a pattern of forgetfulness, the adult had given the child a gentle nudge in the right direction? In the case of the lunch, why not assign a space near the kitchen door where the child can place everything she needs to take to school in the morning? Instead of having to look for it, everything that she needs to put in the school bag would be right there. If tardiness were the problem, an adult would help the child to think through how much time is needed to gather everything needed for soccer practice and to travel to the field where the practice will take place. Although an adult might assume that the child is aware of how much time both activities would take, for children such calculations can be difficult.

Question 2 focuses on another kind of adult reaction. Perhaps you remember, as a child, struggling with a new task such as tying your shoes or preparing your own lunch. Then an adult intervened, taking the attitude: “It will be faster if I do it for you.” In this situation, the child may feel relieved to have someone do the task. Yet, if this happens routinely, it undermines the child’s sense of self-reliance and encourages an attitude of learned helplessness. Instead of tackling a new task, the child starts to hang back and wait for an adult to step in and come to the rescue. Had the adult resisted the impulse to step in and “rescue” the child, the successful struggle to accomplish the new task might, instead, have been a confidence-builder.

While Question 2 focused on a physical task, Question 3 explores a different variety of rescuing behavior. When you were a child, do you remember struggling with a challenging experience, then having an adult intervene, insisting “This is why it happened.” Perhaps the adult told you: “This is what you need to do to fix the situation.” When a child is struggling, parents often try to share their adult insights. But a more helpful approach would be for the adult to help the child think through the problem by talking about what happened, what might have caused it, and what actions might be helpful at this point.

Commands such as those mentioned in Question 4 (“Pick that up!” or “Put that away!”) tend to be irritating even to adults. The instinctive response is resistance and resentment. A child’s response tends to be much better if his or her cooperation is solicited. Instead of issuing a direct order, a parent might say: “It’s almost time for dinner. Could you help me clean up the dining room?” If the problem is more complex than putting toys away, the child might be invited to contribute ideas. A discussion that begins with “How might we...” may take longer than an imposed solution; however, it will create more buy-in. A child’s suggested solution may be less efficient than an adult’s, but implementing it and then discussing how you might do it better next time will increase the child’s sense of ownership and also teach problem solving skills.

Question 5 takes us back to the old conundrum of whether a glass is half-empty or half-full. When dealing with children, there is a real danger when the adult takes the half-empty approach. You probably remember moments when you, as a child or teen, said to yourself: “What’s the use? They only notice what I do wrong. They never see what I do right.” High expectations are good, but they can become destructive if parents point out only inadequacies and neglect to celebrate the intermediate steps in the growth process. When we honor each movement in the right direction, we get better results. When a parent says, “I appreciate the way you put your toys away and took the trash out,” it is best not to follow up with “But I wish you had not left your dirty dishes on the table.” The “but” undermines the compliment. Better to ask, later on, for help in clearing the table. You are likely to be met with a much more positive response.

When adults have a long to-do list and very little time, it can be tempting to make impatient comments like the one in Question 6: “How many times do I have to tell you?...” However, such questions leave a child cornered, with no acceptable answer. The implicit threat is that whatever the child says will disappoint us. So, the child defensively responds with “I don’t know.” If a child is repeatedly

peppered with questions of this type, “I don’t know” can become the all-purpose answer to adult questions, essentially cutting off communication. A more effective approach is for the parent to ask a real question: “What do you think still needs to be done for your room to be clean?” That allows for a real discussion, even though your child may have a differing perception of what it means for a room to be “clean.” By explaining that toys may be stepped on and broken if left on the floor, you transform a battle of wills into a dialogue.

As an alternative, democratic decision-making in which children have an equal vote can be a valuable learning tool. But *not* in every situation. Considering the child’s point of view does not prevent parents from assuming a position of authority and respect. If you do not insist on your parental rights, your child will be deprived of the opportunity to learn how to get along with authority. Parents who refuse to give in when a child makes excessive demands are modeling how to set proper boundaries by refusing to let others walk over them.

Chapter 2 focuses on how parents can help a child to develop self-confidence, beginning in infancy. Five other key building blocks will be discussed in Chapters 3 through 7. All chapters contain a discussion of how parents can help their child develop valued habits and skills. Each chapter also includes advice on supporting a child when problems arise. Each chapter contains an optional diagnostic activity to assist parents in exploring how that chapter’s topic may apply to their family.

Optional Activity: Taking Time to Gather Your Thoughts

Trying to absorb all of the information coming your way during an average day is a bit like trying to drink from a fire hose. The goal of this exercise is to provide a strategy for accessing and making sense of all these scattered impressions, especially in regard to your role as

a parent. This technique is easy and takes only 10 minutes per day. Yet, if you use it consistently, it will help you to become a more aware and insightful parent. Here's how:

- 1) Get a blank notebook or sketchbook, of whatever kind appeals to you. Write by hand.
- 2) Choose a time of day when you can consistently take 10 minutes to write.
- 3) Although you will be writing for yourself, every person's consciousness has many levels, varying from the absent-minded state you may fall into when carrying out routine tasks to the alertness you feel when you encounter something new. In the daily writing exercise, you should try to access a wise and discerning level of awareness, where new insights and creative solutions come easily. So, take a moment to focus. Often people find it helpful to begin by reading a short poem or quotation they find especially meaningful.
- 4) You may choose to do either of the following: a) write about the first topic that comes to mind, following your intuition as to what issues most need your attention; b) ask specific questions and see what answers come to you. If you choose to ask questions, they should be open-ended, compassionate questions.
- 5) Write fast, without editing or judging. Allow ideas to come without stopping to compose.
- 6) Highlight the valuable insights contained in what you have just written. Try acting on the guidance you have just given yourself. Consider it an experiment. See what happens.
- 7) If you feel moved to do so, use a phrase or a sentence from this book to get you started and see what associations with your own experience you come up with.

The goal of this daily practice is to make mindful, self-aware reflection on your relationships, experiences, and decisions—both as a parent and as a human being—a routine part of your life.

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Chapter 2



Developing Confidence

At first glance, the E! reality television series *Keeping up with the Kardashians* might seem to be at the opposite end of the entertainment spectrum from the life-or-death scenario portrayed in *The Hunger Games*. The television series focuses on the personal lives of sisters Kim, Kourtney, and Khloe Kardashian, the daughters of defense attorney Robert Kardashian. Their father received extensive media coverage while helping to defend O.J. Simpson during his trial for the 1994 murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman.

The elder Kardashian died in 2003 but his children and ex-wife Kris have gone on to become something of a phenomenon: they have become famous for being famous. In her free-to-play mobile game, “Kim Kardashian: Hollywood,” the best-known Kardashian sister provides what a *Los Angeles Times* reviewer described as “one of the more refreshingly honest critiques of our city and the celebrity culture.”¹⁰ Players create a svelte character—male or female—and attempt to climb to the A-list, assisted by advice such as, “Dating famous people will get you more fans.”

In the process, players get a peek behind the curtain. They discover that, the element of physical violence aside, Kim Kardashian's world may not be so far removed from that of *The Hunger Games*. Her game highlights the minute-by-minute quest for attention that propels our social media culture. In this pursuit she is a recognized expert. Although she rarely generates any real news, Kim Kardashian somehow still manages to grab headlines. In 2010, she was named the highest-paid reality television personality, with estimated earnings of \$6 million.

Imagine being instantaneously transported to the world depicted in "Kim Kardashian: Hollywood." You would enter a culture where every social interaction becomes a competitive event, featuring the close inspection of every aspect of the "package" each individual presents: clothes, physique, wealth, connections, accomplishments, education. This intensive scrutiny creates a pervasive underlying tension. All human relations become conditional, easily interrupted by any change in the perceived desirability of one's social partners.

If the claim made by the authors of "The Great Game of High School" is correct and high school students feel caught up in a pressure-cooker social game that mirrors social interactions of adults in the "real world," (or at least that part of the real world young people are able to glimpse via television and the Internet), how might parents help? Teens tend to be self-conscious. So, it is difficult for them to distance themselves enough from the rampant social competitiveness among their peers to recognize the insecurity that fuels it. So, an indirect approach tends to work best.

If your teen shows signs of stress related to her relations with peers, criticizing members of her social group may only make them seem more attractive. Better to encourage activities that build a sense of confidence and authenticity. A good way to promote balance is to encourage involvement in activities—sports, hobbies, hiking, dance, etc.—that your teen enjoys engaging in for their own sake. The friends your teen makes while engaged in an activity that the participants truly enjoy are more likely to turn out to be real (as opposed to conditional) friends.

Confidence is a quality that develops over time, through successfully facing challenges and developing useful skills. Although adults tend to take our modern culture for granted, there is a great deal in contemporary life that can be frightening or confusing to a youngster. Grasping how a child's point of view changes over time makes it easier to facilitate the development of confidence by introducing new experiences in a child-friendly manner.

Confidence Begins in Infancy

Young children are highly motivated to learn. Infants who have learned to crawl and walk spend roughly half of their waking hours—approximately five to six hours per day—involved in motor behavior: exploring, gaining information, and engaging with their physical and social environments. On a daily basis, these tots...

take more than 9,000 steps and travel the distance of more than 29 football fields. They travel over nearly a dozen different indoor and outdoor surfaces varying in friction, rigidity and texture. They visit nearly every room in their homes and they engage in balance and locomotion in the context of varied activities.¹¹

This level of activity can, of course, be inconvenient to adults and also dangerous if a child is left unsupervised. Therefore, the adults in the child's life are faced with the challenge of encouraging a confident attitude while also ensuring the child's safety. When relating to infants, attitude matters. If a parent is able to share the child's delight in new sights and sounds, the baby is likely to catch the parent's mood and smile back. Such early experiences can have a far-reaching impact.

When an infant gains mastery over an object, he enjoys the activity and becomes more active. But, when the baby is made to feel helpless, he acts sad or anxious. He becomes passive. The baby gives up trying. Psychologists call this response *learned helplessness*. We touched upon it briefly in the first chapter. Researchers have discovered that when an animal is repeatedly subjected to an unpleasant stimulus (like an electric shock), which it cannot escape, the animal will eventually stop trying to avoid the stimulus and behave as if it is utterly helpless to change the situation. Even when opportunities to escape are later presented, learned helplessness will prevent the animal from taking advantage of them.

Martin Seligman, recipient of two Distinguished Scientific Contribution awards from the American Psychological Association, argues that depression and learned helplessness in children can be prevented by consciously cultivating confidence. How? Plunging an eight-month-old into a wading pool for the first time may be frightening. But if she is allowed to play in one inch of water first, then in two inches, the baby gains confidence. Seligman advises parents to maximize the amount of choice given to a child. As soon as the child is old enough to answer “yes” or “no,” parents can build choice into activities. Instead of pushing food at a baby, dangle it and wait until she shows that she wants it. This increases the child’s interest and confidence.

Research shows that confidence, interest, and emotional engagement precede a child’s commitment to learning. The tricky part is that emotional engagement is subjective. Optimistic children see the glass as half-full (as opposed to half-empty) and look for a silver lining in disappointing situations. When optimistic children face an undeniable setback, they see the setback as temporary. In contrast, pessimistic children tend to think of their failures and rejections in terms of “always” and “never”—often simply giving up. Such attitudes are shaped by early life experiences. This chapter describes how parents can build a child’s confidence by:

- Nurturing their child's perception of himself as a capable person by allowing even a young child to "help" with chores and thus feel part of the "family team."
- Breaking tasks down into simple steps that a child can master, being careful not to ask too much too soon. Celebrate small successes. Invite help. Avoid giving orders.
- Providing warmth and support without intruding on the child's process of self-discovery.
- Avoiding the temptation to do too much for the child, eliminating paths to learning.

When a child smears peanut butter across the tabletop, parents may momentarily wish they had made the sandwich themselves. However, the satisfaction inherent in taking a challenging task and completing it makes the child more confident (and capable the next time). Just as it is harder to get a heavy wagon rolling than to keep it rolling along a level surface, it is more difficult to teach children to do routine tasks for themselves than to maintain an ethic of self-reliance in the home, once children have learned to carry out basic tasks for themselves.

Once self-reliance becomes an accepted part of the family's culture, parents will have many opportunities to feel grateful that their child is able and willing to put dirty clothes in the hamper, prepare healthy snacks, and pick up the toys before bedtime. Parents will find that, as they work side-by-side with a child, preparing dinner or cleaning up afterward, important moments of sharing take place. By consistently treating a child as a competent individual whose input is valued, the parent enables the child to develop a sense of self-confidence that is unlikely to give way to passivity and depression. The child internalizes the self-reliant attitude the parent is modeling. After all, the way we are treated as children tends to be the way we treat ourselves when we become adults. However, reinforcing the message with engaging stories cannot hurt.

Versions of the tale of Cinderella can be found around the world. Magical elements are found in many such stories, but not all. The archetypal tale tells of a young woman who currently finds herself in difficult circumstances, but whose beauty and virtuous character are recognized by a man of high status who is looking for a wife. Once released from her abusive surroundings, Cinderella blossoms and becomes a worthy bride for her influential suitor. Yet there are many kinds of “Cinderella stories.” The most popular contemporary example centers on a young man.

The Harry Potter Phenomenon

Harry Potter is the main character in seven wildly popular fantasy novels written by British writer J.K. Rowling. The books were turned into a top-grossing series of eight films, which tell the story of a beaten-down child gradually gaining confidence and skill with the help of his new friends at a supportive school. An early reviewer of the first novel, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*,¹ observed: “I have yet to find a child who can put it down.”

Science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke once noted that “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”¹² Like the science of our own world, the magic in Harry Potter’s world is viewed as a tool that can be used for either good or evil, depending on the goals of the people using it. Although much has been said about the use of magic—spells, potions, “witchy” black hats—in the *Harry Potter* series, the books contain no demons. The most noticeable effect of the “magical elements” is to add a few amusing wrinkles in the form of unfamiliar devices, like flying brooms. There are also decided limits to what can be done, even through magic. As Harry finds out to his grief: “No spell can reawaken the dead.”¹³

¹ The title was changed to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* in the United States.

When the reader first meets Harry, he is a scrawny, miserable, black-haired boy with glasses. An orphan, Harry has been grudgingly raised by the Dursleys, his only living relatives. While Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia are the ultimate “helicopter parents,” spoiling their own son Dudley, they adopt a drill sergeant approach toward Harry, barking orders and treating him like a servant. In the movie, we see 10-year-old Harry waking up in the cramped closet under the stairs where he is forced to sleep. No sooner is he awake than Harry is put to work, cooking breakfast for the family. Meanwhile, Dudley complains that the pile of birthday presents waiting for him is somewhat smaller than last year. Dudley’s mother quickly promises to buy more gifts.

With his hand-me-down clothes and spectacles held together by tape, Harry Potter has the appearance of a classic “loser,” a boy everyone makes fun of and takes advantage of. Parallels to Disney’s classic movie *Cinderella* are unmistakable. Just as Cinderella is expected to cater to every whim of her stepmother and stepsisters, Harry is expected to cater to his relatives and is not allowed to have fun or friends like his cousin. Yet, it is Harry that young readers identify with, while they react to the petulant, demanding Dudley (and his parents) with distaste.

Just as Cinderella is rescued by her Fairy Godmother, Harry is rescued by Hagrid, a half-giant with a magical umbrella. Yet, beneath the fairy-tale trappings, the real gift Hagrid brings to Harry is a renewed sense of self-worth. After years of mistreatment, Harry (like Cinderella) had tacitly accepted his fate. Then, through an unexpected turn of events, he is transported to a school where people recognize his true worth. Harry thrives, but his fate is yet to be decided. A generation earlier, another orphan boy came to the same school, showing similar promise. However, Tom Riddle (who eventually became the evil wizard Voldemort) chose evil over good. As Headmaster Dumbledore later explains: “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.”¹⁴

What can we learn from Harry's School?

Harry Potter attends Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, which is in many ways a traditional British boarding school. All students are required to wear uniforms. Students are assigned to one of four residential “houses,” where they are encouraged to work as a team in supporting the performance of other house members. Members of a house who are at the same grade level take all classes together. That means there is always a support group of familiar faces. Harry’s house, Gryffindor, provides a sense of belonging that the orphaned Harry has not experienced since the death of his parents.

Readers can easily identify with the jealousies, hopes, and fears of the people who populate J.K. Rowling’s wizarding world. Academically, Harry is an average student, procrastinating about doing his homework, not always on time to class, sometimes tripping himself up by trying to fib his way out of trouble. Harry’s two best friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, are outcasts of a sort. Ron is the youngest boy in a large and friendly (but financially struggling) wizarding family. Ron shows up at school in hand-me-down robes that invite the scorn of class bully Draco Malfoy. Hermione is a brilliant student who is looked down on by members of some established wizarding families because she is a “mud-blood” (from a non-magical family.) Hagrid, the half-giant gamekeeper, also continues to befriend Harry.

Others are not so welcoming. The wealthy and arrogant Draco Malfoy tries to add to his own status by undermining those whom he sees as competitors. The conflict between Harry and Draco will be instantly recognizable to students who have been demeaned by peers or have been the target of insults and malicious rumors. However, although Harry and his friends are not part of the “popular” crowd, they have a lot of fun and find great meaning in life. The “magic” that enables them to overcome the machinations of Malfoy and

others springs not from a wand but from a confident, optimistic, and hopeful approach to life.

This attitude is epitomized by Professor Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts School. Considered the most powerful wizard in the world, Dumbledore is kindly and wise, often using humor to make people feel comfortable in his presence. His eyes twinkle with kindness and mischief. His deep comprehension of human nature enables him to nurture benevolent aspects of the students in his charge, fostering trust, love, and friendship. Yet, as the reader discovers in the last books in the series, Dumbledore also has his faults. He deeply regrets impulsive actions he took long ago, which inadvertently caused the death of his sister and alienated his brother. For all of his wisdom and the services he performs for others, Dumbledore proves to be a tragic figure.

This recognition of human fallibility gives the Harry Potter books a depth and complexity that is unusual in young adult fiction. The final books convey an insight akin to that described by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago*: “Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains ... an unrooted small corner of evil.”²¹⁵ In the impulses battling for control within their hearts, we discover that the Wizarding and the Muggle (non-magical) communities are much alike.

An ongoing theme of the books is that, although life can seem like a continuing struggle, the rewards of a life well-lived are worth the effort. From the night Hagrid informs him of the powerful legacy bequeathed him by his parents, Harry wonders whether he will prove equal to the tasks set before him. Should he go with Hagrid and investigate his mysterious heritage—or not? Yet, in each instance, Harry doggedly chooses to do what is right. As Dumbledore observes

at the end of the first book, Harry “is prepared to fight what seems a losing battle ... again and again,” always proving to be up to the task. As Harry learns to draw on his inborn ability, supplementing it with study and practice, his confidence increases.

Yet, Harry’s development might have taken a quite different course if he had never gone to Hogwarts School or benefited from Dumbledore’s wise mentorship. A skilled mentor or coach encourages a child to attempt new tasks and provides support by scaffolding the child’s learning. Through the assistance of the mentor, the child is able to learn more advanced skills. Successful coaching takes place on two levels: 1) effectively breaking down complex skills into components that the learner can sequentially master; 2) making the tasks engaging and providing social-emotional support. The following two sections deal with these two levels.

The Harry Potter books highlight the impact of self-fulfilling prophecy. In the home of his Aunt and Uncle, where he was treated like an unwanted burden, Harry came to have a low opinion of his own abilities. When Harry left the Dursleys and enrolled in Hogwarts School, where he was treated with kindness and respect, his natural leadership abilities stood out. The availability at Hogwarts of expert mentors enabled Harry to develop his potential.

Effectively Scaffolding Your Child’s Learning

On a construction site, *scaffolding* is the support structure provided for a building under construction; it is removed bit-by-bit as soon as sections of the building are finished and can stand on their own. For educators, *scaffolding* serves as a metaphor for the support children need to learn a new skill. Over the course of instruction, the teacher adjusts the amount of guidance provided to fit the child’s level of performance. More support is offered when a child has difficulty with a task; over time, as the child gains in skill,

less support is provided. Effective scaffolding can boost not just physical skills but also cognitive development.

The social constructivist approach pioneered by Lev Vygotsky focuses on how, through the assistance of a more capable person, a child is able to learn skills that go beyond her current developmental level. Vygotsky refers to the range of tasks that a child is in the process of learning as the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD). The lower limit of the ZPD is the level of skill reached by the child when working independently; the upper limit is the potential skill level that the child is able to reach with the assistance of a capable instructor. Over time, the ZPD moves as the child becomes able to independently complete increasingly difficult work.

Such “scaffolding” affects a learner on both the cognitive and emotional levels; it has an impact not just on the skills acquired by the learner, but also on his motivation and confidence in approaching a problem or task. On a cognitive level, scaffolding encompasses the use of learning tools, demonstrations, self-help aids, and examples. On the emotional side, scaffolding serves to keep the learner from being bogged down by frustration. Development of cognitive skills, such as problem solving, in turn stimulates the development of self-reliance and self-confidence.

Through dialogue, a skilled coach nudges the child’s spontaneous but unsystematic and disorganized concepts toward further development. The limiting factor in the average classroom is the lack of opportunity for one-on-one interaction between teacher and student. Classroom teachers are forced to either 1) calibrate whole-class instruction to the needs of the average student or 2) divide the class into groups of students who exhibit similar levels of performance.

Focusing on the average student risks leaving more advanced students unchallenged, while struggling students are given insufficient support. The risk of ability grouping is that children may come to see their assignment to a specific group not just as a reflection of their current skill level, but as defining their potential.

If a child assumes that she is “just not good at” math, for example, trying hard may seem pointless. Yet parents can often turn such attitudes around with simple, fun activities such as those found in the *Family Math* series (*Family Math for Young Children*, *Family Math*, *Family Math: The Middle School Years*, *Algebraic Reasoning and Number Sense*, *Family Math II: Achieving Success in Mathematics*). No need to worry about your own math skills. Just have fun learning together. The enthusiasm of the adult coach is often what matters most, since it provides insight into *why* this is a topic worth caring about.

Setting Limits

For many parents, there was one particularly memorable moment when a toddler reacted to a parent’s insistence on setting safe boundaries with an explosive tantrum. Too young to respond to rational argument and too active to easily be held in place till the emotional squall passed, the child’s seemingly unreasonable behavior triggered frustration in the hard-pressed parent. If the parent was unprepared, this moment could end in the parent’s use of physical punishment to coerce cooperation. With luck, however, this was the moment when the advantages of the playpen (or any similarly safe place where a toddler can be deposited till the emotional storm was over) were discovered.

Until that moment, the playpen may have seemed a purchase of dubious value. Children don’t like to be limited to such a small space, preferring to have the freedom of the house. So, why do playpens continue to be manufactured and sold? The answer may become clear when a toddler begins to kick and scream, challenging a parent’s attempts to set limits. A “time-out” may be required. This involves temporarily separating a child from the environment where inappropriate behavior has occurred. The purpose is to isolate the child for a short period of time (usually 5 to 15 minutes) in order

to allow the child to calm down. But how? The parent responds to the tantrum in a calm but decisive manner. No anger. No spanking. No toys, either. Just a comment like, “Uh-oh! Looks like you need a time-out,” said in a pleasant voice. Then the toddler has a few minutes to sit and reflect on the playpen’s bare plastic floor.

