

# Transforming the Difficult Child

The Nurtured Heart Approach

Shifting the intense child to new patterns of  
success – strengthening all children on the inside.

**HOWARD GLASSER AND JENNIFER EASLEY** – Preface by Peter R. Breggin, MD

# **Transforming the Difficult Child**

## The Nurtured Heart Approach

Copyright 1998 by Howard N. Glasser and Jennifer L. Easley

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or by any storage and retrieval system, without permission from the publisher.

The Nurtured Heart Approach is a trademark of Nurtured Heart Publications.  
For information contact:

Nurtured Heart Publications  
4165 West Ironwood Hill Drive  
Tucson, Arizona 85745  
E-mail: [adhddoc@theriver.com](mailto:adhddoc@theriver.com)

For information about bulk purchasing discounts of this book or other Nurtured Heart Approach books, CDs or DVDs, and for orders within the book industry, please contact Brigham Distributing at 435-723-6611.

Cover Art by Alice Rose Glasser

Book Design by Owen DeLeon.  
Owen Visual Communication

Copy Editing by Melissa Lowenstein (Block)

Printed by Prolong Press Limited

Library of Congress Card Catalog Number: #99-90249

ISBN 0-9670507-0-7

Printed in China

First Edition: 1999  
Second Edition: 2005  
Third Edition: 2008  
Fourth Edition: 2013  
Fifth Edition 2016

DEDICATED TO

**Alice Rose Glasser**

— AND —

**Forest Hart Easley**

SAMPLE NOT FOR SALE

# Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to all those who have supported, encouraged and cheered my development of the Nurtured Heart Approach. It is only because of the many parents who asked, “When is your book coming out?” that I finally decided to put this project in motion. Having initially struggled and failed to organize my approach on paper, I am eternally grateful to Jennifer Easley, who agreed to collaborate with me. Jen’s skills at relaying my ideas in a cohesive manner and at creating a flow for the written model have been awesome. Thank you. This book would not have happened without your great skill.

I also greatly appreciate the tremendous encouragement of my wonderful colleagues and supporters of this work. I wish to acknowledge the growing number of families, programs, organizations, agencies and initiatives worldwide that have enveloped, cultivated and tested this methodology. My heart goes out as well to my friends and colleagues at the many innovative schools and early childhood programs around the globe that have taken on the incredible and often groundbreaking process of integrating the Nurtured Heart Approach into their classrooms and learning environments.

I am so extremely grateful to my brilliant friend and colleague Peter Breggin, MD, and founder of The Center for the Study of Empathic Therapy for the kind words of his foreword and his ongoing support. Dr. Breggin is the author of so many critically important books that provide insight into the dangers of medications and urgent need for alternative approaches.

My deep appreciation also goes to Dr. Patch Adams for initially teaching me the word “Transformation” in 1984 by helping me to understand my own transformative experience.

Recognition is also due those creative souls who joined forces and helped to put the finishing touches on the first edition: Barbara Sears and Chris Howell for their adept editorial help and Richard Diffenderfer for his wonderfully talented graphics and book production skills from the very beginning and through so many revised editions. Great appreciation as well to Marcia Breitenbach, who read and reread the manuscript with dedication, applying her talents to ensure that the result was of the highest possible quality.

Great thanks to Melissa Lynn Block for her magnificent talent and expert editorial support on the 2008 and 2013 revisions and for her help with this extensively revised 2016 edition. She never ceases to amaze me in her ability to make it all come together.

I am forever grateful to the parents and children that I have been fortunate to know and with whom I have been honored to work. You are the heroes of this book.

I am also immensely grateful to my parents, Nathan and Julia Glasser, and to my brother Joel, for their kind encouragement and support.

Last, but not least, I am totally indebted to my wonderful and great daughter Alice, who is living proof of the power of the Nurtured Heart Approach. She has shown me how incredible it is to use one's intensity fully. She is a product of the model since birth, and has become a model of the full breadth and fullness of the Nurtured Heart Approach — how it supports living one's truth and being one's greatness.