The parent, too, may need a few moments to decompress. Very often, first-time parents are caught unprepared by the power of the toddler’s emotional outburst. This is not the scene new parents imagined as they left the hospital with their precious newborn. Teaching children how to handle their emotions can be stressful. But lovingly implementing consistent, logical consequences is pivotal to helping children feel secure.

How Perception Shapes Reality

When a toddler is involuntarily placed in a playpen or an older child is escorted to his room, the child quickly grasps the relationship between the tantrum and exile to the assigned time-out space. Before long, the words “Looks like you need a time-out...” will begin to elicit a definite response. At first, the child may try to run or to deter the parent with an abrupt change of attitude. However, if the parent remains calm and consistent in responding to tantrums with a time-out, the child will realize that tantrums *always* result in a time-out. The choice is the child’s. This is the opposite of helplessness; it is the beginning of self-control.

If the parent shows anger and frustration, allowing the incident to turn into a battle of wills, the learning is lost. The adult is larger and can force a small child to obey. However, this often leads to fiercer battles when the child reaches adolescence. Depending on a child’s character, forcing small children to obey can also lead to habitual passivity, causing the child to become life-long follower, dependent on others to take the initiative. Better to avoid a battle of wills. Yet that does not mean you have to placate the tantrum-thrower. Giving

in communicates the message: “Be obnoxious to me and you’ll get your way.” Better to set boundaries by lovingly saying, either verbally or through one’s actions, “It hurts my ears when you scream like that. Let’s take a time-out. We can continue the discussion when you are feeling calmer.”

In a sense, the tantrum-throwing of a toddler is not so very different from the same toddler’s curious exploration of every room in the house. The toddler asks an implicit question: “If I do this or go there...what will happen?” Young children learn many things—from the law of gravity (“What happens when I push my bottle off the tray of my highchair?”) to the dynamics of human relationships (“What happens when I spit at my brother?”)—through experimentation. In the physical world, all children end up having to adjust to the same inflexible set of natural laws. (The bottle will always fall down, never up.) Yet, if parents do not pay attention to the rules they are teaching, the social rules a child learns may be quite different from the rules the parents had hoped to teach. But the child is learning about human relations just the same.

The interactions children experience at home shape their assumptions about how the world works. Seemingly similar responses on the part of the parent can be understood quite differently by a child. In *Parenting with love and logic*, Cline and Fay point out that if a parent says, “Please be quiet. I can’t listen to your brother when you are both talking at the same time,” the child may feel a surge of jealousy, wondering, “Why does my brother get to speak first?” This may result in increased competition for a scarce resource: the parent’s attention. Yet, a response that is worded only slightly differently may communicate a more welcome emotional message: “I’ll be happy to listen to you as soon as your brother is finished talking to me.” In this case, the child is reassured that the parent is not shutting him out. The parent is only asking that he wait his turn and not interrupt the child who is currently speaking. In this example, the child is learning the social rule of turn-taking in conversation (instead of learning about social competition).

There tends to be a consistent tone to communications within a household. The child who was told to be quiet has probably also heard messages like: “Don’t talk to me in that tone of voice!” “Get this room cleaned up right now!” or “Sit down. We’re going to eat now.” The child told to wait his turn has probably heard messages like: “I’ll listen when your voice is as quiet as mine.” “You may join us to watch TV after you pick up your things and put them away,” or “We will eat as soon as you are seated.” The first set of messages models a confrontational communication style. The second sets up implicit choices. The child may choose not to speak quietly, put her things away, or sit down at the table. This will lead not to accusations but only to the implicit penalty, with minimal commentary from the parent.

The child in the confrontational household learns that life is about answering the question, “Who’s the boss?” The implicit message is that social relations are about establishing one’s place in the pecking order. People who grew up in such households will nod knowingly at such comments as: “If you are not the lead dog, the view never changes” and “The world is made up of ‘winners’ and ‘losers.’” The child who was allowed to make her own choices learns that when you interact with others, a certain reciprocity is expected (a polite tone of voice, keeping shared spaces clean, not keeping others waiting at dinner time).

Within each of these families, the child develops a world view that acts as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. The child’s understanding of the world causes him to act in a manner that elicits a response from others that fulfills his expectations. The classic examples of self-fulfilling prophecy start with an erroneous understanding of a situation. Although inaccurate, this evokes behavior that has the effect of making the original false assumption become true. For example, bank customers may react to a false rumor that their bank is going bankrupt by withdrawing their money. The bank then becomes bankrupt in reality, even though the initial rumor was false.

Once people define a situation as real and act upon that perception, their actions bring about real consequences. That is why advertising is such a profitable business. If people become convinced that a product will help them achieve a valued goal, the money they spend is real, even if the product does not accomplish the buyer's goals. Self-fulfilling prophecy is common in schools. "Math anxiety" is an example. If a young child has a discouraging experience in learning arithmetic—perhaps due to a teacher's lack of skill in teaching math—the child may decide she has no talent for math and stop trying. Conversely, if early math lessons are effective and engaging, the child may decide that math is fun and look forward to learning more.

Making this a shared journey: How confident are you?

Unlike learning math, learning confidence cannot easily be broken down into a series of skills that can be taught in sequential order. Instead, children learn confidence through 1) their own past successes and 2) the example of others, especially those closest to them. Have you ever unexpectedly found yourself saying or doing something that one of your parents had once said or done in your presence, something that you had perhaps promised yourself you would never do? How was it that you unintentionally reproduced that behavior? With so much to learn, children store away an immense amount of information about how the people around them have coped with one set of circumstances or another. When a new situation suddenly arises, even years later, that memory bank of possible reactions is influential in shaping one's response.

In case you are wondering what kind of an example you may have been setting for your own children, here is a brief quiz. Read each statement and indicate how applicable it is to you. There are no right or wrong answers. Also, our answers may change over time. For now, it is enough to just jot down what comes to you. This will

give us a place to start. The answer choices include: Not true of me; Rarely true of me; Sometimes true of me; Very true of me. (For the sake of brevity, the first letter of each phrase is all that is required.)

- 1) It doesn't take me long to shake off a bad mood. (N, R, S, V)
- 2) In general, I try not to set my hopes too high so I won't be disappointed. (N, R, S, V)
- 3) I can be comfortable with nearly all kinds of people. (N, R, S, V)
- 4) I believe in the saying, "Where there's a will, there's a way." (N, R, S, V)
- 5) I expect that I will achieve most of my life goals. (N, R, S, V)
- 6) I try to make light of my problems when possible. (N, R, S, V)
- 7) When I make a decision on my own, it is usually a poor one. (N, R, S, V)
- 8) I have a tendency to make mountains out of molehills. (N, R, S, V)
- 9) My hardest battles are with myself. (N, R, S, V)

We all have imperfections. Each question focuses on a tendency or habit of mind that can have an impact on your interactions with your child. The goal is to assess current habits. Our habits are not set in stone. Small changes in adult attitudes can make a big difference, showing by example that it is quite possible to take control of one's life. This quiz has no points to add up. Your own intuition will guide you concerning any changes you might wish to make.

Question 1: If it does not take you long to shake off a bad mood, congratulations! Moods have been compared to the "weather of the soul." We all have them and not all of them cheery. But if, after the storm clouds roll in and you find yourself in a funk, it takes longer than you would like to shake off the bad mood, you may have the habit of ruminating—turning issues or events over and over in your mind. This practice can unnecessarily prolong a bad

mood. Fortunately, like all habits, this one can be broken. Just be alert to when you have started ruminating. When you catch yourself ruminating, make an appointment with yourself; assign a time when you will spend half an hour or an hour thoroughly considering the topic and any action that needs to be taken. Till then, focus fully on your current activities or choose a new activity that lifts your mood and makes you feel better.

Question 2: Trying not to set one's hopes too high, so as not to feel disappointed, is a coping mechanism. Since it can be employed in more than one way, let's do a brief mind experiment to figure out whether you use it in a self-defeating way. The key question is: Does it interfere with clearly envisioning what you want (goal-setting)—or with investing enough effort to have a realistic chance of success? If, by “not setting your hopes too high,” you mean “not counting your chickens before they hatch,” this is a healthy attitude. But it can be problematic if it becomes a way of making excuses for a lackluster effort.

Question 3: If you can be comfortable with nearly all kinds of people, you are lucky indeed. Discomfort with certain types of people tends to equate to anxieties of various sorts. Your answer indicates a high level of confidence. Congratulations!

Question 4: Where would adventure movies be without the hero, who, just as everything seems lost, notices a detail that proves to be the key to turning a dire situation around? A safety pin becomes a lock pick. Animal tracks reveal an escape route. The one disadvantage to a dogged belief in the saying, “Where there's a will, there's a way,” is when it leads to over-confidence. There are situations that are better just avoided.

Questions 5 & 6: Much the same can be said for a) the expectation that one will achieve most of one's life goals and b) the habit of making light of one's problems. Confidence helps one commit to putting forth the effort needed to reach one's goal. But it is also helpful to set realistic goals. Likewise, making light of one's problems can be a wonderful antidote to rumination or a “poor me”

attitude. Yet, when one is faced with medical problems or mounting debt, delay in addressing these can be deadly. The pivotal question becomes: What is the cost of inaction?

Question 7: On the other hand, the statement, “When I make a decision on my own, it is usually a poor one” is a clear warning signal. If true, it indicates a need to a) be very careful in choosing advisors and b) nurture one’s own decision-making skills. Competent professionals can provide invaluable assistance in areas ranging from income tax to home repair. (This need not mean paying a stiff fee; it may simply mean visiting a reputable Internet website.) Repeated bad decisions may also hint at an underlying emotional cause. You may find the exercise at the end of this chapter especially helpful.

Question 8: Likewise, the statement, “I have a tendency to make mountains out of molehills” implies a need for change. To admit this shows courage. Denial is easier. It also hints that you already know what is needed. What if you were to look for chances to make light of your problems? Odd as it may seem, even a forced laugh can be an important first step, helping you distance yourself and become more objective when deciding on next steps. The exercise at the end of this chapter may also prove helpful.

Question 9: The phrase, “My hardest battles are with myself” is tricky. This is true for most people. We know that we should eat right, exercise, etc. However, we also have urges that tend to get us into trouble. Realizing that much of the struggle may turn out to be with ourselves is an important first step toward seeing parenthood as a path of development. Just as your child had to learn how to walk and talk, you were not born knowing how to raise another human being. The wish to provide a good role model for your child is a wonderful source of motivation. This has the side effect of helping you to pursue your vision of the person you could become.

Optional Activity: Memories of Childhood

Try to recall incidents from your childhood when you were interacting with your parents. Jot down a brief description of each incident you remember. Based on this evidence, how would you describe the way that your parents related to you as a child? Compare/contrast this with the way that you tend to treat yourself as an adult. This exercise is not meant as a critique of your parents. They undoubtedly had challenges of their own and were doing the best they could. Yet, it may be helpful in building an understanding of the profound influence that parent-child interactions can have over time. You may also pick up on one or two behaviors that you may wish to alter in the interest of inspiring your child to cultivate healthy habits and attitudes.

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Chapter 3



Building a Sense of Human Connection

Visitors may be overwhelmed by the sheer exuberant friendliness of Americans, especially in the central and southern parts of the country. Sit by an American on an airplane and he will immediately call by you by your first name, ask “So – how do you like it in the United States?” ... and wrap you in a warm hug on parting.

This does not necessarily mean that he will remember your name the next day... a wise traveler realizes that a few happy moments with an American do not translate into a permanent commitment of any kind. Indeed, permanent commitments are what Americans fear the most. This is a nation whose most fundamental social relationship is the casual acquaintance.¹⁶

These observations were taken from an amusing book called *A Xenophobe's Guide to the Americans*. After discovering this book at the bookshop of the European Union Parliament in Brussels, I thumbed through several similarly humorous books about other nations. Most anyone who carries a United States passport and has spent a fair amount of time in Europe is aware that Europeans routinely compare Americans to adolescents: noisy, curious, not given to subtlety, and liable to misbehave in public. Of course, such claims are often based on brief sightings of American tourists vacationing in cities where they have little understanding of the local language or customs. But might these claims, like many clichés, also contain a grain of truth?

The observation that the United States is “a nation whose most fundamental social relationship is the casual acquaintance” speaks directly to the topic of this chapter. Although many Americans would disagree with this claim, one can understand how the fast pace of life in the United States might give visitors the impression that Americans are in too much of a hurry to invest much time in really getting to know the people who cross their path. Of course, the U.S. is not alone in this. The pace of modern life has increased across the industrialized world.

In the developed countries, the huge increases in wealth since World War II have failed to translate into increased happiness. In Britain, the proportion of people who say they are “very happy” fell from 52% in 1957 to just 36% in 2006. Once people have a home, food, and clothes, extra money does not seem to make them happier. This may be because the stress and pace of modern life can diminish our access to opportunities and resources we value. A British poll showed that, after family and friends, people listed peace and contentment as adding most to their happiness. Yet, the tempo of contemporary life can make peaceful moments hard to come by, especially for young people whose lives at school afford little privacy.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the current generation of young people is experiencing symptoms of

depression at an earlier age than past generations. In fact, the overall prevalence of depression across the entire population is, by some estimates, ten times higher than 50 years ago. Scholars have argued that a diminished sense of human connection has also contributed to lower levels of academic achievement.

A Declining Sense of Social Solidarity

Through the 1950s, there existed in small-town America—as well as in tight-knit urban neighborhoods—a sense of what sociologist James Coleman termed *intergenerational closure*. Children knew each other's parents, and the parents were in communication with other parents in the neighborhood. Certain expectations and obligations connected the adults; each adult could use his drawing account with other adults to help supervise and control his or her children. Parents were able to use their mutual obligations both to aid them in raising their own children and to establish shared norms that reinforced each other's sanctioning of the children. As a result, children's behavior and attitudes were shaped by consistent reinforcement; they learned over time that respectful interactions with adults earned rewards and harassment of younger children evoked strong sanctions. These social norms carried over to school and helped teachers to enforce norms of civility in the classroom.

In recent decades, the increasingly transient nature of modern society has made the sort of intergenerational closure Coleman describes more difficult to achieve. At the same time, the nature of public schooling has widened the generation gap between young people and their elders. During the last decades of the 20th century, many forms of civic engagement and social connectedness declined sharply. Between 1973 and 1994, the frequency with which Americans attended a public meeting on town or school affairs, served as an officer in (or on a committee of) a local organization, or worked for a political party declined by more than 40 percent. Membership rates

in major civic organizations such as the PTA, Lions Club, and League of Women Voters fell by roughly half between the early 1960s and the late 1990s, and church attendance fell between 25 and 50 percent during the same period.

Even in their use of leisure time, Americans gradually switched from doing to watching. Entertaining friends at home fell by 30 to 40 percent, as did playing cards and playing musical instruments. Among married couples, the frequency of family dinners has declined by about one-third, as has the frequency with which parents take vacations with their children, watch television or just sit and talk with them. Continuation of this trend is not inevitable. Throughout U.S. history there have been both ebbs and flows in social cohesiveness. In fact, measures of social connectedness rose during most of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. The current patterns of diminishing social cohesiveness can be turned around if adequate steps are taken.

What is “social capital”?

A brief detour into social science might prove helpful. *Social capital* is a term social scientists use to refer to social relationships that serve as a resource, enabling individuals to attain their goals. How does this work? James Coleman examined the process by which social capital (social connections) is transformed into *human capital* (economically valuable knowledge and skills). He argued that social capital in the family and social capital in the community play roles in the creation of human capital in the rising generation. But even though children often benefit from the human capital possessed by their parents, this human capital may be irrelevant to outcomes for children if it is employed exclusively at work or outside the home.

The social capital of a family lies in the relations between children and parents (and other family members, when present). If the human capital (knowledge and skills) possessed by the

parents is not complemented by social capital (human connections) embodied in family relationships, then it is irrelevant how much human capital the parent has. Similarly, the human capital of the community at large may be irrelevant to the outcomes for children if it is not complemented by social capital embodied in networks of relationships in which children are embedded. Also, if they are to be effective in fostering the creation of human capital in children, these networks of relationships must have certain characteristics.

There must be a sense of trust that other members of the network will honor their formal and informal obligations to other members. Channels must exist that allow for the sharing of information. There must also be accepted social norms that support the creation of human capital as well as effective sanctions for behavior, on the part of both adults and children, which undermines the healthy development of young people. This is why intergenerational closure is a key factor in creating effective networks, built on the kinds of communication among adults that allow them to share information and enforce norms. It also affects school success.

Even when they do not come in person, families come in children's minds and hearts and in their hopes and dreams. They come with the children's problems and promise. Without exception, teachers and administrators have explicit or implicit contact with their students' families every day.¹⁷

The long-term impact of the absence of normal feelings of human connection in childhood was described over a century and a half ago in a classic tale written by Charles Dickens. What makes this story especially moving is the affirmation that it is never too late to change.

“A Christmas Carol” and the Power of Childhood Memories

A Christmas Carol (1843) is the story of archetypal miser Ebenezer Scrooge, who is visited on Christmas Eve by the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future. They bring Scrooge face to face with his own past and with the choices that brought him to his present lonely existence (along with the future that awaits him if he does not change his ways). First, the reader glimpses Scrooge’s childhood self, spending Christmas alone at the boarding school to which he was sent by his unloving father. Then, we view a happier scene: Scrooge’s younger self, enjoying a Christmas party given by his benevolent employer, Fezziwig.

Asked by the ghost why he and his fellow employees had so much affection for Fezziwig, Scrooge explains that it was the way he made his employees feel that drew them to him: “Say that his power lies in words and looks; in things so slight and insignificant that it is impossible to add and count ‘em up: what then? The happiness [Fezziwig] gives is quite as great as if it cost a fortune.”¹⁸ Unfortunately, this happy experience was not sufficient to tempt Scrooge away from the attitudes he had absorbed during his years of childhood neglect. Yet, when reminded years later of that past Christmas, the memory helped to rekindle Scrooge’s yearning for a sense of human connection. Thus began the transformation of a man who had earlier been described as:

Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.¹⁹

By the end of the story, Scrooge has befriended the family of his clerk, Bob Cratchit, whom he had formerly abused. Tiny Tim, the Cratchit family’s crippled son, receives much-needed medical care

and Scrooge becomes a “second father” to him. Such instantaneous and complete transformations are uncommon in real life. But the power of Scrooge’s story is well-established; the book has not been out of print since it first appeared over a century and a half ago. Similar stories of transformation continue to attract an audience. The 2004 cult classic, *Mean Girls*, uses a parallel scenario, showing how a nice girl is tempted by the “gold” of high school popularity. She turns cold and manipulative—before dramatically repenting at the end.

Mean Girls

The *Mean Girls* screenplay was written by *Saturday Night Live* comedienne Tina Fey, who commented in an interview: “Adults find it funny. They are the ones who are laughing. Young girls watch it like a reality show. It’s much too close to their real experiences so they are not exactly guffawing.” The movie uses the hormone-pressurized high school milieu to put some of the darker impulses of adolescent culture under the microscope, delving into how female high school cliques operate and highlighting the damaging effects these cliques can have on girls.

We first meet Cady Heron, the home-schooled daughter of zoologists, after her family relocates from Africa to the United States. Attending public school for the first time, she immediately gets a crash course on the various sub-strata of the high school caste system: the jocks, the cheerleaders, the stoners, etc. Initially, Cady is ostracized. She makes friends with a couple of fellow outcasts who have fallen prey to the school’s most powerful clique, the “Plastics.” Her new friends warn her of the manipulateness of this group, led by the sexiest and bitchiest girl in school, Regina George.

To her surprise, Cady is soon embraced by the popular and devious “Plastics.” Despite the warnings, she is drawn to the power that popularity confers. Then Cady falls in love with Regina’s

ex-boyfriend. Regina successfully steals him back, setting off a war between the two girls. In her efforts to defeat her rival, Cady becomes as spiteful as Regina, taking on the very characteristics she formerly despised. Savoring her newfound power, Cady eventually excludes Regina from the Plastics, becoming the new Queen Bee. However, her unpleasant new personality alienates everyone. Cady comes to her senses and apologizes to those she has hurt.

Mean Girls pokes fun at suburban teen clichés, pointing out the lengths to which some students will go in their efforts to escape the high school social gauntlet. Based in part on *Queen Bees and Wannabees*, Rosalind Wiseman’s nonfiction dissection of social interactions among teenage and pre-teen girls, the film provides a glimpse of the “stressful blur” that high school culture can become for the unprepared. But how did the social scene in some American high schools come to be so ruthlessly competitive?

How Educational Policy Transformed Secondary Schools

Up until World War II, most American high schools were relatively small. Then reformers argued that more resources could be made available if small, older schools were consolidated and students were bused to new schools with improved science labs, athletic facilities, etc. Unfortunately, many students felt alienated, “lost in the crowd,” in these impersonal new surroundings where teens far outnumbered adults. Adolescents found themselves segregated for significant periods of time from the rest of society. Lack of contact between teens and adults encouraged the evolution of an “adolescent society” that often worked at cross-purposes to the educational institutions that played host to it.

Before long, the junior high school was created for grades 7 to 9. The assumption was that teachers with specialized expertise in English, mathematics, history, and science would boost student achievement. But splitting up the old K-8 elementary schools, where

7th and 8th graders had been respected role models for their younger brothers and sisters, left 12- and 13-year-olds to drift from one classroom to the next without the guidance of a specific classroom teacher who was responsible for knowing where they were throughout the day. Teachers who saw each student for only 50 minutes each day could easily miss danger signs. Students on the cusp of adolescence could easily find themselves floundering, testing boundaries, and falling behind in their studies.

In a tacit admission of the problem, school districts eventually changed course, sending 9th graders back to high school and carving out the more child-friendly “middle school.” Yet, middle schools often used former junior high buildings and had similar class schedules. Some parents have argued that the effect was simply to move 6th graders into what had, until recently, been a junior high. But has the creation of middle schools helped to boost student achievement?

What do international test scores show?

Every three years since 2000, 15-year-olds around the world have taken a test administered by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which gauges their reading, math and science skills. In 2012, the U.S. was ranked 26th among 34 nations in math (somewhere between Lithuania and the Slovak Republic). Despite much talk of educational reform, the PISA scores of American students did not change between 2003 and 2012. However, during the same time period, the test scores of Belgium, Estonia, Germany, Ireland, Poland and others improved. These nations now surpass the United States. Even Vietnam—a poor nation—has higher average scores than the U.S. in math and science.

Not all U.S. students performed so poorly. The U.S. average score in math was 481, compared to the OECD average of 494. However, the average score for Massachusetts was 514 and for Connecticut

506. In fact, Massachusetts scored higher than all but three national education systems (Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Singapore) in reading. In science and math, Massachusetts tied for 7th and 10th place. Connecticut beat the international average in reading and science and scored average in math. The Massachusetts and Connecticut results are evidence that the cultural distractions that plague U.S. schools do not make high achievement unattainable. Canada, our northern neighbor, competes well with the European nations in overall performance.

If the system does not work, why don't they change it?

In most states, local school districts have extensive power to make curriculum decisions. Yet, the multi-layered structure of the U.S. political system—plus the fact that most states and local school districts are in need of federal funds—makes schools simultaneously answerable to federal, state and local regulations. This division of authority has often put schools in the position of attempting simultaneously to meet two different, partially contradictory goals. For example, a school district might be directed to tighten graduation requirements and to lower the dropout rate at the same time; or a school might be directed to teach a more rigorous curriculum while at the same time mainstreaming children with ever more profound handicaps.

John Goodlad noted that expectations for schools constitute a hodgepodge, resulting from accumulations of piecemeal legislation. New legislation takes little or no account of existing requirements in the education code. In fact, most legislators are virtually ignorant of the existing requirements *and* the potential impact of new bills on the finite time and resources of teachers. Principals and teachers often comment on the paralytic inertia created by changing and often conflicting expectations. When true compliance is impossible,

a premium tends to be put upon protecting one's school from any punitive measures that might result from non-compliance.

Even when public schools do accomplish one of the assigned goals, what constitutes success to the political partisans of one goal often constitutes failure to the partisans of another. Therefore, when the tide of public opinion causes one of two competing goals to be strongly emphasized, the partisans of the goal that has been ignored tend to focus media attention on the goal that has *not* been addressed, thus turning the tide of public opinion in their direction. As a result, the emphasis of educational policy tends to lurch from one goal to another, giving the recurrent crises in education a cyclical nature.

The motivation for discussing these obstacles is not to encourage cynicism but, rather, to encourage parents to take a realistic view of what their child's school is likely to provide. This does not mean that your child must suffer. Within the family, you can help your child to develop an open-minded passion for learning

Research on What Parents Can Do

Every three years, when the scores from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) are published, consternation erupts among U.S. journalists and politicians. The United States spends far more per pupil on public education than top achievers like Finland and South Korea. Yet, even the top 10 percent of American students trail top students in Western Europe and East Asia by a significant margin. What can concerned parents do to help their child successfully compete on an international level?

Andreas Schleicher, the researcher who is responsible for the PISA program, carried out a survey of parents in 13 nations. Then, he correlated the answers with test score results. The patterns that emerged were surprising. Just seeing a parent read for pleasure at home has an impact, as it suggests to the child that reading is an enjoyable activity. All around the world, parents who read to their

young children every day—or almost every day—had children who performed much better in reading by the time they were fifteen years old. As children got older, the characteristics of effective parental input changed, but parent involvement remained relevant. Parents who discussed movies, books, and current affairs with their children had teens who performed better in reading. By engaging their children in conversations about the larger world, these parents were essentially teaching them to become thinking adults.

Other results contradicted popular assumptions. Parents who volunteered to help with extracurricular activities had children who performed worse in reading, on average, than parents who did not volunteer. This does not mean that such activities are bad. It just means that one has to be a realist. If a student spends time on extracurricular activities after school, then goes home and watches television, this use of time is unlikely to lead to high academic achievement. Sports and other extracurricular activities must never be allowed to crowd out what is essential.

The good news is that small things can have a large, positive impact. One example is asking children about what they learned at school that day and showing an active interest. Parents can inquire about what lessons their child liked most. The effect such conversations have on achievement can be equal to hours of private tutoring. However, parents should be wary of giving praise that is vague or excessive. This can discourage children from trying hard. If your child has been assigned to read a book, asking serious questions about the content will be far more helpful than indiscriminate praise for the amount of reading done.

Making the System Work for Your Child

The differing roles that families and schools play in a child's education can be better understood by comparing them to the experience of attending a school track meet. The school district is in

charge of maintaining the track, making sure that the grounds are clean and safe, providing coaching and facilities for the competing teams. Yet, if you remember the track meet afterward, what you are likely to remember is the skill of individual athletes, your conversations with those around you, the sense of exhilaration when a student of your acquaintance performed well. The school district did the hard work of setting the stage, but it was the behavior of individuals that you remember. Similarly, students' memories of their school years are shaped by human interactions. Parents' interest and involvement can encourage enjoyable experiences at and around the school.

Students who like school are more likely to do well. Both for young people and for adults, the ratio of good to bad experiences is pivotal. A study by Schwartz and Garmoni found that depressed people had an equal ratio between good and bad thoughts (one bad thought for each good one), while non-depressed people had roughly twice as many positive thoughts as negative ones. When depressed people improved, they moved from their original 1:1 ratio between good and bad thoughts to a 2:1 ratio; depressed people who did not improve stayed at a ratio of 1:1.

What causes changes in this ratio? Psychologist Martin Seligman suggests that it is impossible to sustain a negative mood in the presence of a large number of positive memories and expectations. Similarly, it is impossible to sustain a positive mood in the presence of a large number of negative thoughts. Seligman developed a game with his own children called "Best Moments," in which the child is asked at bedtime: What did you like doing today? The child would list whatever came to mind, from going swimming with the family to eating corn on the cob or playing a game of kick ball with friends. This encouraged the child to focus on moments of happiness and contentment that might otherwise have been overlooked.

A second question—Did anything bad happen today?—was also asked, so that the child had a chance to discuss troubling experiences. However, the focus was on celebrating positive memories. Once the children reached school age, the game was expanded to include

what they were looking forward to doing the next day. Planning for the future, expecting that good events will occur, and feeling that they will ensue if you try hard are helpful in sustaining good cheer in the here and now. Family rituals like that described by Seligman encourage children to adopt a goal-oriented attitude toward life. Over time, such practices within the family can have a powerful effect. The effect is multiplied when parents get to know the parents of their child's schoolmates and join together to create a culture that celebrates achievement and encourages shared behavioral norms.

Another effective strategy that parents can adopt to help children respond in an emotionally healthy manner is playfulness. Not taking yourself too seriously—not getting caught up in a competitive spiral of action and reaction—encourages the building of human connections. In *Playful Parenting*, Lawrence Cohen points out that having fun with your children on a day-to-day basis is just a case of noticing what gets your child smiling or laughing. You may either lightheartedly join in the game of the moment, or wait until later and start a new game when everyone seems ready for a bit of fun. All it takes is being alert to what your child enjoys.

The possibility of playful parent-child interaction begins not long after birth. Typically developing infants seem so intent on communicating that they find creative ways to do so, even before they have mastered words. Long before they learn to speak, infants imitate actions, vocalizations, and emotionally-laden facial expressions. This replication makes possible the imitation games in which adult and infant mirror one another's vocalizations and behavior. Even teenagers are drawn to parents who do not take themselves too seriously. Sharing a good laugh can help teens develop a sense of humor about themselves. One just has to be conscious of timing and remember that young teens can be extremely self-conscious. Parents just need to be alert in case a teen's mood starts to change.

Play is children's natural way of getting closer to people they care about, processing experience, working through stressful situations, and just blowing off steam. When parents join in, it

helps to build strong, close bonds. The parent might, at first, feel stiff and uncomfortable crawling on the floor. But when adults can become involved in play without trying to direct the activity, a new understanding of the child's perceptions emerges. Here are some specific suggestions for helping families to stay connected and parents to stay involved:

- Cultivate dialogue in the family; do not let TV drown out mealtime conversation;
- Create rituals that encourage meaningful communication among family members;
- Develop a parent network so you can consult with parents of your child's friends.

A half-hour weekly or biweekly family meeting where children—as well as adults—can bring up topics for discussion can provide a structure for talking about rules, shared values, household tasks, and goal-setting...things that you might not otherwise get around to. Getting to know the parents of your child's friends not only makes planning birthday parties easier, but it provides a way to informally check out the veracity of your child's "Everybody does it!" claims. Also it provides your child with an example of adults successfully bucking the trend that has led to people all over the industrialized world becoming too busy to make or to keep close friends.

Testing Your Awareness of What Makes People Happy

Before we leave this topic, you may want to test your knowledge of a few basic facts that researchers have discovered about human happiness. Quickly jot down your answers.

1. Which group is happier: people with lots of friends or people with one or more close friends?

2. Which is more likely to be deeply satisfying: involving work that is well-suited to your skills or recreational activities undertaken purely for pleasure?
3. When a parent is confused as to what to do, is it best to go with one's "gut reaction"?
4. Is saying "no" the best way to convince children that we mean business?

Did you pick "lots of friends" for Question 1? Although the pursuit of popularity is endemic in American society, research indicates that a person with one or more close friends is likely to be happier. In 2002, researchers Ed Diener and Martin Seligman conducted a study at the University of Illinois that focused on the 10% of students with the highest recorded scores in a survey of personal happiness. Their findings showed that the most salient characteristics shared by students who were very happy were their strong ties to friends and family, as well as their commitment to spending time with them.

The answer to Question 2 is "involving work." The reason is a phenomenon called "flow." This has been referred to as "being in the zone," feeling completely one with what you are doing. The concept was introduced by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. He found that when one is completely involved in an activity for its own sake, the ego falls away and time flies. Every action, movement and thought flows from the previous one; one's whole being is involved.

Question 3 concerns the reliability of "gut reactions." Since such reactions are often rooted in our own childhood responses to family interactions, their reliability is related to how happy a childhood we had, as well as how rewarding our current relationships are. If, when you look back on your childhood, you hope to do better with your own children than your parents did with you, then you probably should evaluate your gut reactions before acting upon them.

Question 4 asks whether saying "No" convinces children we mean business. The answer is "No." Even adults don't like to be

turned down. We would much rather hear someone say “yes,” even if it is conditional. So, why not replace “No, you can’t watch television until your chores are done” with “Yes, you may watch television as soon as your chores are done”? The implied consequences and our record of following through on what we say are what convince children we mean business.

Optional Activity: Family Rituals

What rituals does your family have that routinely bring two or more family members together in a manner that encourages a deeper level of communication? If no examples come to mind, what possibilities appeal to you? One option would be the type of bedtime conversations that Martin Seligman talks of having with his children. Another is a weekly or bi-weekly family meeting. A third option is weekly or bi-weekly parent-child outings, when a parent takes one child out for an ice cream or other activity, providing time for relaxed one-on-one conversation. This is a favorite choice for larger families, where children do not get as much one-on-one time with just one parent. But there are countless possibilities, such as hiking or bike riding together.

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Chapter 4



Learning from Consequences

““**S**pice’ is a deadly ingredient,” announced the headline of a suburban newspaper. The front page was dominated by a picture of a 19-year-old lying comatose in a hospital bed. Below was a photo of his family watching a medical helicopter take off, transporting his heart to a transplant recipient. The Saturday before, this young man had smoked “spice” with a friend, then fallen asleep. By Monday, his brain had become swollen and he was in a coma.

At the heart of this tragic story was a synthetic form of pot, popularly known as “spice,” which is thought by many young people to be legal. Often teens think it is safe to smoke spice because it was once easily found at gas stations and head shops. What is not well-known is that, since the chemicals in spice vary, it is difficult for users to know what they are smoking. “Spice” can be orders of magnitude more powerful than marijuana, overwhelming the brain’s circuitry.

Illicit drugs are only one example of the deadly choices that can suddenly confront a teen at a party or other gathering of peers. Actions may be taken out of a sense of bravado, without an understanding of

the possible consequences. Or a teen may be too embarrassed to say “no,” as when offered a ride home from a party by a friend who has already had too many drinks. In such situations, prior coaching on how to say “no” in a friendly but firm manner can save a teen’s life.

Teaching through Offering Choices

We sometimes forget that what our culture expects of teens has changed radically since the early 20th century. Before child labor laws, children routinely worked in factories or on the farm. Young people got married in their teens. Not until after World War II did attending high school become a nearly universal experience. With the advent of modern medicine people were living longer. The standard of living had risen, but technology had eliminated many less-skilled jobs. The jobs that remained required higher levels of education. Suddenly young people in their teens could not afford to set up their own households; they were expected to stay in school.

Taking the long view, it is clear that recent generations live longer, healthier, more comfortable lives than their forebears. However, the yearnings that caused earlier generations to take to the high seas or join a wagon train heading west have not gone away. Athletics or wilderness adventures provide an outlet for some, but not all teens have the inclination or resources to take part in these activities. So, adolescents may find themselves asking the impatient question: How long do I have to wait for life to begin? Their parents may recall wondering, themselves, as teens: Is this all there is?

The challenge a parent faces is to simultaneously recognize that the restlessness of modern teens is understandable, yet still remain the calm voice of reason. This task is easiest if there has been an on-going dialogue between parent and child concerning how to make wise choices. Telling teens what to do tends to be counterproductive. Although it takes longer to help young people learn to make wise decisions, it yields benefits throughout their lives.

In *Parenting with Love & Logic*, Cline and Fay point out that offering choices forces the child to weigh a set of options. Over time, this prepares children to apply good sense to the problems and daily hassles of life. The parent paves the way by offering options the parent finds acceptable. For a young child, the choices offered may be simple:

“Would you rather carry your coat or wear it?”

“Would you rather play quietly in front of the television or noisily in your room?”

For a teen, the options will be more complex: “You are free to use the car as long as your mother or I don’t need it. But first, you need to deposit the insurance deductible in a savings account.”

This approach avoids drawing a metaphorical line in the sand and daring your child to cross it. The child can choose to be quiet or noisy, to save the money for the insurance deductible or not. Either way, it is his choice. But a limit has been established, along with implied consequences. The next section describes the process in more detail.

Helping Your Child Learn from Consequences

Much as we may wish that we could always be there for our children, we know that we cannot. Our mission is to prepare them to thrive, not just during their school years but long after. Young people who develop a sense of confidence that they can find their own solutions will become survivors. In contrast, when we solve problems that our children could have solved for themselves, they are never quite satisfied. Our solution does not feel quite right to them.

Even when we give very clear and sensible advice, the child may choose not to follow it. If we insist that our solution be implemented, the child may assume that what was formerly their problem is now our problem. Therefore, the child takes no responsibility for the

ultimate consequences. A cycle of shifting blame or claims of “He said/She said” may result.

Responsible behavior is directly correlated with the number of decisions children are expected to make. The more decisions children make, the more responsible they become. The focus is not on blame but results. Of course, there are situations where physical danger is involved and a parent has to step in, but that is rare. In the vast majority of cases, the two rules of love and logic laid out by Cline and Fay give children the security of having firm limits that do not change arbitrarily (while also saving parents considerable frustration):

1. Adults set firm, loving limits using enforceable statements without showing anger, lecturing, or using threats. The statements are enforceable because they deal with how the adult will respond.
2. When a child causes a problem, the adult shows empathy through sadness and sorrow. Then the adult lovingly hands the problem and the consequences of the problem back to the child.

What this looks like depends on the situation and the age of the child. If a toddler throws a tantrum, the parent might say quietly, in a sing-song voice, “Uh-oh, looks like you need a little private time to pull yourself together.” (The reason for using melodic, sing-song tones is to avoid sounding angry, frustrated, or sarcastic.) The parent lovingly scoops the toddler up and walks her to her room (or other recovery area, such as a playpen). Once there, the parent says, again in a sing-song voice, “Feel free to continue your tantrum here if you would like. We’ll see you when you are sweet.” The parent does not tell the child how to act: “Stop that right now!” “Go to your room!” Such statements give the child the option of disobedience and are not enforceable.

A choice may be given: “Would you like to go to your room walking, or would you like me to carry you?” But the choices must be both acceptable to the parent and enforceable if the child decides to do nothing in response. The choices also share some modicum of control with the child. The consequences come from the child’s choices, not the parent’s. For example, if the child continues to misbehave in response to the question, the parent can simply say: “Uh-oh! It looks like you choose being carried.” For older children, the choices offered might be:

“Please feel free to join us for dinner when your room is clean.”

“Please feel free to join us to watch television when your chores are finished.”

Since the parent must be willing to enforce whatever choices are given, some thought should be given to the “bottom line.” Parents may feel that how a child keeps his own room is his concern, as long as the common areas that all family members share are picked up. What chores are required is also a matter of parental discretion. But, if a clean room is an absolute must for you, you must be willing to live with your child eating a cold dinner—or none at all—while the habit of keeping one’s room clean is acquired.

What a parent should avoid is making threats that everyone knows will never be carried out. Parents may put off a response, saying something like, “I am going to have to do something about that, but I have to focus on something else right now. I will get back to you on that.” If you are in the car or out in public, this makes perfect sense. Perhaps you just cannot think of a good response right then. Take some time to think or talk over what the optimal learning experience would be in this situation. Even if children initially feel as if they have gotten away with something, the eventual consequence is more meaningful because it is more fitting.

When consequences must be enforced, the parents should express sadness at the actions of their child, showing that they love them and feel sad when they have made the wrong choices, as in: “How sad. That never turns out very well for me when I do that.” No sarcasm is expressed. Nor does the parent get dragged into an argument. There is nothing wrong with repeating the same phrases, such as “I know” (in response to a declaration like “That’s unfair!”); “I love you too much to argue with you” (in response to “You just don’t love me!”); “Bummer” (in response to “None of my friends have to do that!”); “Nice try!” (in response to “I can’t talk to you!”). The message is: “Let’s talk when both of us are calmer.”

Taking a Look at Your Parenting Style

Parenting styles tend to fall into three broad categories. Authoritarian parents make children’s obedience (compliance with rules and norms) the highest priority. The child is expected to obey and not question, even if the rules seem arbitrary or unreasonable. In contrast, permissive parents allow children to regulate their own activities, avoiding the exercise of control. Nor do they encourage the child to obey externally defined standards. Each of these parenting styles has disadvantages. Children who grew up in authoritarian households tend to be anxious and withdrawn, lacking a belief in their own perceptions and convictions. In contrast, children who grew up in permissive households have trouble regulating their emotions. They have a tendency to disobey rules and potentially may come to consider themselves to be above accepted norms of mutual consideration.

Authoritative parents take a middle path, holding clear expectations and setting firm limits for their children, while also respecting, nurturing, and affirming the child. Such parents seek to foster both the child’s capacity for self-determination and an aptitude for fitting in and conforming to reasonable social norms.

Developmental research shows that children of authoritative parents tend to be happier, as well as more resilient, socially adept, and flexible. Most parents intuitively recognize the wisdom of an authoritative approach. However, many feel unsure about where and how to set limits on their child's behavior. Parents who are unsure as to whether their parenting style might be too permissive may find the following quiz (based on Richard Bromfield's book *How to Unspoil Your Child Fast*) to be helpful.

1. Do you find yourself warning your child to shape up by the time you count to three, then feeling unsure about what to do when you get to "three" and the child has not responded?
2. Do you find yourself "promising" to buy your child something or to take her somewhere, even when you are not sure that you will be able to carry through with your promise?
3. Do you find yourself giving in when your child whines, screams, or pleads in public?
4. Do you find yourself threatening to take away privileges when you do not intend to?
5. Do you find yourself bribing your child to get him to brush his teeth or do his homework?

Each question focuses on a pitfall that parents can easily fall into if they have not given advance thought to how best to handle outbreaks of unruly behavior. Take the counting-to-three method mentioned in Question 1. "Don't let me get to three..." the parent says. Young children usually respond to the implied threat...at first. But before long they begin to test the limits. If the parent then resorts to inserting ever-growing fractions between two and three, the child soon realizes that he doesn't have to respond and goes on his merry way. This strategy only works in the longer term if the parent has a clear consequence in mind and takes action, perhaps leaving the playground early, withholding an expected treat, or taking away toys that were misused.

The difference between permissive and authoritative parenting can be seen in the forethought and firmness of the parent who has given thought to how predictable consequences (loss of an ice cream sundae, television privileges, a trip to the swimming pool or bowling alley) might be utilized to guide a child to make wise decisions. Question 2 refers to a situation in which parents frequently react on impulse. A child has made a request that the parent cannot currently comply with, then follows up with a request for tomorrow. The parent is not sure if the timing will work out, but wants to please the child and so agrees. “Do you promise?” the child asks, trying to secure a guarantee. Not wishing to explain the various contingencies that might interfere, the parent says “Yes.” Then something comes up so that the trip has to be delayed. The child howls “But you promised!”

Usually, at such a moment, the frustration on both sides discourages the parent from dwelling on how the child feels when something is promised and not delivered. As a result, next time the parent—who really means “We’ll see” or “I’m not deciding now”—may again say “Yes.” And, if the circumstances do not work out, the parent will again be made to feel like a liar. Better to simply say, “I plan on taking you to the zoo tomorrow,” which should be enough.

But what if, as described in Question 3, your child begins to whine, scream, or plead in public? Feeling surrounded by critical eyes, parents may feel at a loss and give in, even though they realize that—by giving in—they are reinforcing a behavior they fervently hope never to see again. Not giving in can be tough. But, by standing firm and explaining, “I’ll be able to hear you better when you use your regular voice,” then calmly waiting, the parent makes it clear that no advantage will be gained by persisting.

Question 4 has similarities to the first question (counting-to-three), except in this case the parent has threatened to take an unwanted action. Perhaps you have told your child that, if he did not put his school things away and get ready, you would not take him to soccer practice. Then, you wonder: “What will I tell his coach?” The

coach is probably a parent, too, and will understand if you explain that you are working on some issues with your child. However, next time you may wish to be creative and take away dessert or a favorite electronic game. If you are trying to turn around a long-standing pattern of behavior, you will need to give some thought to what consequences may motivate your child to exert the needed self-control—and you will need to be persistent.

When a child has to get through a painful medical procedure or has climbed up on the roof and you fear for her safety, bribery can be an effective way of motivating your child to do what is necessary. But Question 5 refers to bribing your child to take more routine actions, like brushing his teeth or doing his homework. The problem here is that a short-term burst of motivation may come at sizeable cost. Once a child has come to expect payment for doing his homework, he is even less likely to find the internal motivation to get it done on his own. Worse, he is likely to start expecting to be bribed to carry out tasks that he used to assume he had to do for free. This can become a slippery slope, leading to a situation where the parent has to pay for any cooperation. What are the alternatives?

Stopping the Nonsense

If children are to learn to act effectively in the world, they need to know the boundaries of permissible behavior and how others are likely to react when they overstep those boundaries. However, many parents feel unsure about where and how to set limits on their child's behavior. Wanting the child to be happy, they ignore small incidents, allowing myriad near-imperceptible instances of indulgence to build up a pattern of behavior they feel unable to control.

How does a parent turn around a situation where permissiveness has gradually and steadily taught a child to look away and ignore parental direction? Richard Bromfield suggests that further warnings will do little good at this point. Strong, memorable action is needed:

“If your child acts up in public, tell him that you are planning on going to his favorite pizza place on Friday night... Come Friday night, if you are driving to the pizza place and your child predictably starts to show his spoiled behaviors, *turn around and go home*. If you make it to the restaurant, but your child starts to act up while waiting for the pizza to come, just get up and leave the restaurant with him, head home, and stay there... And do not take the pizza home.”²⁰

The child may yell that he’s starving or that you cannot leave food you have paid for. He will survive. A grand gesture grabs your child’s attention and announces that you must be taken seriously. This strategy works just as well when you are going to the movies or on other outings. A parent might march a spoiled child back to the mall and return a toy bought a few minutes earlier. The key is taking action that has a clear connection to the misbehavior. Further explanation is not needed and may well weaken the impact. A child might try blaming the parent: “You’re mean!” “I hate you!” “You don’t love me.” Or may beg for another chance. But to take that bait and relent would be counter-productive. Better to stay calm and firm.

Having thus escaped the old familiar cycle of guilt and leniency, the parent is free to empathize with the child over the loss of a toy or outing that was triggered by the child’s unwise choice. A parent who lets action carry the day does not need to punish the child through anger or rejection, saying instead: “I know that soon you are going to make better choices.” Although, in the heat of the moment, the child may shrug off the comforting words, he will still sense the love behind the parent’s decision to set clear boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not.