As thrilled as I was that her first watercolor, created at age seven, graced the original book cover for so many years, I was even more thrilled when she asked to create a new cover based on the look and feel of the original, now at age 25. This new cover is so rich and deep; it nurtures my heart. Great appreciation to Michael Longstaff who skillfully captured the essence of the new painting by photograph; and to Owen DeLeon, who brilliantly translated that perfectly lit image into the present cover and created a wonderful new inside look to match.

Thank you, too, to the angels who have constantly whispered in my ear sweet words of advice about ways to cultivate and fine-tune this approach.

—Howard Glasser

**I**t is impossible to enumerate all those who have helped inspire and motivate me in the process of co-authoring this book. There are so many.

Primarily, the parents and children I have worked with over the years as a therapist must take the greatest thanks. If not for their experiences, courage and wisdom, the need for birthing this book into the world would not be so clear. It is their contributions and inspiration that have moved my heart and fingers through this project.

Howie Glasser will always be the visionary-warrior, battling on the front lines to bring this magical model into the world—for the far-reaching future changes we need for our children. He was the primary fuel I needed to assist in this momentous undertaking. If not for Howie's undying dedication to change the world and heal the children, I believe I might have given up long ago. It was his fire that spurred me on to the task we needed to do. Thank you, Howie.

Thanks must be given to my parents, William and Barbara Stotts, who were foundations for my own growth and development; and to my brother, Bill, who impelled me to believe in myself as a writer, or at least to behave like one to complete this book. Without the patience and computer tutoring of my nurturing husband, Glenn, I believe I would have murdered my computer and possibly the project with it. After months of my whining, computer confusion and repeated mistakes, he was still willing to help us format. Thank you, Glenn, for being the stabilizing force I could lean on during those darker hours.

—*Jennifer Easley*

# Table of Contents

**Preface** ..... 10

**Introduction** ..... 12

**CHAPTER ONE**

**How Quickly Things Can Change** ..... 15

MATTHEW, BRANDON AND MONIQUE

**CHAPTER TWO**

**A New Primer** ..... 19

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFICULT CHILD

**CHAPTER THREE**

**Patterns** ..... 26

MOVING MOUNTAINS

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**The Energy-Challenged Child** ..... 40

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

**CHAPTER FIVE**

**Active Recognition** ..... 47

WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY

**CHAPTER SIX**

**Experiential Recognition** ..... 64

INSTILLING THOSE WONDERFUL VALUES

**CHAPTER SEVEN**

**Proactive Recognition** ..... 72

A NEW SPIN ON RULES

**CHAPTER EIGHT**

**Creative Recognition** ..... 84

CREATING SUCCESSES THAT WOULD NOT OTHERWISE EXIST



CHAPTER NINE

**Consequences** ..... 95  
 PERFECT TIMING

CHAPTER TEN

**Extending The Success To School** ..... 135  
 GOOD INTENTIONS ARE NOT ENOUGH

CHAPTER ELEVEN

**Later Stages of Treatment** ..... 155  
 PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

CHAPTER TWELVE

**The Energy-Challenged Child** ..... 167  
 EMOTIONS AND THERAPY

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**More on ADHD** ..... 177  
 SYMPTOMS, MEDICATION AND DIAGNOSIS

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**On Greatness** ..... 185  
 TILTING THE TRAJECTORY TO THE TOP

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

**Unveiling the Potential** ..... 188  
 NEW HORIZONS

APPENDIX

**The Credit System** ..... 193  
 BLESS THE CHILD WHO HAS HIS OWN

ABOUT THE AUTHORS ..... 213

SPECIAL THANKS ..... 215

FINAL NOTES ..... 216

NURTURED HEART INSTITUTE ..... 217

RESOURCES ..... 218

# Preface

## ARE YOU TIRED OF GETTING NOWHERE WITH YOUR CHILD?

by Peter R. Breggin, MD

Is it *breaking your heart* to heap useless punishment upon useless punishment on your child?