Boundaries keep the child and others safe, while also laying the foundation for a child to grasp rules outside the home, whether at school, on the playground, or in the community. Limits help the child learn to control himself and live harmoniously with others. As important, the sense of agency modeled by a parent who sets firm limits offers a powerful example for the child. What happens when

no firm boundaries are set? In the entertainment industry, there are numerous examples of child stars whose early success allowed them to side-step the kind of parent-child boundary-setting described above—often with devastating consequences.

The Tragic Story of Michael Jackson

Recording artist Michael Jackson, referred to during his career as the King of Pop, was recognized as the most successful entertainer of all time by the *Guinness Book of World Records*. Born in 1958, he debuted on the professional music scene in 1964, singing with his brothers as a member of the Jackson 5. He began his solo career in 1971. Jackson's 1982 album, "Thriller," became the best-selling album up to that time. In 1985, he wrote the charity single "We Are the World" with Lionel Richie to raise funding for famine relief in Africa; 30 million copies were sold world-wide. Yet, despite four decades as a global figure in popular culture, Jackson's life ended heartbreakingly in 2009, just as he was about to embark on a new world tour.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, while Jackson was rehearsing for the new tour, a music promoter e-mailed the company bankrolling the tour, claiming that Jackson was "an emotionally-paralyzed mess."²¹ Prior to the news conference announcing the tour, the singer had locked himself in his London hotel room, drunk and despondent. He was deeply in debt and had few choices. How could this be, given that Jackson is known to have donated more than \$300 million to charity? Why had he not been able to balance philanthropy with self-care?

In interviews, Jackson referred repeatedly to the stress of growing up as a child star. Always onstage, he had not been able to make normal childish mistakes and learn from the consequences of his choices. His every move was supervised by adults who had an enormous investment in his continuing success. To compensate for

this real life lack of freedom, young Michael played the role of the archetypal romantic hero onstage. Day to day, he lived within the constraints of the everyday world but, when singing, he managed to transcend those constraints. Michael asserted that he was never so comfortable as when performing. This created the temptation to approach real life as if it were also a performance. His staff was expected to take care of mundane considerations such as finances, while Michael was required only to play his superstar role.

The trap inherent in this way of coping—not just for superstars but for all young people who have not developed the ability to anticipate the consequences of their actions—is that their behavior is not grounded in a realistic sense of social boundaries and economic limitations. In the case of Michael Jackson, his enormous contributions to popular music and to global human welfare were overshadowed in his later years by questions concerning his personal choices and erratic behavior. Yet, such was the impact of Jackson’s joy-filled early recordings and humanitarian efforts that his death in 2009 triggered a worldwide outpouring of grief.

Talking about Serious Choices in Middle and High School

The first chapter of this book began with a newspaper story about three 7th graders who came to the principal’s office at their middle school, complaining of stomach problems. The students, it turned out, had ingested a drug-laced brownie that had been brought to school by another student. They were taken to a hospital for observation. Let’s pretend that your child had been a student at that middle school and brought up the topic at dinner. Having heard comments made by peers, your child has questions about the marijuana brownie. How serious was this offense? Was the school over-reacting? Does ingesting a brownie really require medical care?

These questions may be rooted in the depiction of marijuana in the media. There is a whole sub-genre of film comedies called

“stoner films.” The archetypal examples are the 10 movies made by the comedy duo of Cheech Marin and Tommy Chong in the 1970s and 1980s. These films created a template from which stoner movies rarely veer: two guys + a big bag of weed + some kind of task to complete = awesome times.²² The protagonists are treated with affection. They are depicted not as lawbreakers but as rogue individualists who refuse to play the corporate game. You may not have such films in your DVD collection, but your neighbors may. What if your child asks: “What’s wrong with putting marijuana in a brownie?”

At this point, parents usually try to talk to their teen about their concerns. There are strong arguments that the parent can offer. The potency of marijuana, as measured by the psychoactive ingredient tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), has risen steadily for three decades. The increased potency is due both to hybridization by growers and to the part of the plant that people commonly smoke. In the 1960s and 1970s, when the leaves of the plant were most commonly smoked, the percentage of THC was often under 1 percent. Now it is more common for marijuana users to smoke the flowering heads of the plant. According to a U.S. government report, the percentage of THC in recent samples has exceeded 10 percent.

This stronger marijuana is a matter of concern because higher concentrations of THC have the opposite effect of low concentrations. Young and inexperienced users who do not moderate their use of potent marijuana may suffer from dysphoria, paranoia, irritability, and other negative effects. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, marijuana was involved in 242,200 visits to hospital emergency rooms in 2005. Regular use of potent strains of marijuana also poses significant risk to the developing adolescent brain.

A 35-year cohort study published in August 2012 in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* reported an association between long-term cannabis use and neuro-psychological decline, even after controlling for education. Persistent, dependent use of marijuana

before age 18 was found to be associated with lasting harm to a person's intelligence, attention, and memory. Quitting marijuana use did not appear to reverse the loss. However, persons who started cannabis use after age 18 did not show similar declines. Other researchers have pointed to weaknesses in the analysis or to research that indicates that reductions in IQ due to marijuana use were not permanent. The question is: "Who would want to take that chance?"

At the dinner table, such arguments may convince your pre-teen, especially if you have a tradition of frank talk around the dinner table. BUT young people who would not dabble in drugs on their own may react to peer pressure in unexpected ways. What do you say if your 14-year-old has been invited to a party where beer and marijuana may be present? You voice your concerns. Your daughter protests that you are being overprotective: "You know I don't do stuff like that! I'm a good kid." Or your son says: "Don't you trust me? Why can't you just trust me?" You ask how your child would react if a friend were to offer beer or marijuana. "I'll just do like you told me. I'll just say 'No'." What should the parent do?

In *Parenting Teens with Love and Logic*, Cline and Fay point out that there is one more step that parents should take before agreeing to let a young teen enter a situation where she may be exposed to peer pressure to experiment with drugs or alcohol. The parent should ask: "What is your plan?" Your child may say, "I'll just tell them that drugs are stupid." However, it is difficult for teens to risk their standing in the peer group by making this kind of statement. Such assertions are usually made only to impress the parent. What you are looking for is a well thought-out plan. Try a surprise "dry run" practice session, saying: "Hey dude, I've got some really good stuff. Want some?" If your son or daughter is able to turn the conversation around, not sounding defensive but affirming that drugs are not their thing (perhaps suggesting another activity they and their friend could do instead), they may be ready to handle the peer pressure. If they hesitate, you know they are not ready for the upcoming party.

An improved plan is needed. But what if your teen wants to argue? In that case, short responses tend to be best:

“I bet it feels that way.”

“Thanks for sharing that.”

“I don’t know. What do you think?”

“That’s an option.”

“What do you think I think about that?”

Hint: In case your teen’s planned response proves ineffective, it does not hurt to suggest a back-up plan. Let your teen know that it is fine with you to respond with a comment like: “My parents are such dorks. Last time I did something like that, they went ballistic. I’d better not.”²³

Grade Point Average vs. Character

Another news story was also touched on briefly in the first chapter. A school district was weighing a decision on whether to expel 11 students who had been involved in a sophisticated cheating scheme. After lengthy closed-door discussions, school district trustees eventually reached a decision to expel the students. According to an affidavit, police officers had been helping the district investigate the cheating for over six months, after a teacher had notified administrators of the possibility that someone had accessed her computer and altered grades. Media outlets reported that a private tutor (who was being sought by authorities) had suggested to students that a keylogger be installed on at least one teacher’s computer in order to record keystrokes; this allowed the students to use teacher passwords to break into the system.

The passwords enabled students to change grades and to access English, science and history exams, some at the honors and Advanced Placement levels. The district was in the process of auditing 52,000 student records to see if others might have been altered by students. According to parents, the tutor had worked with as many as 150

students. Parents said more than 17 teachers' computers had been hacked by a group of upperclassmen. A parent who objected to the expelled students being allowed to enroll at another school in the district was quoted as saying: "This isn't run-of-the-mill cheating. This was premeditated, sophisticated and ongoing."

Located in a wealthy area where pressure to get into elite universities is intense, the school where the cheating took place had long been considered one of the state's top public high schools. According to the school profile published by the district, of the 398 students who had graduated from the school the year before, 99% attended college in the fall, with the majority enrolling at four-year universities. Yet, in a 2009 survey, 64 percent of students at the school had acknowledged that they had cheated on a test or quiz. Experts quoted in the newspapers insisted that cheating was far more widespread than the public suspected. Others noted that increased dependence upon technology had made the educational system more vulnerable to the sophisticated types of chicanery often used to defraud commercial enterprises.

When the allegations first came to light, a parent was quoted as saying: "It's shocking. I can't believe that an adult [the private tutor] who's supposed to be helping these children and mentoring them would tell them to do something like this." Apparently the private tutor had a strong reputation for helping students improve their grades. What was not clear was how many parents understood what services the tutor (who apparently supplied the keylogger devices to the students) actually offered. Three families of accused students wrote a letter to the district, saying:

You cannot simply throw a handful of students to the wolves and claim that you have solved the cheating crisis. There are plenty more kids walking around your campus who are as guilty, if not more so.

What is striking is the typical “helicopter” response of these parents, who are attempting to swoop in and rescue their children. The parents’ response is easy to understand. They love their children and want to protect them. Yet this attempt to rescue teens from the consequences of their mistakes does nothing in terms of addressing the problem. Sure, other teens may also be guilty. However, pointing that out is unlikely to help their own son or daughter gain a stronger, healthier sense of personal responsibility or build the foundation for making better choices.

In Chapter One, the long-term impact of helicopter parents hovering over their children and rescuing them whenever trouble arises was briefly discussed. These parents are always pulling their children out of jams, swooping in and shielding them from teachers, schoolmates or anyone else who seems like a threat. As mentioned earlier, a favorite tactic of such parents is to declare their child a victim, creating a verbal barrage that eventually wears down teachers and school administrators, allowing the parents eventually to get their way. In this case, the school district trustees stood their ground. As another parent commented during the public meeting: “I don’t feel like these children will learn or grow from their mistakes unless they’re held accountable.” A newspaper opinion piece summed up the sentiment expressed by many:

The parents must be beside themselves with anxiety over how badly this will hurt their children’s chances. But this is more than a little mistake in their lives. It might set them back some, but it might also save them from making a much bigger mistake down the line.

A student who spoke up at a public meeting observed: “It’s a really serious crime. I don’t think they knew how serious it was.” That probably was true. If, in the past, their parents had swooped in and “saved the day” whenever they faced daunting obstacles, they

may not have learned to associate success with hard work. They may have come to feel: “The rules don’t apply to me.” Also, the students may have convinced themselves that “Everyone is doing it.” This is not an excuse. One can only hope that, deprived of the perfect image and spotless school transcript they had felt driven to present the world, these students will develop the stamina to reach their goals through individual effort.

If children are given the chance to learn that poor decisions lead to unhappiness, they tend to be more careful about their choices. Fortunately, it is never too late to get started. The next section offers a strategy that may help teens to sort out their feelings and motivations.

Talking to Moody Teenagers

This chapter began with a news story about a young man who made a reckless decision in the heat of the moment and, as a result, met a tragic end. We have all had moments when we felt at war with ourselves, when we strongly desired to do something—but knew we should not. In part, this is due to the complex structure of the human brain. We can easily receive mixed signals because our brains contain structures that serve varied purposes, ranging from survival (fight-or-flight), to the nurturing behaviors we share with fellow mammals, to the advanced planning and rational thought we tend to think of as typically human.

The task of balancing competing inclinations is especially difficult for adolescents, who may be distracted by peer pressure, intense emotions, or a rebellious yearning for independence. Instead of calmly considering the logical consequences of alternative courses of action, they may be swayed by mood swings or the opinions of friends. Often teens lash out or adopt a surly attitude when parents enforce logical consequences, hoping that the parents will back down. Confronted by a moody teen, parents may feel at a loss as to

how to initiate a meaningful discussion that does not immediately get derailed by adolescent defensiveness.

We routinely teach children general principles, such as the “Golden Rule” of treating others the way we ourselves would like to be treated. This is a great start; however, it provides no specifics. Nor does it challenge children to think deeply about how the needs of others may differ from their own. Sharing stories about our day around the dinner table provides children with useful examples of how day-to-day problems may be dealt with effectively. Yet we tend to feel an understandable hesitancy about digging deeply into the complex motivations of people we know. In contrast, with fictional characters we feel free to speculate: Why do you think he decided to...? How do you think she felt when...? What alternatives did he not think of...?

The challenge of helping teens address emotionally charged issues is examined in the next chapter. To prepare for this discussion, we will briefly look at how parents might use popular books or movies to initiate discussions about dealing with warring impulses. This is best done at a time removed from the last adolescent outburst and without specific reference to the teen’s own behavior. The goal is just to get the teen thinking about the long-term consequences of actions. For families who have a tradition of reading together, such discussions may come easily. Other families may find it easiest to start with films. Since adolescents may not pick up on subtle aspects of plot and characterization, an easy approach is to choose a movie aimed at teens.

The Hidden Narrative of Star Wars

From an \$11 million dollar budget, *Star Wars* ended up earning over \$775 million—and that’s just the original movie.²⁴ What was the attraction? Although the story is set in a galaxy “far, far away” where space travel is the norm, the six episodes in the *Star Wars* series

feature archetypal elements of both the fantasy genre—knights, chivalry and princesses²⁵—and the classic sword and sandals films: high-tech chariot races; stadiums in which prisoners are forced to fight strange beasts. The narrative arc of Episodes I, II, and III is loosely modeled on the fall of the democratic Roman Republic and the formation of the Empire;²⁶ in Episodes IV, V, and VI we see the restoration of liberty, echoing the foundational mythos of the United States.

A prominent element of the films is the *Force*, described as: “an energy field created by all living things [that] surrounds us, penetrates us, [and] binds the galaxy together.”²⁷ The omnipresent energy of the Force can be harnessed by individuals known as Force-sensitives, who may choose to harness it in two very different ways. The Jedi, a monastic order of Force-sensitives known for their calm, considered demeanor and role as the guardians of peace and justice represent one path. The second option is represented by the Sith a group who believe that conflict was the only true test of one’s ability. The Sith, in contrast to the compassionate Jedi, believe that individuals only deserve to have what they are strong enough to take. The Sith see morality (and therefore the Jedi) as an obstacle to be overcome.

The abilities of Force-sensitives vary but, with training, they can perform feats such as clairvoyance, telekinesis, precognition, and mind control. The Force also amplifies physical traits like strength and speed. As Episode I begins, the Dark Lords of the Sith plot to destroy the Jedi, the sanctioned guardians of peace and justice in the Galactic Republic. In Episodes I, II, and III (also known as the prequel trilogy) we see the Jedi in their prime, attempting to deal with the rising presence of the Dark Side of the Force. The corrupting influence of the Sith’s lust for power is personified via the experiences of Anakin Skywalker (father of Luke Skywalker, hero of the original trilogy) and Anakin’s eventual enslavement by the Dark Side.

When we first meet Anakin in Episode I, he is a 9-year-old slave boy who has been raised by his mother on a remote, lawless planet. Anakin is already a gifted pilot with an ability to sense things before they happen. Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn meets Anakin after an emergency landing on the planet and becomes convinced that the boy is the Chosen One of Jedi prophesy. Anakin wins his freedom in a futuristic race, but they are unable to free Anakin's mother. Qui-Gon brings Anakin to the Jedi Council, but the Council forbids his training as a Jedi because the boy's future is clouded by the fear he exhibits. Not long afterward, Qui-Gon is killed in a duel with a Sith Lord. In his dying moments, Qui-Gon asks his apprentice, Obi-Wan Kenobi, to train Anakin as a Jedi. After Anakin's piloting skills help to win a key battle and Obi Wan proves his mettle by killing the Sith Lord who had killed Qui-Gon, the Jedi Council reluctantly agrees.

In Episode II, which starts a decade after Episode I ends, Anakin has repeated dreams of his mother in pain. He goes to rescue her but, having been kidnapped and tortured by Tuskin Raiders, she dies in his arms. Enraged, Anakin kills the entire local Tuskin tribe. Around this same time, Anakin becomes passionately attracted to an old acquaintance, former-Queen-turned-Galactic Senator Padmé Amidala. As a member of the Jedi Order, Anakin is not allowed to marry. But, overcome by their mutual attraction, Anakin and Padmé marry in a secret ceremony.

By Episode III, Padmé has become pregnant. Anakin cannot admit that he is the father because he would be forced to resign from the Jedi Order. He has a dream of Padmé dying in childbirth and becomes haunted by fear that the dream will come true. This allows Chancellor Palpatine (secretly a Sith Lord) to begin to drive a wedge between Anakin and the Jedi. He convinces Anakin that only the Sith can save Padmé. Frustrated by the double life he is now forced to lead, Anakin becomes increasingly alienated from the Jedi. Tempted by the idea of gaining power over life and death, Anakin eventually betrays the Jedi Order. After taking on a new Sith identity as Darth Vader he leads the massacre of younglings at the Jedi Temple.

Analyzing Darth Vader's Psychological Problems

In popular culture, Darth Vader has become a synonym for evil. However, one could as easily think of Anakin as a child star who has become convinced that the rules that govern the behavior of others do not pertain to him. Successful at an unusually young age, he feels entitled both to the benefits of remaining a member of the Jedi Order *and* to an intimate relationship with the woman of his choice. However, Anakin's feelings of entitlement blind him to the impact his choices have on others, particularly those closest to him.

Anakin spends much of Episode III in a state of anxiety about losing Padmé. Yet in the end, when she pleads with him to go away with her and leave the Sith, he refuses. Exultantly he tells her that they will rule the galaxy together. A moment later, Anakin catches sight of Obi-Wan emerging from the ship, jumps to the conclusion that Padmé has betrayed him, and chokes her into unconsciousness. Obi-Wan pleads: "Let her go, Anakin!" But Anakin snarls like a predator over the body of its prey: "You will not take her from me!" Padmé's preference is not even considered.

Psychiatrist Eric Bui has argued that that Anakin meets six of the nine diagnostic criteria for Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD).²⁸ Only five criteria need to be met for a person to qualify as suffering from BPD, a complex condition that causes emotional instability, a low sense of self-worth, relationship problems, and fear of abandonment. Other common symptoms include problems with managing anger and recurring self-harming or suicidal behaviors. Fortunately, most people who are treated for borderline personality disorder get better over time. However, treatment can be difficult and recovery can take years.

Eric Bui and Rachel Rodgers, a researcher at the Center for Studies and Research in Applied Psychology in France, have used the *Star Wars* example to teach medical students about BPD. They see using such a famous fictional example as a way to spread awareness. In Bui's view, use of the Dark Side of the Force is psychologically

similar to drug use: “It feels really good when you use it, it alters your consciousness and you know you shouldn’t do it.”²⁹ He and Rodgers suggest that the success of the *Star Wars* prequel films might be partially due to the way struggling teens relate to the troubled Anakin Skywalker. Although very few teens go on to develop borderline personality disorder, many adolescents experience some symptoms of BPD. This is why clinicians are discouraged from diagnosing anyone with BPD before the age of 18.

So, the hesitancy of the Jedi Council in regard to training Anakin as a Jedi can be seen as psychologically perceptive. Anakin’s terror of losing Padmé demonstrates his fear of abandonment. His anger management issues grow to deadly proportions in his massacre of the Tuskins. Anakin’s relationship problems show up in the way he goes back and forth between idealizing and devaluing his Jedi mentors. The cause of these problems may be traced to his childhood. Although the causes of BPD are complex and not fully agreed upon, evidence suggests that BPD and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may be related.³⁰ Most researchers agree that childhood trauma (such as Anakin experienced) may be a contributing factor.³¹

Differing Critical Responses

The *Star Wars* prequels have been widely criticized from an artistic point of view. Hayden Christensen, who played Anakin, received two Golden Raspberry Awards for Worst Supporting Actor based on his performance in Episodes II and III. Critics also criticized Director/Writer George Lucas’ talents as a writer of dialogue. Nevertheless, box office receipts made *Revenge of the Sith* the top-grossing film of 2005.

However, there were also reviewers, like A.O. Scott of the *New York Times*, who argued that Episode III ranked with *The Empire Strikes Back* as the best of the six *Star Wars* films. Scott admitted: “Mr. Lucas’s indifference to two fairly important aspects

of moviemaking - acting and writing - is remarkable.”³² Yet Scott also pointed out that nobody ever went to a *Star Wars* movie for the acting. In Episode III the scenes of spectacle were

executed with a swashbuckling flair that makes you forget what a daunting technical accomplishment they represent ... Mr. Lucas has surpassed Peter Jackson and Steven Spielberg in his exploitation of the new technology’s aesthetic potential.³³

A successful adventure film also needs a good story. George Lucas has spoken of his vision for the *Star Wars* series in terms not only of spectacle but also mythic resonance. Clearly, the plot of the prequel trilogy cuts against the optimistic tradition of the traditional Hollywood blockbuster. We find ourselves “witnessing a flawed hero devolving into a cruel and terrifying villain.”³⁴ From this perspective, we can see a marked resemblance between Episode III and the narrative arc of Goethe’s *Faust*, itself based on the medieval legend of Doctor Faustus.

Making a Pact with the Devil

Goethe’s *Faust* is widely considered to be one of the greatest works of German literature. Faust, the main character, is a highly successful scholar. Yet, he is nonetheless deeply dissatisfied with his life. Bored and depressed, he is contemplating taking his own life. Mephistopheles, the Devil’s representative, appears and makes a bargain with Faust. He will grant whatever wishes Faust desires while Faust is on Earth—if Faust will agree to serve the devil in Hell after his death.

Like Faust, Anakin is talented and successful, yet dissatisfied. Since the age of 10, Anakin has grown up within the Jedi Order. But now his attachment to Padmé is causing him to chafe against the

limitations of the Order, whose keynote is non-attachment. This allows Palpatine to make use of Anakin's feelings for Padmé to slowly ratchet up Anakin's level of frustration. Dangling the promise of saving Padmé, he lures Anakin into joining the Sith.

After making his bargain with Mephistopheles, Faust meets and falls in love with a beautiful and innocent girl named Gretchen. With the devil's help, Faust seduces her. Gretchen's mother dies of a sleeping potion Gretchen administered so that Faust could visit her in privacy. Then Gretchen discovers she is pregnant; her brother challenges Faust and is killed. At her wit's end, Gretchen drowns her illegitimate child. She is convicted of murder and sentenced to die. Faust tries to free her from the dungeon, but Gretchen refuses to escape. Her last words are:

Thine am I, Father! Rescue me!
Ye angels, holy cohorts, guard me,
Camp around, and from evil ward me!
Henry [Faust]! I shudder to think of thee.³⁵

As Faust and Mephistopheles flee the prison, a voice from heaven proclaims Gretchen is saved.

Padmé, a much stronger character than the naïve Gretchen, is never lured into destructive behavior. Still, she meets an untimely end. Ultimately, Anakin becomes so emotionally unstable that, in his last interaction with Padmé, he chokes her into unconsciousness. Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi brings Padmé to a medical center, but she lives only long enough to give birth to twins. Padmé has eluded the Dark Side, but nothing can restore her will to live.

Faust's final deliverance is made possible by two factors: his own continual striving for transcendence and the intercession of Gretchen, who now resides in bliss in the heavenly realms. As Faust's life ends, Gretchen prays for him. Her prayer granted. In our last glimpse of Faust, we see him about to attain the joy of heavenly companionship.

However *Star Wars* is an epic for a less religious age. Padmé does not reappear. Yet her son Luke plays a key role in his father's redemption. In Episodes IV and V, Darth Vader appears to be the personification of evil. Yet, Padmé's final words to Obi-Wan Kenobi turn out to be prophetic; there is still a spark of good in Anakin/Vader. In the climactic scene, Anakin's son Luke (born just before Padmé's death) is about to be killed by the Emperor. To save Luke, Darth Vader kills the Emperor, an act that costs Anakin/Vader his own life. Through this final act of sacrifice, the former Anakin Skywalker returns to the Jedi ideal he had abandoned.

Following the destruction of the Emperor, we see Anakin (in ethereal form) standing with his Jedi mentors Yoda and Obi-Wan, quietly watching the rebel victory celebration. Darth Vader's black mask is gone. Anakin has reclaimed to his original identity.

The Phantom of the Opera: A Female Perspective

Faust and *Star Wars* explore the theme of a metaphorical "deal with the devil" from a male point of view. Gretchen and Padmé are important characters, but the psychological dynamics behind their actions are never fully explored. In the end Padmé exclaims:

I don't know you anymore. Anakin, you're breaking
my heart! You're going down a path I can't follow!

What led a strong, perceptive character like Padmé to fool herself about her lover's intentions in the way she did?

The Phantom of the Opera, the longest-running musical in Broadway history, focuses on a heroine whose emotional journey has similarities to that of Anakin and Faust. Christine, a young soprano, explains in an early scene that, as her father lay dying, he told her that after his death she would be protected by an angel. Recently, a disembodied voice has been talking to Christine when she visits

certain rooms of the Paris Opéra. She believes this voice is the spirit of her father, come back to comfort her and serve as her vocal coach.

In reality the voice Christine hears is that of a mysterious, disfigured musical genius (the Phantom) who has become obsessed with Christine. The song “Angel of Music” describes Christine’s touching, if wildly mistaken, perceptions of her musical mentor. Like Anakin’s misperception of Chancellor Palpatine’s intent, her illusions make it difficult for Christine to recognize the danger inherent in this mysterious new influence in her life. In some ways, Christine is not so different from a teenage girl obsessed with romance novels. She longs for a supportive male presence. But the man who shows up may have quite different interests.

Like Palpatine, the Phantom is a man of extraordinary talent who carefully keeps his darker side hidden from the talented young person he pursues. The Phantom deftly uses various secret passageways within the Opéra to communicate with Christine, while remaining unseen. The central conflict is set up when Christine triumphs at a gala attended by her old childhood friend, Raoul. Hearing her sing, Raoul recalls his love for Christine. He contacts her and their feelings for one another are revived. However, their romance arouses the jealousy of the Phantom, who has come to rely on Christine as conduit for his own musical inspiration.

Putting Christine into a kind of trance with his singing, the Phantom lures Christine down to his lair beneath the Opéra. In the song “Music of the Night,” the Phantom implores her to forget the life she knew before, urging her to “Let your darker side give in to the power of the music that I write.” However, seeing a mannequin resembling herself dressed in a wedding gown, Christine faints. When she wakes up, the Phantom is intently composing music. His back is turned to her. Christine creeps up behind him and snatches away his mask, catching sight of his disfigured face.

Even so, the revelation that the Phantom is quite a different character than the person she had dreamed of does not free Christine. Swept away by the force of the Phantom’s passion,

Christine is unable to regain her emotional balance. In the duet “The Phantom of the Opera,” the psychological underpinning of their relationship is laid bare.

Phantom: Sing once again with me our strange duet. My power over you grows stronger yet.

Christine: Those who have seen your face draw back in fear. I am the mask you wear.

Phantom: It’s me they hear.

Both: My/your spirit and your/my voice, in one combined.
The Phantom of the Opera is there inside your/my mind.

The Phantom has made it possible for Christine to rise from chorus girl to opera star. Her “darker side” is attracted to the sense of power and passion he radiates. Yet she also fears him. For the Phantom is intent upon recruiting her to help him fulfill his own dreams, giving little thought to her needs. In this, the Phantom is not so different from Anakin, who is in love with his image of Padmé—not the real woman standing before him.

Christine’s healthy love for her childhood sweetheart, Raoul, ultimately enables her to break the Phantom’s spell. The Phantom then drags her down to his lair in a jealous rage. Raoul follows and is captured. Christine is forced to choose. Is she willing to remain with the Phantom in order to save Raoul’s life? In the end, Christine’s compassion for the Phantom inspires him to free both Christine and Raoul, allowing them to flee.

Anakin was offered a similar choice. Padmé begged him to go away with her but her healthy love was not sufficient to break spell. Anakin had internalized the lust for power Palpatine personified. He was now a Sith. Only after living for many years as prisoner of the life support system hidden beneath his armor would Anakin/Darth Vader find the strength to break the spell. Only then would Anakin, like the Phantom, be moved by love to an act of compassion.

What a movie like *The Phantom of the Opera* offers is an opportunity to talk with teens about the danger inherent in romantic illusion. The Phantom might be attracted to Christine, but this does not mean that he is focused on what is best for her. Christine is finally able to escape the Phantom when she can view him with neither fascination nor fear, but with compassion.

Optional Activity: Watching Movies with Children and Teens

Parents are in the best position to decide whether watching and discussing *Star Wars*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, or another movie is a good fit for their family. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry provides free guidelines on media viewing.³⁶ Common Sense Media has an extensive library of age-based ratings³⁷ of movies, games, TV shows, websites, books and music. Just as an example, the original *Star Wars* movie (now referred to as Episode IV) is recommended for ages 7 and older; Episode III (where Anakin betrays the Jedi) is recommended for ages 11 and older. Both movies received 4 out of 5 stars.

Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera* is recommended for ages 13 and older. The film received 3 stars out of 5. (The reviewers found it a slightly stiff but sumptuous and faithful production.) For each film rated, there are suggested topics families may wish to discuss, along with specific ratings for each film based on the prevalence of positive role models, violence, questionable language, sexual content, etc. You might enjoy checking out the ratings of some of your favorite films. There is also a Topic Center that addresses topics such as cyberbullying, setting limits on "screen time" (TV, iPad, etc.), and Internet safety.

Pick a movie that seems a good match for the interests and age level of your child(ren). If they are young, the discussion after watching the film will probably center on simple questions like:

What did you like best/least about the movie? Why? With older children, you may wish to focus on what motivated the characters to act the way they did. The website *Teach with Movies* provides a wide range of interesting questions that can be helpful in sparking conversation.³⁸

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Chapter 5



Nurturing Emotional Intelligence

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), suicide is the third leading cause of death for youth between the ages of 10 and 24. Approximately 4600 young people in this age group commit suicide each year. A nationwide survey of youth in grades 9-12 found that 16% of students reported seriously considering suicide in the 12 months preceding the survey. Fortunately, research over the last several decades has uncovered a wealth of information on the prevention of suicide and other self-destructive behaviors.

The Student Health and Safety Survey funded by CDC has shown that risk of suicide attempts was over two times higher among youth who had been violent against others, compared to those who had not been violent. Why violence against others may be associated with greater risk of suicide is not well understood. Yet, it is clear that a perception that life is a scene of moral chaos, in which there are no safe moorings, can lead to desperate behavior. How can parents help children to gain the emotional resilience to cope with the social and emotional rigors of the pre-teen and adolescent years?

Helping Young People Cope

In his popular book, *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman pointed out that family life is our first and most powerful school of emotional learning:

In this intimate cauldron, we learn how to feel about ourselves and how others will react to our feelings; how to think about these feelings and what choices we have in reacting; how to read and express hopes and fears. This emotional schooling operates not just through the things parents say and do directly to children, but also in the models they offer for handling their own feelings and those that pass between husband and wife.³⁹

This may seem to put a heavy burden of responsibility on parents. Yet, once parents understand the connection between a) maintaining their own physical and emotional well-being and b) supporting their children in developing similarly healthy habits, the idea that modeling good habits is a burden dissipates. As adults, we know that it is all too easy to undermine our own best intentions by impulsively grabbing a snack that offers only empty calories or by dwelling on small snubs or disappointments. Pausing to ask whether this is the model we want to set before our children helps us to make the best choice, both for our children and for ourselves.

In Chapter 4, we looked at instances where a parent must hold firm, despite a child's impulsive demands. Yet the ultimate goal of child-raising is not simply to have an obedient and compliant child. As parents, we want our children to grow into strong and responsible people who are capable of making healthy choices. In our highly mobile era, more of the burden of teaching children how to regulate their emotional responses lies with parents than was true in earlier generations. Grandparents often live far away.

Close-knit neighborhoods where parents enforce similar social norms have become rare. Fewer families are active members of religious communities. Lawsuits have made public schools wary of delving into emotional issues. So, it is of pivotal importance that parents know how to support healthy emotional development.

Fortunately, research has shown that, by utilizing a simple set of Emotion Coaching strategies, parents can help children successfully cope with negative emotions like anger, sadness, and fear. John Gottman's studies of successful parent-child interactions uncovered a process that typically happens in five steps. The parents

1. become aware of the child's emotions
2. recognize the emotion provides an opportunity for intimacy and teaching
3. listen empathetically, validating the child's feelings
4. help the child find words to label the emotion he or she is experiencing
5. set limits while exploring strategies to solve the problem at hand.⁴⁰

Children who get Emotion Coaching still feel sad, angry, or scared under difficult circumstances, but they are better able to soothe themselves, bounce back from distress, and stay productive. Unfortunately, it is easy for parents to start off on the wrong foot. Gottman quotes a father who found his four-year-old daughter, Becky, comical when she was angry: "She says 'Gosh, darn it!' And then she walks away like some little midget human. It's just too funny!"⁴¹ A mother made a similar comment: "She's so little and her face gets all red. I tend to see her as this little doll and think, 'Isn't that funny?'"⁴²

On one level, the image of a tiny girl expressing such a big emotion seems humorous. But how would the father feel if his boss were to laugh at or dismiss his anger in a similar way? The father would feel disrespected. So would the mother. The child does, too,

although the impact may not be immediately apparent. One way to better understand how a child might react to a careless remark is to translate the child's situation into adult terms. Think of how you would feel if you overheard a co-worker whispering about your appearance just as you got up to speak.

In a longitudinal study, Gottman found that preschoolers whose parents were over-alert to the child's mistakes (overwhelming the child with a barrage of criticism)—or who responded to a tantrum by mocking or laughing at the child—were the same kids who, three years later, were having trouble with schoolwork and getting along with peers. Fortunately, as with setting boundaries, it is never too late to change. When parents switch to an Emotion Coaching approach, behavioral problems tend to decrease over time. One reason is that the parent responds to a child's distress when the emotions are still at a low level of intensity, so that the child does not have to act out to get attention. Also, if children receive Emotion Coaching from a young age, they become practiced in the art of self-soothing, which allows them to remain calmer under stress and therefore misbehave less.

In its most basic form, empathy is the ability to feel what another person is feeling. When parents take the role of Emotion Coaches, they consciously connect with what the child is feeling. Seeing their child in tears, they imagine themselves in the child's position and feel her pain. This makes the child feel supported. What does Emotion Coaching look like? If a child had had an argument with a friend at school, the mother might ask how it came about, how it made the child feel, and whether she might help to find a solution. If a child had a misunderstanding with a teacher, the parents would not automatically take the teacher's side. Instead, the parent would listen carefully as the child told her story and would trust her to tell the truth. When the child felt that she had been heard, the parent might circle back and engage the child in a conversation about how she might avoid future misunderstandings.

What might the five steps of Emotion Coaching look like in action? Perhaps a school-age child is upset because his pre-school

sister has gotten into his comic book collection and scribbled on the pages. His mother puts her arms around him and says: “I can see why you are angry. You cared a lot about those books. You’ve been collecting them for years.” In so doing, the mother has shown her awareness of the child’s emotions, recognized the moment as an opportunity for intimacy (as opposed to an I-told-you-so lecture on putting one’s belongings away), validated his feelings, and helped him find words to label the emotion he as feeling. Once emotions have cooled, she may reopen the discussion and explore strategies for keeping the comic books out of a toddler’s reach.

When the emotional connection between parent and child is strong, limit-setting grows naturally out of the parent’s genuine reactions to a child’s misbehavior. The child responds to a parent’s anger, disappointment, and worries, so that negative consequences like a time-out are less likely to be required. The respect and affection between parent and child become the primary vehicle for setting limits. When a parent is starting to use Emotion Coaching, it is helpful to keep two rules in mind: a) All feelings are permissible, but not all behavior is permissible; b) the parent-child relationship is not a democracy, since it is the parent’s responsibility to determine what behavior is permissible.

Establishing an emotional connection is key. There will be times when healthy children do not want to go to school, when they suddenly “hate” food they loved a few days earlier, when they are not speaking to former best friends, when chores do not get done. Sometimes it will be tempting to tell a child or a teen that what they are doing (or saying) just does not make sense. But feelings, especially those of children, can be sensitive. So, it may be better to commiserate than argue: “Gee, I’d like to stay home too. But I promised the people at work that I would be there for a meeting. What could we do after school that we can both look forward to?”

Helping Young People Deal with the Media Barrage

With the advent of television, the entertainment industry has entered homes across the nation. Through television, pre-teens and adolescents are bombarded by media messages, many of which sell air-brushed images of unattainable perfection that can undermine a young person's self-confidence. What is the problem? Lurking beneath the surface of the glossy ads is the implied message that, if you are not a "winner" (in whatever sense the ad has focused on), then you are a "loser." Girls are encouraged to believe that a bit of makeup, an item of clothing, or a certain "look" will win popularity or male attention. This encourages girls approaching puberty to obsess endlessly over someone else's approval—just when they are at the optimal age to be:

- * testing their own talents,
- * developing their own standards,
- * gaining the knowledge, skills and grade point average that could open up a wide range of educational and/or job opportunities after high school graduation.

One way to help a daughter to cope is through humor. All of us can remember times when buying a much-desired object turned out to be much less satisfying than daydreaming about owning it. For example, we might have bought a classic antique car, only to find that we ended up spending more time fixing it than driving it. Through sharing a laugh at the contrast between our daydream and the reality, we can inject a sense of ironic objectivity into our roles as consumers. Alternatively, in early January we can take a good-humored look back at the holiday wish lists of family members and discuss which gifts lived up to pre-holiday expectations.

Another strategy can be useful during spring cleaning, which is a great time to discuss whether specific objects are better kept—or thrown out to provide room for other needs. This discussion might

focus on two questions: Do we need it? Does it add meaning to our lives? Such a ritual, pursued regularly (and with a self-deprecating sense of humor), not only helps to weed out the possessions we never use, but also helps children to develop a sense of proportion regarding how little the habit of crowding our houses with possessions actually adds to our lives.

Boys frequently get the impression that they must suppress their emotions in the service of a rigid ideal of manhood...that “real men” are tough; intimacy is for weaklings. This requires hiding their feelings and silencing their fears. As a result, boys are left to manage conflict and adversity with a limited emotional repertoire. Boys learn to turn away from their inner life, pouring their energy into athletics, electronic gadgets, and/or shooter video games. When stung by criticism or embarrassed by school problems, they lash out or withdraw emotionally, expressing an irritable wish that everyone would “just leave me alone.” What is going on?

If you ask a boy the question “How did that make you feel?” he very often won’t know how to respond. He’ll talk instead about what he did or plans to do about the problem. Some boys won’t even have the words for their feelings—*sad* or *angry* or *ashamed*, for instance. A large part of our work with boys and men is to help them understand their emotional life and develop an emotional vocabulary.⁴³

This quote is from one of the classic books on emotional development, *Raising Cain: Protecting the emotional life of boys*, by school psychologists Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson. They compare acquiring emotional literacy to learning to read. First, they help boys increase their sense of clarity about their own feelings and those of others: recognizing the look and feel of various emotions, naming them, learning where these emotions come from. Second, they assist boys with recognizing the emotional content of voices,

facial expressions, and body language. Third, they help boys gain an understanding of the situations or reactions that produce emotional states, such as the connection between frustration and anger. If you have a son, this book may provide unexpected insights into why he sometimes reacts as he does.

The next section discusses a movie whose plot provides a pungent metaphor for the disorientation experienced by young people who have gotten caught up in the media barrage of popular culture and do not have anyone in their lives who can show them how to *unplug*.

The Matrix

The classic 1999 science fiction film, *The Matrix*, was made for \$63 million but took in \$463,517,383 at the box office. The movie depicts a future in which the reality perceived by most humans is actually an elaborate simulation called the “Matrix.” This metaphor clearly resonated with many young people. As the plot unfolds, we discover that the Matrix was created by sentient machines to pacify and subdue the human population so that their body heat and organic electrical activity could be used as an energy source by the machines. At the beginning of the film, computer programmer Thomas Anderson (referred to by his secret hacker name, “Neo”) appears to be living in the world as we know it—until he meets a man named Morpheus, who offers him a red pill. After taking the pill, Neo wakes up in liquid-filled pod connected to an elaborate electrical structure, next to thousands of other pods.

Neo is rescued from the pod by Morpheus, who tells Neo that free humans are fighting against the intelligent machines that have taken control of the Earth’s surface. These machines have turned humans into a battery-like energy source confined to pods, where they are kept docile by projecting into their brains an illusory life experience. Neo has lived in the simulated world of the Matrix since birth. Morpheus and his crew belong to a group of free humans

who “unplug” others from the Matrix and recruit them to join their rebellion against the Machines.

The film focuses on the struggle between the rebels and the machines. For our purposes, the most interesting scene involves Cypher, a member of the rebel crew who is so disillusioned by the challenges that are an integral part of his “unplugged” life in the real world that he agrees to betray his fellow rebels. He asks only that the machines plug his body back into the Matrix, thus restoring his former illusory—but comfortable—existence. In fulfilling his part of the bargain, Cypher (whose name means “zero” or “nothing”) shoots three fellow rebels. He is then killed himself, by a crewmember he had earlier shot and left for dead.

Cypher shows, in an extreme form, the symptoms of a Narcissistic Personality Disorder. He wants attention and positive reinforcement from others, but lacks empathy. Instead of returning the positive reinforcement he gets from others, Cypher disregards their feelings and welfare. For *young* children, an inflated view of self and grandiose feelings (characteristics of narcissism) are part of normal development. However, after about age 8, views of the self—both positive and negative—usually become more realistic, based on comparisons to peers.

Narcissism may also be rooted in the other extreme: lack of attention or neglect during childhood. This is exemplified by Cypher’s isolated development in a pod. The root cause of narcissism is low self-esteem. A narcissist’s inflated view of self and grandiose feelings are essentially a coping mechanism, a way of dealing with the pain of his or her own perceived worthlessness. Cypher’s perception that his life is worthless is made clear by his decision to abandon his individuality and have himself plugged back into the Matrix. Once inserted back into the Matrix, his reality would have been that of a “couch potato” who had lost the capacity to turn away from the television screen. Even had Cypher not been killed, his existence as an individual capable of making choices would have been over.

Yearning for a Sense of Human Connection: A Quiz

In Chapter 2 we discussed how parents can give their children a sense of belonging and human connection. What happens when a child grows up *without* that sort of experience? A child who never felt valued by others might—like Cypher—fail to develop a sense of self-worth. But what if the opposite were true? What if a child got nothing *but* positive feedback? What happens then? Just for fun, let's try a little quiz. Jot down the answers that occur to you, based on your own observations and on our discussion so far.

1. Why might a child whose parents have showered her with attention and positive feedback still feel socially inadequate?
2. What might the impact be if parents consistently focused on fostering capability?
3. Based on what was said earlier about Narcissistic Personality Disorder, would you guess that the incidence of this disorder has increased, decreased, or remained the same in recent years? What observations caused you to answer as you did?
4. What can parents do to help teens stay grounded and make healthy choices?
5. Critics have pointed out that the ideas presented in *The Matrix* are not entirely original. What authors might the creators of the movie have borrowed from?

Question 1 asks how a child whose parents have showered her with attention and positive feedback might still end up feeling socially inadequate. Once children start school, influences outside the home come to bear. As children move into the upper elementary grades, they cannot escape comparisons to peers. There will be times when a child meets with less success in academics, sports, and social relations than she had desired. If she has not learned to cope with frustration, this may result in a retreat into resentment and daydreams of exaggerated success—especially if she has come to

feel that her parents value success so much that failure will reduce their support for her. To the child this means that, without success, she is nothing. Yet, she may have no idea how to achieve success. In such circumstances, she may (like the high school students in Chapter 4 who installed keyloggers on teachers' computers to steal their passwords) resort to cheating to achieve at least the appearance of success.

In a sense, Question 2 is a continuation of this discussion. It asks what advantages a child might gain if his parents focused on capability instead of the appearance of academic or athletic success. Bit by bit, the child would learn a range of useful skills, ranging from flipping pancakes to figuring out how much change is owed when groceries totaling \$17.50 are paid for with a \$20 bill. By learning a wide array of practical skills, he gradually comes to feel a sense of confidence that he will succeed when called upon to learn and make use of real world skills.

This approach has a second advantage in that it is not based on any external ranking of, for example, what member of the family is best at flipping pancakes. The child learns to do a "good enough" job and get on to the next task. There is no reason to feel self-conscious if another family member did a slightly better job of raking leaves. This eliminates the element of "performance anxiety" that can otherwise undermine children's motivation to learn.

In contrast, a child who has received consistent positive feedback that is unrelated to his real world performance may fear that, when actually put to the test, he will fail and be rejected by his parents, who expected much more of him. What parents sometimes fail to realize is that fear of failure can cause a child profound anxiety. Such anxiety may stimulate a strong urge to control the situation in which the child will be called upon to perform.

In Chapter 2, we discussed interactions among the characters in the *Harry Potter* books and movies. Harry's schoolmate and nemesis, Draco Malfoy, put a great deal of effort into keeping Harry from competing with Draco on an equal footing. Draco belittled

and ridiculed Harry, using every opportunity to get Harry into trouble. What is the motivation behind Draco's repeated attempts to undermine Harry's performance? Draco fears that he can't compete on an equal footing with Harry Potter, the "boy who lived" despite the efforts of the powerful evil wizard Voldemort to destroy Harry's whole family.

Question 3 asks about the incidence of Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Narcissism among university-aged students has doubled in the last 30 years. A nation-wide study showed that 30 percent were rated as narcissistic after taking psychological tests, in contrast to 15 percent in 1982. Jean Twenge, the psychology professor at San Diego State University who conducted the study commented: "It worries me, when I talk to college students, that they are not surprised at all that their generation is more narcissistic. They say, 'We have to be this way because the world is more competitive.' But the problem is that narcissism doesn't help you compete. It blows up in your face eventually."⁴⁴ Dr. Twenge explained that narcissistic students tended to have poorer results and were more likely to drop out, probably because they thought they did not have to study because they were already smart. She noted: "It's delusional thinking."

In Question 4, the focus shifts from the responses of children to those of teens, who often relish control battles. Often these are battles the parent cannot possibly win, given that it is impossible to monitor a teen's behavior 24 hours per day. Trying on different attitudes or sets of values is part of growing up. If parents have a strong negative reaction to a particular school acquaintance, this may only make this peer seem more attractive. If repeating a certain political slogan gets a rise out of the parents, this can quickly turn into a battle about the teen's right to make choices and to establish himself as an individual separate from the parents. What other alternatives might parents consider?

In *Parenting Teens with Love and Logic*, Cline and Fay discuss the importance of offering a teen choices (each of which is acceptable to the adult). Examples include:

“Would you rather clean your room or mow the lawn so that I will have time to clean your room?”

“Would you rather wash the car this morning or this afternoon?”

“Do you prefer to negotiate a reasonable time to come home or not go out tonight?”

“You’re welcome to _____ or _____.”

“Would you rather _____ or _____?”

“What would be best for you, _____ or _____?”

Non-threatening choices, if offered calmly, give teens a chance to take some control over their lives. The key is to only offer choices that the parent can live with. If you offer a choice that you do not like, chances are that your teen will sense this and instinctively opt for that choice. Don’t bluff. Offering choices that might put the teen in danger is never an option. Also, never give choices unless you are willing to make the choice yourself in the event the teen does not. Also, don’t threaten to do it. Just do it. And your delivery is important.

This approach puts the burden of thinking through the consequences of each choice on the teen. It also keeps the adult from being maneuvered into the position of doing all of the thinking, all of the advocating, all of the reasoning. That gives the teen something to fight against while relieving the teen of the need to take responsibility for the choice he or she has made. When the parent says, “I won’t let you hang out with the kids who smoke behind the gym at school” or “Don’t you talk to me like that!” that sets up a battle of wills. Parents cannot enforce such commands; but parents can control what they will offer, allow, or put up with.

If a high school student comes home with alcohol on his breath, a parental outburst is likely to trigger defiance or defensiveness. But consider the impact if, the next morning, the parent were to say: “I smelled alcohol on your breath. I’m starting to worry about you and

alcohol. What would you guess about using the family car now?”⁴⁵ The teen will probably try to talk the parent out of this decision, arguing that other parents do not react that way, etc. But if the parent just calmly says, “Probably so,” not letting himself be drawn into an angry confrontation, the teen cannot avoid taking responsibility for his actions by focusing his anger on the parent.

Frequently, parents worry that if they do not respond immediately to a teen’s misstep, their response will have little effect. However, in many situations, an immediate response is likely to be an angry response, which is likely to trigger an equally emotional response on the part of the teen. Then, instead of considering what he may have done to cause the problem, the teen will just focus on the parent’s anger, getting angry in turn. Since the parent’s goal is to aid the teen in focusing on the results of past choices, it is better to delay the discussion till both have calmed down and are able to put the incident into perspective.

Question 5 asks about authors who might have put forward ideas similar to those found in *The Matrix*. Of course, the discovery that one’s senses can deceive one—as can other people—is not new. It was already being discussed 2000 years ago. Aspects of the plot of *The Matrix* resemble Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” Descartes’ evil demon, even *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Of course, telecommunications did not exist in ancient Greece. However, Plato’s metaphor of prisoners in a cave mistaking shadows cast on the wall for reality—then resisting attempts to convince them otherwise—is reminiscent of Cypher’s violent rejection of the “unplugged” reality outside the Matrix.

Descartes argued that, since our senses cannot put us in contact with external objects but only with our mental images of such objects, we can have no absolute certainty that anything exists in the external world. In his “evil demon” argument, Descartes proposed an entity who is capable of deceiving us to such a degree that we have reason to doubt the totality of what our senses tell us. This strongly resembles the situation in the Matrix, where the illusion bypasses the senses

and is fed directly into the brain. In contrast, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has fun with fantasy. Written by Oxford mathematics lecturer Charles Dodgson (under the pen name Lewis Carroll) the *Alice* books play with the rules of logic. In fact, the scene where Alice enters Wonderland by going down a rabbit hole is mentioned by Morpheus in the scene of *The Matrix* where he offers Neo the red pill that causes him to wake up in the real world.

“The Matrix” as Metaphor

Although the plot of *The Matrix* may seem preposterous, it provides a striking metaphor for the subjective experience of young people growing up in a media-saturated society. Cypher's experience carries this to an extreme. He spends his early life immersed in the illusions of the Matrix. Later, when Cypher becomes disillusioned with his “unplugged” life in the real world, he has no social norms to guide him. He makes a deal with the intelligent machines, then vents his rage and frustration on those closest to him—briefly enjoying a god-like feeling of power over life and death, unconcerned with the pain of the victims. We are reminded of the disturbed students who have made headlines by taking guns to school and turning them on classmates.

Cypher's uncontrolled rage quickly leads to his own death, echoing the fate of the doomed shooters at Columbine High School and elsewhere. His murder of comrades shocks the viewer. Yet Cypher does make one point that is worth considering: he did not ask to be released from his former illusory life within the Matrix. For Cypher, the revelation that his former life was a lie was insufficient to motivate him to abandon it. Awareness alone is not enough to set Cypher free because he lacks the inner strength to face the truth. Never having gained the skills needed to thrive outside the Matrix, Cypher is literally willing to kill to get back inside it.

But how far do we take the metaphor? In the movie, the massive artificial intelligence system that has 1) tapped into people's minds and 2) created the illusory world known as the Matrix is 3) actually draining people's minds and bodies of energy and 4) throwing them away afterward like spent batteries. That is much more extreme than the experience of just watching television (or playing a video game). During the time you are immersed in watching TV, your emotions may react to the virtual reality on the screen as if it were real. Depending on the extent of your willingness to suspend disbelief, you may even form emotional attachments to characters on the screen. This phenomenon, on a mass scale, explains the celebrity status of actors who play characters in popular television series.

Still, there are limits to the comparison of captive humans kept in pods in the Matrix to television viewers who voluntarily turn on a program of their choice. It is the viewer's choice to watch—or not. If indulged in with restraint, the electronic dreamscapes created by television producers can be an entertaining diversion. Yet one aspect of real life does show some similarity to the plot of *The Matrix*: the opportunity costs that can accompany intensive viewing, especially for young people, who are among the most eagerly sought television audiences. What is the long-term effect on those teens who habitually escape from real-world feelings of emptiness or frustration by immersing themselves in music videos or “reality” shows?

Like Cypher, students who spend endless hours watching soap operas or situation comedies may confuse the television world where everyone seems to be good looking and affluent (despite having no visible means of support) with reality. They are likely to find their emergence into the real, post-graduation world to be a rude awakening. If the time spent watching television prevented teens from taking their studies seriously, they may be in for an especially difficult transition to adulthood. In consternation, such a teen might credit his predicament to some kind of cultural conspiracy. Looking back, he might perceive the whole youth culture that surrounded him as a pre-teen and teen to have been an illusion created by media

companies that saw the youth market as an opportunity for easy profits.

The remarkable popularity of *The Matrix* may be explained, in part, by this metaphoric warning. Looking back, high school graduates often express regret that they did not make better use of their years in school. Fortunately, even those students who end up living in a parent's basement for a time after graduation tend to eventually find their way into the working world. Life goes on. Yet, heartfelt regret over lost potential and opportunities may remain.

What if your child struggles with social skills?

Although the majority of teens are able to develop meaningful friendships and experience a healthy amount of social acceptance, research suggests that about a third of teens are not so fortunate. Social skills training programs are available for children who struggle with depression, anxiety, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other social impairments. *The Science of Making Friends: Helping Socially Challenged Teens and Young Adults* by Elizabeth Laugeson presents an evidence-based parent-assisted system for helping young people make and keep friends. If your teen has struggled in this area, you may wish to look into such an intervention.

Many people think that conversational skills and other social abilities are inborn—or not. However, Dr. Laugeson and her colleagues have been able to break down complex, seemingly sophisticated social skills into concrete rules and steps that can be taught, like science or mathematics. The parent serves as coach. A long-term follow-up study, conducted one to five years after treatment at Dr. Laugeson's clinic at UCLA, showed that the improved social skills were maintained over time. This is not a guarantee but does indicate that such an intervention may be helpful to your child.

How does this program work? The focus is on *ecologically valid* social skills, which are social behaviors that are naturally used by teens and young adults who are socially successful. In other words, the social skills taught in the program are not based on what researchers think young people should do in social situations, but on what actually *works* in reality. Although well-intentioned parents often try to help young people by offering advice about what their teens should do in certain situations, this advice may be out of sync with current peer culture. However, research has shown *ecologically valid* social skills to be effective.

Taking on the challenge of serving as a social skills coach can seem daunting. So, let's take a moment to address a question that may have arisen in the minds of some readers: What is the role of the school in all this? Some school districts do offer a range of professional services for students who are struggling. Many offer very little. Certainly it is worthwhile to inquire. The information above is provided in case your school district is not able to offer assistance.

Why the great variation among U.S. schools and teachers?

This may be a good time to address a broader question that is asked by many parents: "Sure, there are great school districts and wonderful teachers working in public schools. But why is there so much variation? Why can't I simply assume that my child will get a good teacher every year?" The short answer is two-fold: funding and politics. A longer answer is offered below. While this section does not offer practical tools for parents, you may nevertheless find it interesting to learn how some nations *do* manage to provide every child with a good teacher.

Finland, which has become renowned for high academic achievement, takes a very different approach to teacher training than the United States. As Amanda Ripley explains in *The Smartest*

Kids in the World, all of Finland's eight teacher training programs are highly selective. For the 600 slots available in 2010, there were 6,600 applicants. Getting into a Finnish teacher training program is as prestigious as getting into medical school in the U.S. Teacher training programs in the U.S. are less rigorous; only one in twenty American teacher training programs is located at a highly selective institution. In the most populous state, California, a college graduate can become a credentialed teacher in just nine months. In contrast, Finnish teachers undertake a six-year course of study, during which they spend a year observing and teaching at a highly regarded public school where their work is observed and critiqued, much as medical students are critiqued in a teaching hospital in the U.S.

The difference in the level of training offered is not the fault of American teachers. State legislatures set the requirements. But how do we know that rigorous, high-quality teacher education makes a difference? Norway, another Nordic nation, shares a border with Finland. Norway also spends more on education. However, Norway is less choosy about who gets to be a teacher and the quality of Norwegian teacher preparation programs varies widely (just as it does in the United States). The government (again like the U.S.) has tried to improve the situation by requiring teachers to get ever-higher levels of training and education, but without paying much regard to quality. Not surprisingly, Norwegian 15-year-olds perform at about the same level on the international PISA test as their American counterparts.

What made Finland so different? Before 1968 (the year the Finnish Parliament enacted legislation to create a new basic education system) Finland had many small teaching colleges of varying quality, much like the United States. When the reform was first implemented in the 1970s, teachers had to keep diaries of what they taught each hour. School inspectors made regular visits to make sure teachers were following an exhaustive centralized curriculum. Central authorities approved textbooks. A wide range of decisions were taken

out of teachers' hands. Much the same thing has happened in the United States with the No Child Left Behind reforms.

However, Finland did something that the U.S. has not yet attempted: Finland transformed its talent pipeline. The Finnish government re-booted the teacher education system, shuttering the smaller teacher training schools and moving teacher education into the more respected universities. There was considerable resistance. Opponents argued that the new system was elitist. Some university leaders worried that the move would dilute the academic standards of their other departments and lessen the institution's prestige. But, in the end, the teacher training colleges were forced to become much more selective and rigorous. These days, teacher education in Finland is highly content-driven. Even primary teachers majoring in education need to minor in at least two content areas. Also, their content-specific education (for example, mathematics) is delivered not by the teacher preparation program, but by university departments of mathematics, Finnish literature, etc.

Eventually the Finns realized that, with more rigorous teacher training in place, their expensive and cumbersome accountability system (which required hour-by-hour records of what was taught and regular inspection visits) was no longer necessary. During a deep recession in the early 1990s, top-down rules and inspections were abolished. School leaders and teachers became free to engineer experiments in their schools to find out what worked best for their students. Since Finnish students already had to take a demanding graduation test at the end of high school, there was already a well-defined standard against which to judge student success.

Perhaps the current cumbersome attempts at educational reform in the United States will eventually lead to a transformation of the educational system similar to what took place in Finland. However, this will happen only if every child in every school is guaranteed a highly educated, rigorously trained teacher. That key factor would make more difference to the achievement of U.S. students (and to their long-term economic prospects) than any number of top-down

regulations. Yet, this sort of long-term reform takes great political courage. Entrenched interests would resist. The results would only show up slowly, as the current teacher workforce gradually retired and was replaced by teachers possessing a consistently high level of expertise.

Having spent my career in education, I can think of few nobler goals than making sure that every child has an excellent teacher. This goal could even be accomplished with little additional expenditure. However, educational reform is a highly emotional issue; there are many entrenched interests; coming to a consensus is exceedingly difficult. Even so, there are pockets of excellence all over the United States. If you are alert—or lucky—it is possible to get a public education in the United States that rivals any in the world.

For the majority of today's parents, though, the simple truth is this: During his or her years in public school, your child is likely to get some good teachers and some that are not as good. Still, with your help, your child should be able to manage just fine. You just need to be prepared for the problems that may arise, think outside the box, and know where to go.

Just as an example: What if your child has an algebra teacher who does not seem able to effectively explain basic algebra concepts? Lots of families have had that problem. Your child might benefit from solutions that others have made available. Khan Academy⁴⁶ has become a YouTube phenomenon by making engaging, easy-to-understand videos that explain challenging academic content available for free. There is an introductory TED talk video that you might wish to take a look at.⁴⁷ If this option seems interesting, you can either set up a free account on the Khan Academy website or sign in using Google or Facebook. Some classroom teachers have started using the videos as a way to allow students to work at their own pace.

Conversely, your student may simply be bored by the courses at the local high school. If there is a community college nearby, it may be possible to take a more rigorous course there and have it count for course credit at the high school. Some school districts even have

programs that allow high school students to take such courses for free, getting a head start on their college education. So, you may wish to visit your school district website to see what might be available. Conversely, if your student is not particularly interested in college, training for various trades may also be available through the school district.

The Limits of Technology

Contemporary society has delivered great benefits in terms of health, longevity, and comfort. Yet there have been costs. One of the costs is the stress generated by a lifestyle that is divorced from the natural world and from our own natural biological rhythms. We spend our time immersed in a high-tech culture full of ringing phones, never-ending streams of e-mails and text messages, not to mention the constant distractions of television, radio, and the Internet. Multi-tasking may be fashionable, but it takes a toll both in terms of the ability to dedicate one's full attention to the task at hand and also to feel the sense of closure that should accompany the completion of a task. There are excellent websites, such as that of the Khan Academy. However, students who become accustomed to spending their time just surfing the Internet, dividing their attention between television and homework, often end up retaining very little.

Given the huge sums the U.S. spends on public education, it is ironic that we: 1) allow teacher education programs of widely varying quality to award teaching credentials, allowing graduates with starkly different levels of expertise to teach our children; 2) surround children with electronic distractions that limit their ability to take advantage of the educational resources we have provided. Those who see technology as the answer to every problem may argue that the problem is not the exposure of young people to technology, but the type of technology they are exposed to. However Andreas Schleicher, designer of the international PISA test, asserts:

In most of the highest-performing systems, technology is remarkably absent from classrooms. I have no explanation why this is the case, but it does seem that those systems [focus] primarily on pedagogical practice rather than digital gadgets.⁴⁸

Let me share my own experience. When our children were growing up, we lived in the Rocky Mountains just west of Boulder, Colorado. The children lived in the same house from kindergarten through high school. With limited television reception in our mountain subdivision, children had to find other ways to amuse themselves. It was the kids themselves who noticed, as high school graduation approached, that the percentage of “mountain kids” who had taken on leadership roles in sports and academics at the local high school was noticeably greater than their actual percentage within the student body. Coincidence? Perhaps.

Optional Activity: Emotion Coaching

Review John Gottman’s 5-step Emotion Coaching process, which was described at the beginning of this chapter. Over the course of the next week, look for opportunities to listen empathetically when your child is upset, validate the child’s feelings, and help him to label the emotions he is experiencing. Wait till later to circle back with helpful advice or to set limits. Did the approach seem helpful in strengthening your sense of connection with the child?

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Chapter 6



Fostering a Sense of Agency

Can the characteristics highlighted in earlier chapters—confidence, a sense of human connection, the ability to learn from consequences, emotional intelligence—help children to become physically healthier? There is evidence that this might be the case. Eight years after their mothers took a seven-week program designed to promote nurturing parenting, 272 low-income children showed much lower levels of inflammation in their bodies than did peers whose mothers got no such training. The well-being of these young adults, now 19 to 20 years old, suggests that good parenting has lasting health effects. The difference was most dramatic in those participants whose families had been most disadvantaged.⁴⁹

The researchers were checking the levels of six immune system proteins that set the stage for chronic, low-grade inflammation, which contributes to such conditions as obesity, insulin resistance, coronary heart disease, depression and drug abuse. The authors underscored that the study fell far short of proving that better parenting drives down the heightened risk of physical and psychiatric maladies among children who grow up poor; that will take many more years of study

to discern. But, since the inflammatory biomarkers they measured contribute to such ills, any factor that drives those levels down is likely to improve health outcomes later on.

This raises an interesting question. Why should a non-medical intervention impact health? To answer this question, we will focus on another quality that proactive parenting encourages: a sense of agency. This is the quality that allows us to act, not just react to what others have done. Agency is pivotal to success in life; young people with a healthy sense of agency are able to assume responsibility for their behavior and become self-starters, capable of taking action when action is needed.

A sense of agency is essential if teens are to feel in control of their lives, resist peer pressure, and have faith in their ability to handle a wide range of situations. Having a sense of agency allows adults to maintain a feeling of stability in the face of conflict or change. This chapter provides an overview of how children's understanding of the world and sense of agency develop throughout childhood and adolescence.

Social-Emotional Development and School Success

During their pre-kindergarten years, children spend a large proportion of their waking hours engaged in expressive activities such as drawing, painting, molding clay, singing, and pretending to be heroes, parents, babies, monsters, or animals. Then, as soon as they arrive at school, children are expected to put such activities aside and sit quietly at desks. Opportunities for imaginative engagement are greatly diminished.

This was not always the case. Through most of the 20th century, kindergarten was a time for children to learn the social and practical skills that would prepare them for the academic work of school. Now, under pressure to improve student achievement, kindergarten classrooms have come to resemble the first grade classrooms of

decades past, emphasizing formal reading and math instruction, instead of play and socialization. The irony is that there is little evidence that this change increases achievement; the high-achieving Finns do not start school until age six.

Research has shown that children who experience greater peer acceptance and more positive peer relationships tend to feel more positively about coming to school, participate more in classroom activities, and achieve more in the classroom. Overall, children who have become more competent in understanding the feelings of others tend also to become more academically competent in the primary grades. These developing capacities help children to reap the benefits of the social support that is crucial to healthy human development.

Stories as a Child's "Language of Possibility"

Years ago, I attended a memorable lecture entitled "Abraham Lincoln and My Mother Were Not At-Risk" (1994). The speaker was kindergarten teacher and MacArthur Fellow Vivian Paley. She pointed out that public schools had begun to focus their attention on an increasingly narrow spectrum of measurable skills and socioeconomic characteristics. Paley noted that, by current standards, both Abraham Lincoln and her own mother would have been considered "at risk." In Paley's view, schools were ignoring important human variables, including those that most children would consider central to describing who they were.

If children are to build the strength of character to lead fulfilling lives in a world dominated by the calculus of the marketplace—where people are often judged by how well they match an abstract employability profile—these children need to gather the sort of personal resources that nourish a strong and resilient personal identity. They need to spread their roots deep and wide, into the lore of their own community and of the whole human race. Children must learn to see themselves as individuals with stories that are

integral to the human whole. This capacity may get little support from a curriculum that measures achievement in terms of scores on standardized tests; whereas it is nourished by much older traditions.

Until the 20th century, most children did not spend much time in school. Instead, they learned about the world beyond their personal experience by listening to the stories of family, friends and acquaintances. Over time, these stories coalesced to form the cultural backdrop against which the story of their own lives unfolded. Alasdair MacIntyre warned:

Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words.⁵⁰

All of us gain from the experience of seeing the world through another's eyes, especially those of close friends and family members. We get that experience through the stories people tell. Children living in a disconnected world of home, school, and TV episodes benefit when they are able to reflect on the meaning of experiences by sharing stories about their day. Among themselves, children continually share and re-tell stories.

When family members tell stories around the dinner table, children are able to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the people closest to them. Telling stories about their day also gives children a greater sense of control over the circumstances of their lives. Sometimes, just telling other family members about an encounter helps to provide perspective, suggesting ways to resolve a situation that may have seemed irresolvable.

Commercial Substitutes for Shared Family Stories

In our social media era, however, family stories are not the only tales that children hear. The world of the contemporary child

has become saturated with commercial advertising. Often such advertising implies that a product possesses semi-magical powers to confer happiness and social success. In *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, Peggy Orenstein discusses the impact of marketing upon even very young girls. While still in preschool, many girls learn the name of every Disney princess and are able to give a detailed explanation of which is their favorite.

Most Disney heroines are noble, even heroic. They are also among the limited number of positive female role models in the entertainment world. Still, they are commercial products. Around the year 2000, the Disney Corporation realized there was an untapped marketing opportunity and started pushing products featuring the female protagonists of the movies *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Beauty and the Beast* under the “Disney Princess” brand. Since then, Disney has created over 26,000 princess products.

A generation ago, the total number of advertising dollars targeting children and youth was nowhere near the \$20 billion total that it approaches now. Sneakers and jeans came in fewer styles. Choices were more limited. Children got around on foot or by bicycle; they did without smart phones and credit cards. Now marketing to children has reached such a pitch that many parents feel as if they cannot say “no” without putting their children at a disadvantage *vis a vis* other children at their school, potentially undermining their child’s self-confidence. Yet, parents may also wonder: “What is going on here?” The following sections explore the developmental stages that make certain kinds of stories especially appealing to particular age groups.

How a Child’s Understanding of the World Develops

In *The Educated Mind*, Kieran Egan argues that the way we teach children should be patterned on the natural way a child’s

understanding of the world develops. Each stage in development includes a set of thinking tools that 1) assists us in processing information and 2) enriches our understanding of reality. These *cognitive tools* help us to remember, learn, apply, evaluate and reflect on our experiences. Egan describes five stages through which children develop an increasing grasp of the world around them; he also provides the approximate age levels when each kind of understanding tends to be dominant. Of course, these age ranges are averages; children's rate of cognitive development varies as widely as do height and weight.

The first stage, which Egan refers to as *somatic* (bodily) *understanding*, is dominant between birth and learning to talk. This is when the physical abilities of the infant's own body (grasping, sitting up, crawling) are discovered. Children also engage in the communicating activity—facial expression, sound and movement—that precedes the development of language. The power of such nonverbal communication can be seen in mammals, such as elephants, that routinely teach survival skills to the young within their group by modeling key behaviors.

Learning by example is also important to human development. The facial expressions of an infant are spontaneous and immediate. An infant's smiles speak directly to the sensory and emotional systems of adults, who respond in kind. At first, the sounds an infant makes—laughing, crying, squealing, babbling—are simply spontaneous expressions of inner emotional states. But, as the months pass, the infant begins to playfully mimic the surrounding soundscape. Over time, the infant's babbling begins to reflect the specific melodies of the language that is spoken by the adults around him; he learns to echo its accents and inflections. He begins to talk. As a child learns new words, adults supply hints that, little by little, prepare the child to grasp the concepts represented by new words.

Learning Oral Language to Age 7.

Once a child starts to form words, she begins to recapitulate the stages of cognitive development that produced our modern society. Each stage is based upon learning to use a powerful cognitive tool. The first of these is oral language, which is learned largely through imitation. *Mythic understanding* refers to a person's ability to make sense of the world using stories and other tools that are developed primarily through exposure to oral language.⁵¹ This means of understanding predominates from the time children learn to talk until about the age of eight.

Children in preschool and the primary grades are often powerfully drawn to folk tales and myths. Passed down from eras when few people could read, these stories are easy to recall and tend to have characters that represent social roles (like “mother” or “king”), as opposed to the more complex characters that appeal to modern readers. Similarly, the plot in such stories tends to clearly depict the tension between binary opposites like good/evil or wise/foolish. The stark contrast between kind princesses and wicked witches helps children both to make sense of the world and to internalize the ideal of kindness.

Opposites like hot/cold, big/little, and fast/slow stand out. For example, children commonly begin to grasp the temperature continuum by establishing *hot* and *cold* as opposites. The first discriminable temperatures are things that are hotter than the child's body temperature — and things that are colder. An intermediate term like *warm* or *cool* becomes meaningful through its place on the continuum between these two extremes. In this way, binary opposites can function as structuring concepts to help children to make sense of the world. Parents can encourage emotional perceptiveness by asking about what a character in a story (or on a T.V. program) seems to be feeling and how that feeling may affect how the character acts. Adults may promote awareness of cause and effect by asking: “What do you think will happen next?”

Ethical Dimension of Mythic Understanding. The original *Star Wars* movie (referred to as Episode IV in the six-film series) vividly represents the universal childhood view of ethics as a dramatic struggle of good vs. evil (all-or-nothing). The Jedi symbolize Light; Darth Vader represents the Dark Side of the Force. The opening scene shows Darth Vader's ship attacking a lightly armed cruiser. Princess Leia entrusts a secret message to a robot. We see Darth Vader preparing to torture the princess. Later in the film, the Emperor's military officers obliterate Princess Leia's home planet of Alderaan, so as to demonstrate the power of the Death Star. In the climatic scene, we see Luke Skywalker blow up the Death Star, defeating the evil empire.

In contrast to the prequel trilogy, the original *Star Wars* trilogy follows the classic pattern of the Hero's Journey. We meet Luke Skywalker, a farm boy who has been raised by his aunt and uncle, ignorant of his family history. We follow his journey into the larger world. Only later do we realize that there is a great deal that Luke's mysterious mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi, has not chosen to tell him. Still, there is a great deal of developmental wisdom in the response that Yoda later gives to Luke when he questions this: "Not ready for the burden were you." Just as the frame of a building has to be constructed before the plumbing and electric wiring can be put in, a child needs to construct a clear moral framework before the grey areas of life can be addressed.

From Age 8 to Age 15.

The next developmental stage, which Egan calls *romantic* (in the sense of a heroic tale) *understanding* becomes the dominant cognitive tool from age eight to approximately age fifteen. The oral language skills associated with mythic understanding are not lost. However, students in this age range are most attracted to knowledge that is presented as product of human emotions and actions. Children in

the upper elementary and middle school years are attracted to heroes (athletic and otherwise) who seem to transcend the constraints that hem in the rest of us. Identifying with such heroes gives students in this somewhat awkward stage a sense of security. Still, they will have many questions.

If you tell a typical five-year-old the story of Cinderella, you are not likely to be asked: “What means of locomotion does the Fairy Godmother use?” Nor are you likely to be quizzed about where she is and what she does when she isn’t active in the story. But if you tell a typical ten-year-old the equally fantastic story of Superman, you will need to explain his supernatural powers by reference to his birth on the planet Krypton and to the differing molecular structure of our sun and Krypton’s sun.⁵² What happens between the ages of five and ten to cause this difference? The prosaic reality of the adult world intervenes.

Kindergartners easily accept magical elements in the plot of a story, just as long as they move the action along. During the elementary school years, however, children gradually cease to believe in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. This happens whether or not the parents try to keep alive the illusion of Santa sliding down the chimney on Christmas Eve. Cartoon action heroes and Disney princesses lose their appeal. The actors and singers who dominate pre-teen popular culture tend to have carefully cultivated public images, so that they seem to transcend the constraints that hem in most boys and girls teetering on the cusp of adolescence.

By identifying with whatever hero seems best able to transcend perceived threats and/or constraints, a 10-year-old feels a sense of security. The constraints that he finds most problematic are indicated by the kind of hero he chooses to identify with. Students this age will also tend to be attracted to movies, tabloids, and soap operas that portray emotions—greed, love, revenge, lust—as the cause of human actions. When looking for movies to watch with students this age, well-executed biographies can be a good choice. At this age, knowledge is most easily conveyed through study of the lives of

the individuals who invented or discovered it. This allows students to get a feeling for why someone cared deeply about the structure of the universe or the cause of disease. Well-produced historical documentaries can show how the past has shaped the present.

Pre-teens also take great interest in establishing the actual extremes of human experience. This is why *The Guinness Book of Records* is such a perennial favorite with this age group. These records provide a neat summary of the limits of reality. Who is the tallest person? The oldest? The fastest? At first, it may be difficult to recognize the sense-making drive that lies at the heart of a 10-year-old's fascination with extremes and the bizarre. But think of it this way. By gaining a knowledge of the extremes, the preteen can develop a sense of the proportionate relationship among other things on that same continuum. If you look at it that way, exploration of the limits of reality can become an enjoyable shared adventure. There is no need to stop at *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. This is a great age for exploring natural history and science museums, state and national parks, as along with mystery novels and adventure fiction.

Here's another way to look at it. Imagine what it is like to arrive in a new city where you expect to spend some time. You may decide to drive to the highest point in the surrounding area to get a feeling for the lay of the land. You might tour various landmarks to get a sense of what is unique about this place. Then you might taste various dishes the city is known for, or walk along major streets to get a sense of the local culture. Between the ages of eight and fifteen, your son or daughter will be using somewhat similar strategies to size up the adult world. As they do so, their confidence and sense of agency grows. What did you find most interesting at that age?

Parents can encourage joy in learning by sharing interesting new facts around the dinner table. For example, the Imaginative Education Research Group website reports that the denim students are fond of wearing derives from a cloth made by the André family in Nîmes, France. The cloth was called *serge de Nîmes* (which was then shortened to denim). *Serge de Nîmes* was first used for making

trousers in Genoa; so the pants became known as “jeans” (from the French name for Genoa, *Gênes*). Following the California Gold Rush, dry goods wholesaler Levi Strauss went into business with Jacob Davis, inventor of the first pair of riveted denim pants, to produce blue jeans. The two men patented this new style of work pants (called “Levi’s”) in 1873.

Ethical Dimension of Romantic Understanding. In the first *Star Wars* movie Luke Skywalker (the son of Anakin) accomplishes great things with the help of others. A question remains: What would Luke be able to accomplish on his own? In the next film in the series, *The Empire Strikes Back*, we see Luke begin his formal Jedi training with Master Yoda, make mistakes, and finally discover (to his horror) that Darth Vader is his father. In a highly symbolic scene during Luke’s training, he spars with an image of Darth Vader. Luke strikes Vader’s head off but, when the helmet falls to the ground, Luke sees his own face inside it.

Up to now, Luke has envisioned evil as an external force that he must struggle against. In this scene, he begins to realize that the Dark Side of the Force can influence anyone via sudden upsurges of anger, fear, lust and greed that are powered by our survival instincts. If he is not going to end up as his father did, Luke must learn to monitor his emotions—and not let them control him. Students in late elementary and middle school are naturally inclined to see emotion as the cause of action. The challenge is to learn to recognize and transcend unhealthy impulses.

Age 15 through early 20s.

With the onset of adolescence, the student’s interest begins to shift from exploring the strangeness of the world (and the unexpected connections that can be discovered within it) to discovering how the world works. Egan refers to this next step as *philosophic understanding* (philos = loved; Sophia = learning), a

term that captures the passion with which teens sometimes focus on discovering the general underlying laws that tie together previously disconnected phenomena. This is the developmental shift that Piaget described as moving from “concrete” to “abstract” thinking—or “formal operations.” Suddenly, the connections *between* things have become very important. All at once, teens want to know how all the separate facts and events fit into larger wholes, systems, and processes.

Words that students had long known and could have defined, such as “society,” emerge in their conversations with new energy and prominence. This is because “society” is no longer a vague term used largely by adults; it has become the name of an *entity*—as though an *object* has been discovered. Terms like “the environment,” “system” and “culture” undergo similar transformations. The initial excitement of philosophic understanding comes from the belief that one’s general theories allow one to grasp the truth as it is *in reality*. However, this can also be a challenging time for parents, since teens now tend to turn a critical eye on familiar beliefs.

From about the age of 15 through their early 20s, students characteristically tend to search for theories that spell out the “truth” about human psychology, the laws of historical development, how societies function. Wishing to embark on this search unfettered, they may seem to cast aside beliefs and ideas with which they grew up. This allows them to establish a psychological distance, so they can arrive at their own judgments. Uncomfortable as this may be for family members, this is a healthy development, which is important to the growth of a sense of agency. Building a unique, individual world view helps the young adult to become a realistic and sensible agent in the world. Most often, they ultimately come to once again embrace many of the beliefs they once questioned, but with new conviction.

Another aspect of this developmental stage is that students come to realize that historical events and complex social processes have influenced the circumstances of their lives. Through understanding

the truth about these processes, they hope to discover the truth about themselves. What teens do not initially grasp is that theoretical thinking works by setting up an additional “mimic” world made of ideas, concepts, and knowledge—mind stuff. This mimic world enables us to remove the irrelevant and confusing contingencies that are inherent in the real world. By getting to “the heart of the matter” in this way, we are able to think about an issue clearly and act decisively. But this also means that *any* general theory underestimates the world’s true complexity, possibly leading to an overestimation of the truth the resulting theory can claim.

Students who accept a general theory—or an ideology—may think they understand the general principles from which all particulars are derived. Since they feel that they know the truth in general, further learning may seem trivial. Why bother with the details when one already grasps the general truth? This kind of overconfidence in the reliability of our scientific knowledge is what Mary Shelly warned against in her novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*.⁵³ She described an eccentric scientist, Victor Frankenstein, who carried out an unconventional experiment that produced a grotesque creature. He is later horrified at the result. The clarity and decisiveness with which Dr. Frankenstein initially acted grew out of a thought process that ignored important features of reality, leading to disaster.

When students accumulate only a small amount of knowledge, they tend to generate crude and simplistic general theories. The problem is that such general theories can comfortably organize *anything*. If a scheme is crude enough, everything becomes evidence to support it, and nothing can effectively challenge it. This can lead to prejudice rather than to understanding. What should parents do? Usually the wisest course of action is to support a teen’s development of general theories, even though those theories may at first seem simplistic. Then the parent can, little by little, highlight the incongruous and conflicting consequences of a theory, tactfully encouraging greater sophistication and complexity of understanding.

Ethical Dimension of Philosophic Understanding. The last film in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, *The Return of the Jedi*, offers two distinct narratives. In the first half, Luke orchestrates the rescue of Han Solo, who has been encased in carbonite and is now held by Jabba the Hutt. The rescue Luke plans has the structure of an elaborate chess game. As it unfolds, we see Luke's increased self-control, as well as his ability as a strategist. As Yoda comments when Luke visits him afterward, no more Jedi training is required. Luke has now mastered the skills required of a Jedi.

Through Yoda, Luke is able to gain a firmer grasp on how his life has been shaped by historical events, as well as by his complex family history. When he discovers that Leia is actually his twin sister, Luke is able to understand the powerful bond between them. He feels less alone. By accepting that Darth Vader is his father, Luke begins to grasp the unique contribution he himself might make, both in the upcoming battle and through continuing the Jedi tradition.

Moving from Knowledge to Wisdom

This brings us to one final stage of development, which provides a way of coping with the following quandary: What do we do when we encounter two theories that are internally consistent, yet contradict one another—and the available external evidence does not clearly indicate that one theory is superior to the other? The classic example of this conundrum is quantum physics, where neither the concept of “particle” nor the concept of “wave” is able to fully describe the behavior of quantum-scale objects. As Einstein put it: “It seems as though we must use sometimes the one theory and sometimes the other, while at times we may use either. We are faced with a new kind of difficulty. We have two contradictory pictures of reality; separately neither of them fully explains the phenomena of light, but together they do.”⁵⁴

Kieran Egan uses Socrates as the exemplar of this final stage of development, which takes a step beyond philosophical (rational) understanding. When the Delphic oracle pronounced him to be the wisest of men, Socrates concluded that the oracle might have considered him wisest because he was unique in realizing how little he knew. *Ironic understanding* assumes that the way we make sense of the world is dependent upon our historical and cultural perspective. Although the relativistic element in ironic understanding can lead to cynicism, it can as easily lead to lightheartedness, to the sense of humor about human limitations that Socrates exhibited.

The attitude that Socrates adopted was similar to the perspective that the Greek gods might have taken as they looked down on the human world. If we try to imagine what we might look like from the Greek gods' perspective, we begin to see that any particular action or event could be viewed as playing a distinctive role in different narratives. We may even discover that we can slip from perspective to perspective. For example, Egan points out that one may choose to look at a stand of trees with aesthetic delight, with calculation as to what price its timber would fetch, or with religious awe as the sacred resting place of an ancestor's spirit.

But, if so much depends on the perspective we choose to take, what can we ever really be said to *know*? This is a visceral question that has caused considerable existential angst to undergraduates around the world. It brings us face-to-face with questions of human frailty and fallibility. For, in the end, the decision as to what we will believe is up to us. Nietzsche saw human beings as lonely artists facing the empty dark, free to make their own meaning, sing their own songs, and dance their own dances. In contrast, Socrates saw wisdom as the beginning of a willing recognition of how comparatively little one knows.

The ironic turn of mind transcends chaos by harnessing *both* the artistic passion for life *and* sober scientific inquiry. From rational thought, ironic understanding absorbs those abstract theoretical capacities that impart intellectual order. The contribution of

ironic understanding is to keep us aware of the inadequacy of our theoretical categories to the reality they try to represent. After all, any term or category we use to describe the world will be tied to a particular tradition. Both the language we are using and the concepts we have inherited from the past constrain the sense we can make (or fail to make). Nevertheless, the theories we construct do provide us with some useful grasp on relevant phenomena in the real world.

Seen in this manner, ironic understanding does contain an element of wisdom, in that nothing need be denigrated or thrown away. We do not stop walking when we learn to talk, or stop talking when we learn to read. Old capacities survive, but we gain in flexibility of application. Our continuing ability to access the mythic perspective of early childhood preserves a sense of freshness and wonder. Persistence of the romantic capacity to feel deeply provides theoretic general schemes with energy, giving direction and focus to our capacity for theoretical thought. Still, beneath the layers of socialization we preserve our own unique individual consciousness. Retaining the flexibility to move from one level of understanding to another allows that consciousness to remain vivid and clear (not faint and suppressed). By honoring the uniqueness of our own experience, we stay in touch with the visceral immediacy of life.

Ethical Dimension of Ironic Understanding. Both the original *Star Wars* trilogy and the prequel trilogy end with a fierce struggle between two characters who, in other circumstances, would have been close allies. In *Revenge of the Sith* Darth Vader fights Obi-Wan Kenobi, the Jedi master who had been like a father to him. In *The Return of the Jedi*, Darth Vader fights his own son Luke. In both cases, the fight turns out to be transformative for Vader. After the first fight, he ends up a cripple, dependent on the life support system embedded in his armor. After the second fight, Vader's love for his son finally overwhelms his habitual subservience to the Emperor. Vader sacrifices his own life to save Luke—and again becomes Anakin Skywalker.

What phenomenon is portrayed in these scenes? In the real world, situations arise where we are forced to act even though we have incomplete information and the outcome of our actions cannot be fully foreseen. The Jedi, patterned on historical orders of warrior monks, are trained to take an attitude of mindfulness and non-attachment. They are alert to all clues but rely on the living Force to guide them, even in life-threatening situations. In the novel *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* by Matthew Stover, there is a description of Obi-Wan and Anakin, as observed by the Sith Lord Dooku, just as they are about to engage in mortal combat.

Kenobi was luminous, a transparent being, a window onto a sunlit meadow of the Force.

Skywalker was a storm cloud, flickering with dangerous lightning, building the rotation that threatens a tornado.⁵⁵

Of course, Obi-Wan Kenobi is an idealized character, akin to the legendary Knights of the Round Table in King Arthur's court. Still, there is a great deal of research that supports the effectiveness of mindful non-attachment, of getting "in the zone," as a way to arrive at peak performance. Research also supports the contention that the sort of hard-driving "Type A" state of mind that Anakin exhibits is hard on one's health. In the movie, Anakin overreaches in his fight with Obi-Wan on Mustafar and ends up dependent on machines to stay alive. In the real world the technology is not so advanced, yet many people who drive themselves that hard do end up dependent on pacemakers, etc.

In *Return of the Jedi*, the contrast between the philosophies of the Jedi and Sith is taken even further. Having sensed the conflict within Darth Vader, Luke surrenders to his father on Endor in the hope that he can redeem him. As a Jedi, Luke is convinced that the struggle of Good vs. Evil does not take place between people, but

within each individual. Luke hopes that, by approaching his father in a spirit of love and compassion, he can influence the outcome of the inner struggle he has sensed in Darth Vader—and help Vader to reconnect with his authentic self. This idea of losing connection with one’s real self may seem far-removed from everyday life. But, if you think about it, the way that people act when their emotions run away with them is often enough to cause others to say: “He was not himself.”

The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit

All of the multiple levels of understanding described by Egan can be seen interacting in another film trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, based on the books by Oxford professor J.R.R. Tolkien that gave birth to the modern genre of fantasy fiction. Peter Jackson’s film trilogy broke records at the box office, grossing close to \$3 billion. *The Return of the King*, the last film in the series, received 11 Academy Awards, tying the record held by *Ben-Hur* and *Titanic*.

What lifts these films above formulaic fantasy fare is the power of the narrative. Tolkien’s own traumatic experiences, fighting in the Battle of the Somme during World War I and living through the Nazi bombing of Britain in World War II, come through in the sense of desperate struggle that pervades *The Return of the King*. Although Tolkien denied that the trilogy was an allegory of the World Wars, one does not have to equate Sauron with Hitler or the Ring with the atom bomb to be touched by the aching sense of loss expressed in Tolkien’s foreword to the second edition, where he says: “By 1918, all but one of my close friends were dead.”

Joseph Stalin allegedly once observed: “The death of one man is a tragedy; the death of a million is a statistic.” Our minds tend to be overwhelmed and numbed by such devastation. Yet, although Tolkien gives us a grippingly realistic description of the devastation caused by war, he keeps us from becoming benumbed by introducing

the elements of myth and heroic romance. The protagonist is a member of a diminutive race, the Hobbits, who retain a kind of child-like innocence in the face of the evil represented by the Dark Lord Sauron, who is plotting to seize control of Middle Earth. Four Hobbits set out on a quest to destroy the One Ring from which Sauron derives his power. Their companions are a wizard, an elf, a dwarf, and two men. One of the men gives way to temptation and tries to grab the One Ring for himself. The other develops into the romantic hero who leads the armed struggle against Sauron, ultimately becoming King.

If life in the affluent contemporary world sometimes seems to lack a sense of visceral immediacy, this may be because the stakes seem relatively low. Few citizens of the industrialized West are old enough to remember the wars that shattered European civilization in the first half of the 20th century. Tolkien, who went directly from his student days at Oxford to the trenches of World War I, provides a sense not only of the fragile nature of peace and prosperity, but of how the cumulative choices made by ordinary folk—such as the Hobbits Bilbo, Frodo, Sam, Pippin, and Merry—can shape the fate of nations. The point is driven home by the contrast between Frodo's choices and those made by Gollum, a former Hobbit who was corrupted by the Ring.

Tolkien revives an ancient vision of the universe in which the natural world played a larger role. Elves live in harmony with nature; dwarves delve deep in the earth; trees have voices. But evil forces threaten the natural order. The free races of Middle Earth must unite to defeat them. Gandalf, the white wizard, plays a pivotal role in meeting this challenge. A long-time friend to the elves and advisor to men, Gandalf fights alongside those whom he has befriended, without favoring one group over another. Gandalf's primary mission is to help the free races of Middle Earth develop the strength and wisdom to stand on their own.

Young people of every generation yearn for wise mentors who encourage exploration, provide just enough guidance (but not too

much, lest the mentee lose the thrill of discovery), and patiently help the mentee to fully develop his natural abilities. As a Professor of Anglo-Saxon literature, Tolkien had a firsthand familiarity with medieval lore. So, it is not surprising that Gandalf shares characteristics of legendary mentors such as Merlin of the King Arthur tales.

Although the ideal mentor may be able to envision what the mentee has the potential to become, he never insists, never overpowers the mentee's free will. This helps foster a sense agency. Of course, Gandalf is an idealized figure, free from the human frailties that plague the rest of us. He does not have to work 40 hours per week, buy groceries on the way home, then cook dinner while also doling out sage advice to family members. Yet, Gandalf was not meant to be perfect. Tolkien described him this way:

Merry he could be, and kindly to the young and simple, yet quick at times to sharp speech and the rebuking of folly; but he was not proud, and sought neither power nor praise... and desired not that any should hold him in awe or take his counsels out of fear.

At various points in the narrative, we see Gandalf epitomizing all of the varied types of understanding. He stirs wonder in young Hobbits with his fireworks, figures out the true nature of The One Ring, and adapts to the needs of each member of the Fellowship in turn. Still, much of Gandalf's attraction lies in his overall attitude, which is eloquently brought to life in the theme song of the animated version of *The Hobbit* (prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*) produced by Rankin/Bass. The lyrics proclaim:

The greatest adventure is what lies ahead.
Today and tomorrow are yet to be said.
The chances, the changes are all yours to make.
The mold of your life is in your hands to break...⁵⁶

Both contemporary schools and popular culture encourage young people to live in their heads: attending lectures, studying, surfing the Internet, playing video games. The mind and imagination may be highly active, but the body moves little. In another verse, the song warns: “He who sits by the window will one day see rain.” The window that contemporary students sit beside may be a computer monitor or television screen, but moving one’s fingers across a key board does not constitute active engagement with the outside world. Gandalf urges Bilbo Baggins to go out and explore. The continuing popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy may come from the sense of adventure that Gandalf not only encourages but embodies.

Making Stories Come to Life in Early Elementary School

Nevertheless, *The Lord of the Rings* is not well-suited for very young audiences. Common Sense Media describes the first film in the series as “Fabulous, but also violent and scary;” the movie is recommended only for age 12 and older. Parents of younger children may wish to experiment with creative drama as an alternative.

In the early elementary years, discussions of serious themes tend to work best when they are integrated with play. Since such playful interactions are easier to exhibit in video format than to describe, the following sections will focus on lessons that are available online, free of charge and can easily be adapted for home use. (See end of chapter for URLs.) These video lessons were developed through an Improving Teacher Quality grant, administered by the California Department of Education, for which I served as principal investigator. Therefore, the lessons are considered to be in the public domain and can be used free of charge.

During the classroom drama workshops children acted out stories, taking time to discuss how characters might perceive one another and the interactions in which they were involved. Children grappled with the archetypal problems—dealing with a bully,

putting in the effort needed to prepare for the future, the value of truthfulness—that underlay seemingly simple tales like “Three Billy Goats Gruff,” “The Three Little Pigs,” or “The Boy Who Cried Wolf.

The Impact on Classroom Culture

Teachers whose students had participated in the drama workshops spoke eloquently about the impact of the weekly lessons on interpersonal skills teaching artists who worked with the teachers in their classrooms p. They put a strong emphasis on teamwork, insisting that children be respectful and responsive audience members while classmates presented their work. Teachers commented:

- The teaching artist has taught them: “We are very respectful of each other. We will work as a team.” So, I think they are really close. They are a close-knit group.
- They have developed a very close relationship, camaraderie. We have that and I think that’s very important.

By re-enacting stories through creative drama, children experienced familiar material in a different way. Acting out a scene required deeper exploration (What was the character’s motivation? Why did others react in the way they did?) and, therefore, better comprehension. A first grade teacher observed: “What was really amazing was that those kids who were very reserved and did not participate in other school things became totally involved. So it brought out a lot of very positive feeling.” Comments on the social-emotional impact are included below.

Grade 1 I believe that performing in a culminating performance has given the kids a lot of self-confidence and ability to get up in front of groups and be proud.

Grade 2 The teaching artist unlocked a lot by interviewing them and then developing their own poems to recite. They figured out, “Well, this is how I feel.” I think it has a lot to do with getting out the feelings.

The students have become a lot more introspective. They are able to deal with their own emotions a lot better and to sort out what they are feeling.

Teachers especially valued the opportunity that the acting exercises provided for the discussion of emotions, especially bullying and friendship, sensitive topics that were difficult to address elsewhere in the curriculum without students feeling embarrassed or defensive. Students were able to weigh the comparative advantages of alternative reactions and discuss which response might deliver the most satisfying outcome.

Commenting on the effect creative dramatics workshops had on the culture of her classroom, a fourth grade teacher explained: “I think [students] are able to look and analyze and evaluate, not only from their standpoint but from that of others—to step into someone else’s shoes and look at things at different levels and in different ways.” Children not only became more constructive group participants but they enlarged their capacity for exercising agency or taking responsible, independent action.

Optional Activity: Do You Recall Going through Something Similar?

Take another look at the section, “How a Child’s Understanding of the World Develops,” especially the segments that focus on age 8 and above. Jot down any memories of your own childhood experiences that might come to you. Do you remember enjoying tales of adventure—or learning about the extremes of human experience?

Did you go through a period when you felt a sudden passionate interest in a particular field of study or philosophical outlook? In high school or college, do you remember feeling acutely aware of the existence of varied points of view—each with arguments in its favor—but feeling frustrated because you lacked any reliable way to determine which was correct.

I recall becoming fascinated, in upper elementary school, with a novel called *The Black Stallion* and its sequels. To a girl who seldom left her own neighborhood, the fantasy of riding a powerful horse across open country was thrilling. Perhaps this vision of exploring the wild on horseback led to the fascination I felt with maps and geography as a teenager. In my early 20s, that evolved into an intense interest in diverse cultures and philosophies. I wondered: What why do people perceive the world so differently? Is there a way to find common ground? Eventually, these questions led me to return to the university to pursue a Ph.D.

How about you? What adventures did you dream of at the age of 10? In high school, what topics did you find interesting enough to spend time investigating them on your own? Did these interests propel you to take independent action? Do you recognize similar patterns in your child? What shared activities might support your child in exploring the world in a healthy way?

Creative Drama Lesson Plans and Classroom Videos of Teaching Artists

Kindergarten: <http://sites.uci.edu/class/kindergarten/theater-kindergarten/>

Grade 1: <http://sites.uci.edu/class/first-grade/theater-first-grade/>

Grade 2: <http://sites.uci.edu/class/second-grade/theater-second-grade/>

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Chapter 7



Making Wise Decisions

The late Albert Shanker, long-time president of the American Federation of Teachers, may be best remembered for something he never did. In the 1973 science fiction/comedy film, *Sleeper*, Woody Allen's character wakes up two hundred years in the future to learn that civilization was destroyed when "a man by the name of Albert Shanker got hold of a nuclear warhead." At the time, Shanker was considered by many New Yorkers, particularly liberals like Allen, to be a hothead and union thug for shutting down the entire New York City school system with bitter strikes in 1967 and 1968. As head of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the nation's largest union local, Shanker had led a fourteen-day strike in 1967 and a thirty-six-day series of strikes in 1968 that closed down the nation's largest public-school system and threw the lives of one million students and their parents into chaos.

Almost a quarter century later, a very different perception of Albert Shanker was expressed in eulogies by dignitaries such as President Bill Clinton. Lauding the former union chief as a champion of equity, Clinton asserted that the education-standards movement

Shanker had led “was essential for democracy to work” because it “was the only way we could give every child, without regard to their background, a chance to live up to his or her God-given capacity.”²⁵⁷ By then, it was clear that Shanker’s greatest impact on public education had grown out of his decision to advocate for a system of education standards, testing, and accountability comparable to the systems in the leading European and Asian nations.

Never one to mince words, Shanker wrote a forceful critique of American public education in an editorial published in the July 15, 1991 issue of the *Wall Street Journal*.

First we should realize that the overwhelming majority of American children—perhaps 90 percent—are not learning very much in school. Middle-class parents are happy with the education their children get because the kids go on to colleges. They don’t realize that most of these youngsters would not be admitted to a university in any other industrialized country. These kids are getting their junior and senior high school educations in college.

Coming from the then-President of the American Federation of Teachers, this was a ringing indictment. However, it was linked to a passionate call for the professionalization of teaching. Shanker saw that, until American children received the same level of classroom instruction that was available in nations like Finland, children in the United States would not be able to achieve their full potential—unless families stepped in. Most often, the family’s contribution was to pay for college or trade school. This is the second-largest investment many families make after buying their house. Yet, the decision is frequently made hurriedly and with too little information.

Teens who have, during their elementary and middle school years, learned to take responsibility for the consequences of their choices will be better equipped to weigh the postsecondary options

available to them. Even so, there is a difference between the small choices students make every day—often largely by instinct—and setting up a decision-making process that will enable them to wisely weigh a choice that may shape the rest of their lives. Taking a thoughtful, thorough approach to postsecondary education can also provide a model for important decisions later on.

Helping Teens Weigh Post-High School Options

The more careers children learn about as they grow up, the better they will be able to assess which profession might be a good fit for them. Unfortunately, most students graduate from high school with only a vague notion of how roads and bridges get built, where their food and clothing comes from, or who supplies the array of consumer products they use every day. Aside from the physicians, teachers, and other professionals with whom they routinely interact, students have a hard time imagining what careers might be available. If your child is young, this situation may be addressed by taking every opportunity to tour harbors, farms, railway yards, etc. Look for television programs that focus on the technology of everyday life or on varied careers. This can prepare students to think seriously about what types of work they might find satisfying.

Parents of teens might consider buying a teen-focused adaptation of a classic book for job hunters: *What Color is Your Parachute? For Teens: Discovering Yourself, Defining Your Future* by Carol Christen and Richard N. Bolles. Parents may page through the book, to get a sense of the approach used, before encouraging their teen to read it and complete the exercises. Students will benefit from taking their time. The exercises will be helpful not only for academically-oriented students but also for young people who are not scholastically-inclined. As college dropouts Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, and Steve Jobs have demonstrated, success comes not so much from earning a degree as from figuring out how to make optimal use of one's talents.

Having accurate information is important. What options may be most relevant to one's individual talents and career aspirations? What is the relationship between disciplines that a student might study and the careers that will then be open to her? Data showed that 2009 graduates with a technical degree from Florida's community colleges were out-earning the average graduate from the state's four-year institutions by over \$10,000. Alternatively, students who plan to borrow to finance their education can save a great deal by spending two years at a community college. Taking the time to investigate such options can also help students avoid such pitfalls as going into debt to take courses from costly private trade schools. These for-profit schools, whose credits are seldom transferable, lure struggling working class students with exaggerated promises. Yet, their courses routinely turn out to be inferior to those available at far less cost from a public community college.

Resisting Social Pressure

As high school comes to an end, students who find themselves facing the uncertainty of the post-high school world yearn for reassurance. Parents hope for affirmation that they have been good parents. Both students and their parents can unconsciously get caught up in the "virtual ranking" of the soon-to-be high school graduates. Who is most likely to succeed? Who is most popular? Who is the best athlete? Getting accepted to a "good" college or having other impressive plans can be perceived as an important marker. Unfortunately, making a crucial life choice out of a desire to impress classmates can easily lead to disappointing results.

Starting the decision-making process early, while there is plenty of time to weigh all sorts of options, allows students time to explore various alternatives to see what feels like a good fit. If students begin weighing their career and/or college options well before senior year, they are likely to make a better decision. One key factor is that the

student—or the student’s family—must now pay the cost of his tuition. Student loans are easy to get, but debt piles up fast. For families that would find it a financial burden to pay for more than four years of college tuition, room and board, it may make sense to provide incentives to encourage a timely graduation.

Is College Worth the Money?

Uncertainty about finding a job that will enable them to pay back their loans can put a heavy burden on students who must borrow to finance their education. Many college graduates (57% of liberal arts and business majors; 40% of science and engineering majors) do not end up in a field that is directly connected to their studies. For this reason, many undergraduates migrate toward majors such as business that will help them get a foot in the door at a major corporation after they receive their diploma. Still, most students who receive a degree from a respected four-year university do eventually find that the financial investment was worth making.

A 2014 study by the Pew Research Center indicated that, for people age 25 to 32, the earnings gap between college graduates and those with a high school diploma or less can be dramatic. In 2012, those who have college degrees made about \$17,500 more, on average, than their peers with only a high-school diploma. In percentage terms, workers aged 25 to 32 with only a high school education earned 61.5% of the annual income of similarly aged adults with a bachelor’s degree. Many employers now see a four-year degree as a must, even for entry-level jobs. Therefore getting a college degree has significant benefits.

However, graduating from college requires considerable self-discipline. The 2011 graduation rate for full-time, first-time undergraduate students who began their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree at a 4-year degree-granting institution in fall 2005 was 59%, i.e. *just under 60% graduated within 6 years*. So, what is in store for

the 40% of students who never graduate—or for those who get a degree but just squeak by? Craig Brandon, author of *The Five-Year Party: How Colleges Have Given Up On Educating Your Child and What You Can Do About It*, describes the risks in stark terms:

Many of these “college graduates” are functionally illiterate ... [and] have an average of \$25,000 in student debt that they must pay off working as waiters or clerks. This debt can never be forgiven, even if they declare bankruptcy.

Who Pays for College?

When students help to pay for their own education, they tend to take their studies more seriously. In *Parenting Teens with Love and Logic*, Cline and Fay offer a range of observations, including: the more responsible the teenager, the safer it is for the parent to pay more. If parents have doubts about a student’s motivation, the safest plan is to tell your teen: “You pay for the first semester of college. After you get through the first semester, send me a report card with average or above-average grades and I’ll reimburse you to help with the second semester.”⁵⁸ Most colleges will agree to a one-year delay (after an offer of admission) to allow a student to save additional money to pay expenses. If parents are going to pay for books, lodging, and incidentals, this should be done through some sort of allowance for which the student is responsible. Just providing a credit card whose bill is sent to the parent is not only dangerous, but it teaches the student nothing about financial management.

Each family will have its own unique set of needs and considerations. If there are multiple children whose education must be provided for, parents might say: “We will pay for four years of undergraduate State U tuition. If you want to go out of state, fine: We’ll pay the same amount as in-state tuition and you pay for the

rest.” The three messages that Cline and Fay advise all parents to give their high school graduates are these:

I love you.
If you have any questions, ask.
Good luck in life.⁵⁹

The last phrase may seem a little jarring, but it has tremendous power. It conveys the message: “Well, that’s your problem. It’s not my problem.” This empowers teens by letting them know that they have the responsibility to solve their own problems. If the parent worries or agitates about an issue, the teen feels that she does not have to. When the teen makes the decision, there are no lingering resentments that might disturb family relationships years after a problem is overcome. Instead, there is a clear-minded focus on current challenges that need to be addressed. Professor Dr. Dennis Hensley describes a memorable present from his father:

It was a four-year clock that ran backward. My dad handed it to me and said, “For the next four years, your mother and I will keep a roof over your head, food in your stomach, clothes on your back, and help you through school. But when this clock runs out of time, so do you. You’re on your own after that.”⁶⁰

Looking back, Hensley sees this as “The best thing my parents could have done”⁶¹ in terms of helping him to become a functioning adult and a contributing member of society. This tactic will not be optimal for all families, but it does demonstrate that the setting of firm boundaries need not alienate parent and child. In fact, when parents know that there are clear limits on what they can afford to pay for a child’s education, honesty is by far the best policy.

Dealing with the Rigor of College Courses

For students who choose to attend a four-year university, the focus will initially be on adjusting to the world of higher education. Although the United States K-12 public education system lags behind other industrialized nations in rigor, the American higher education system is widely considered to be the best in the world. Students who enroll at a selective university and choose a demanding major are often shocked by the difficult workload. A student who was used to being respected as being near the top of his high school class is now sitting in a large lecture hall where the teaching assistant who corrects his exams knows him only by his student number. Everything seems to have been turned on its head.

The focus has shifted from getting into a good university to qualifying for a good job or an elite graduate program. Such competition helps ensure sure that only the best-qualified students go on to become the next generation of physicians, scientists and engineers. The cliché example is a class of freshman engineering students who are told by their professor: “Look to the right. Look to the left. Next year, one of those students will not be there.” The confidence and work ethic students picked up in their pre-college years are now pivotal to success.

The students who tend to run into the most trouble when they go away to college and must fend for themselves on campus are the children of the “helicopter” and “drill sergeant” parents discussed in earlier chapters. Frequently, the college years are when things fall apart for students who have been coached or ordered to focus on the external signs and symbols of success, but who have not developed the strength and clear-headedness to make wise decisions.

In contrast, young people who have learned to take responsibility for their own success tend to come into their own in the years after high school. Even so, there are practical bits of advice all students can benefit from. The Pew study mentioned earlier asked college graduates what they could have done while in school to enhance their

chances of landing their ideal job. These college graduates wished that they had done four things:

- Gain more work experience (50%);
- Study harder (38%);
- Look for work sooner (30%);
- Choose a different major (29%).⁶²

As young people move into their 20s and beyond, making generalizations about what course of action will serve any individual best becomes increasingly difficult. Despite the best of intentions, parents can never be sure what choices will make their offspring happy. Individual talents are diverse and the range of career alternatives is vast. Nevertheless, the qualities of character explored in the previous chapters will retain their value. The final section of this chapter will highlight the life-long value of each quality of character, using an unusual example: the fictional biography of a man who combined low I.Q. with high moral development.

Forrest Gump

Forrest Gump was the top-grossing movie in North America in 1994, winning Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director (Robert Zemeckis, and Best Actor (Tom Hanks. The 1986 novel by Winston Groom depicted Forrest Gump as an *idiot savant* with impressive mathematical abilities, who was also capable of great feats of strength. The film leaves out the math, focusing on Forrest's good-hearted naiveté. In the opening scene, we meet the slow-witted Forrest as an adult, waiting at a bus stop. To pass the time, he tells his life story to strangers.

Through flashbacks, we learn about Forrest's experiences as a young boy living in rural Alabama. To provide a living for herself and her handicapped son, the resilient Mama Gump has turned

her old plantation home into a rooming house. We see Forrest as a young boy in leg braces, who is targeted of local bullies. By traditional standards of success, Forrest seems predestined to be a life-long “loser.” However, coached by his feisty mother, Forrest is able to overcome daunting obstacles, again and again, through his optimistic strength of character.

Although she recognizes Forrest’s handicaps, Mama Gump has unshakeable *confidence* in her son. Even though Forrest has an I.Q. of 75, Mama Gump would not dream of hiding her son away at home. She insists: “Stupid is as stupid does.” As Forrest observes: “Mama always said life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get.” Following Mama Gump’s example, Forrest shows no self-pity. Instead, he radiates a sense of confidence in the basic goodness of others. This allows him to focus fully on his interactions with those around him, responding wholeheartedly in the moment.

In an early scene, Forrest connects with a young girl named Jenny on the school bus. Jenny sees Forrest’s limitations but accepts him as he is. Jenny becomes Forrest’s only friend. Yet she also is an abused child with self-destructive tendencies. Despite his steadfast devotion, Forrest cannot rescue Jenny from her inner demons. Nevertheless, the *human connection* between them becomes the most meaningful factor in both their lives, eventually leading to the birth of their son, Forrest Jr. After Jenny’s death, raising his bright young son gives purpose to Forrest’s life. He forges similarly strong human connections while in the army. After army buddy Bubba Blue is killed in Vietnam, Forrest remembers his promise to go into the shrimping business with Bubba, eventually founding the Bubba Gump Shrimp Company in Bubba’s honor.

Forrest has little use for books. Instead he responds to the needs of the moment and *learns from consequences*. After he discards the leg braces of his boyhood, Forrest’s running skills are honed by his continuing need to outdistance local bullies. Eventually, his lightning speed gets Forrest into college on a football scholarship. Forrest adapts to this new challenge with unpretentious openness

(even during his victorious team's visit to the White House). Years later, distraught after Jenny leaves him again, Forrest starts running to let off steam. He ends up running all the way across the country—more than once. In the process, Forrest becomes a celebrity, inspiring several failing entrepreneurs to success through his unadorned honesty.

Although naïve and slow-witted, Forrest's *emotional intelligence* is striking. He has a remarkable ability to recognize people's hidden strengths. After an ambush in Vietnam, Forrest's platoon leader, 2nd Lt. Dan Taylor, loses both legs above the knee, eventually becoming an embittered alcoholic living on welfare. Lt. Dan is scornful of Forrest's plans to enter the shrimping business and mockingly promises to be Forrest's first mate if he ever succeeds. When, against all odds, the resilient Forrest comes up with the money to buy a shrimp boat, Lt. Dan joins him as first mate. When a hurricane destroys every other boat in the region, their business becomes a success. Dan finally thanks Forrest for saving his life. Although possessed of a far higher I.Q. than Forrest, Lt. Dan (like Jenny) is shown to be far less emotionally resilient.

Forrest's very simplicity keeps him from being paralyzed by the discouragement and confusion that plague others. Forrest exhibits a *sense of agency* that enables him to take action when needed. When his platoon is ambushed in Vietnam, Forrest saves four of the men. After discovering an aptitude for ping-pong, he begins playing for the U.S. Army team, eventually playing against China on a goodwill tour. Returning home, Forrest is offered \$25,000 for endorsements. This is the money that enables him to buy the shrimp boat. Once the shrimp business is successful, Lt. Dan takes over the day-to-day management. Forrest to gives Bubba Blue's mother a large check, enabling her to quit her low-paying domestic job.

Not equipped to play the role of rugged individualist, Forrest nevertheless thrives when he is included as a member of a coherent social unit where his unique abilities are put to good use. Forrest ends up *making wise decisions*, based not on logic but on his integrity and

emotional intelligence. Having been repeatedly victimized by bullies as a boy, Forrest gravitates toward people he senses he can trust. He forges bonds with people who complement his own strengths and weaknesses; together they are able to accomplish much more than would have been possible as solitary individuals. This is true of the college football team Forrest joins, his army unit, and the shrimping company that he forms (based on Bubba Blue's idea) with the help of Lt. Dan.

On one level, *Forrest Gump* is (quite literally) a tale told by an idiot. However, like the ever-present Fool in Shakespeare's comedies, Forrest cuts through the self-serving rhetoric of the powerful, acting as a reliable guide to what is really going on. Following his mother's early example, Forrest displays the qualities of character we have discussed throughout this book. Showing no self-pity, he just gets on with living what turns out to be a deeply fulfilling life.

Of course, Forrest Gump is a fictional character. However, he serves to remind us of the potential that *all* of our children possess. As film critic Robert Ebert observed: "Movies are like machines that generate empathy." In the context of our discussion of public education, Forrest Gump highlights the human dignity of those students who too often are ignored and poorly served. From the perspective of people who choose to classify others as either "winners" or "losers," Forrest would have seemed to be a classic "loser." Yet the unwavering support he received at home gave him the strength to weather both ridicule and frustration, enabling Forrest to enrich the lives of the people he encountered in profound ways.

Optional Activity: Changing Thought Patterns

What can the rest of us learn from Forrest Gump's buoyant resilience? One of Forrest's strengths was that he did not over-think his actions or reactions. People often blame how they feel (or act) on events in their lives. The following activity, suggested by David

Stoop, allows you to glimpse how habitual thought patterns may be shaping your feelings and your responses to others. The exercise requires only a blank sheet of paper, divided into three columns. The first column is titled: “When this happens...” The second is titled: “I think this...” The third is titled: “I do this...”

In the left column, list some events that triggered feelings of frustration or resentment. For example, a mother might write: “When there are clothes on the floor after the kids leave for school.” Her thoughts when this happens might be: “What if someone comes by and sees this mess? They will think that I am a sloppy housekeeper.” Her reaction might be: “I put everything away immediately. Then I feel frustrated when I end up doing the same thing again the next day.” A father might write: “Someone asks me to do something that I don’t have time to do.” His reaction might be: “I want to be seen as a good person. So, I can’t say ‘no’.” What does he do? “I stay up late, taking time away from myself and my family, to do something I resent doing.”

The left column lists real world events, while the right column describes one’s actions and emotions these actions triggered. When people blame their feelings on external events, this is often because the contents of the left and right columns are all that they are conscious of. The content of the middle column, which identifies the thought patterns that may actually have triggered the feelings described in the right column, goes unnoticed. In everyday life, it is easy to miss the role that one’s thoughts play in a sequence of events. Yet, that role may be pivotal.

External events are often beyond one’s control. If one is unaware of the connection between thoughts and feelings, emotions can also seem to be beyond one’s control. However, once one recognizes the role that thoughts play in triggering emotions, it becomes clear that our thought patterns are where meaningful changes can most easily be made. With patience and practice, we can change our habitual thought patterns. How is that done?

An easy way to start is by re-writing the worksheet discussed earlier. The mother whose children left clothes on the floor might imagine herself thinking: “What a mess! That’s kids. We will have to work on picking up their things. But that does not mean the whole house is dirty.” How does she respond? “I am going to take a moment for myself and relax with a cup of coffee.” Next time clothes are left on the floor, she does just that—relaxes with a cup of coffee. Taking those few moments for herself gives her time to think about logical consequences that might encourage her children to pick the clothes up themselves. She may also find that she has more energy with which to face the rest of her day.

Similarly, the father who is asked for help at an inopportune time may say to himself: “I am a good person whether I say ‘yes’ or ‘no’.” So, what does he do? “I explain that this is not a good time and tell the person who asked the favor that I’d be glad to help another time.” Both the mother and the father had initially fallen into the trap of thinking only in all-or-nothing terms.

Even as adults, when we feel rushed or under pressure it is easy to fall into the primal all-or-nothing thought patterns that are quite normal in early elementary school. The mother thought only in terms of her house being either clean or dirty. The father assumed that he would either be thought of as a good person—or not. Reflecting back on their reactions, both could see that there was an attractive alternative that had simply not occurred to them at the time.

When you find yourself feeling frustrated by life’s minor aggravations, this simple exercise can be helpful in escaping the all-or-nothing thought patterns that may have kept you from dealing effectively with a situation. This exercise can be especially helpful when dealing with the demands and emotional outbursts of older children and adolescents. When an interaction with a teen has not gone as well as you would have liked, taking time to think through your response—using the steps outlined above—can prepare you to respond effectively next time.

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