Is it *frustrating* to see your child take rewards without behaving any better?

Has the *fun* gone out of being with your children?

Are you *disappointed* and even *scared* about how angry you get?

Are you *afraid* your child is heading for failure?

Has your child already been given a psychiatric diagnosis and placed on medication?

It doesn't have to be this way—not if you read this book and apply the advice it contains.

This is a great book with a genuinely helpful approach that is good for both children and parents. Applied consistently and with determination, it makes even the most challenged parenting circumstances enjoyable again. And you don't have to wait four to six weeks for it to help; you should see the difference within a short time of seriously applying Howard Glasser's approach.

This is a simple and straightforward approach, easily learned and applied. Its rationale makes clear sense to every parent. It begins with a principle that we all can appreciate: to transform a difficult child, don't turn to punishments, manipulations, diagnoses or drugs; instead, find out how to appeal to the best in him or her.

*Yes, it's still there.* No matter how bad it's gotten in your home and at school, your real child—the successful child who wants to do well and to live harmoniously in his world—is still there, waiting to be nurtured and to be brought to life again.

I've known Howie Glasser for many years as a colleague and friend. The first time I met him, he was giving a talk in which he spoke about encouraging greatness in children. Howie's ideas and his enthusiastic presentation helped bring out the best in me as a parent and therapist, and I think this book will do the same for you.

This is not only a good book; it is a book you can trust not to harm your child. This is no small matter, because so much that is written about children will do you and your child more harm than good. These other books often

encourage parents to go along with giving their children demoralizing psychiatric diagnoses like ADHD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Anxiety Disorder and even Bipolar Disorder. This usually leads to the psychiatric medicating of children and, in many cases, to a lifetime career as a “mental patient” with ever-increasing psychiatric diagnoses and drugs. Other books will give psychological prescriptions for manipulating your child with rewards and punishments that will only further alienate your child from you.

By contrast, this book will provide you with a new, refreshing and genuinely helpful approach—with no adverse side effects and no horrible unintended adverse drug effects. And it applies to all children!

We have a basic choice in how we treat our children. In the frustration a challenging child can create, it becomes so easy to believe medically oriented professionals who insist that imposing diagnoses, drugs and “behavioral” treatments is the only or the best route. Howie’s work provides us with a hopeful alternative: a clear way to renew that original, unconditionally loving feeling we felt for our children when they were born—that they are treasures to be nurtured, loved and treated with wisdom and respect.

Howie Glasser can help you recapture that love by bringing out the best in yourself so that you can bring out the best in your children. As a psychiatrist, I recommend his book without reservation. It represents a chance for you and your child to heal and prosper.

—Peter R. Breggin, MD

Author, *Psychiatric Drug Withdrawal: A Guide for Prescribers, Therapists, Patients and their Families* (2013)

and

*Guilt, Shame and Anxiety: Understanding and Overcoming Negative Emotions* (2015).

Founder and Director, *Center for the Study of Empathic Therapy, Educating and Living*

Ithaca, New York  
www.breggin.com

# Introduction

**E**very parent wants to see his or her child succeed. Your intention regarding creating success for your child will always be your most powerful ally. It is our intention to give you the tools with which to develop and maintain a way of parenting that creates tremendous success. This book will present strategic ideas and a technology to accomplish this core goal.

In selecting this parenting book, you are already in the process of making a powerful decision to parent more consciously and with more determination. You will be pleasantly surprised to find that you can also parent with much more “peaceful” leverage and results than you would ever imagine.

Not all parenting books and parenting models are the same. Almost all models are designed for the average child. Some work a little bit for the difficult child, but all the methods that we have come across fail to hold up under pressure in the challenging situations in which you most sorely need effective approaches. Traditional methods of parenting and teaching get stretched beyond their capacity when applied to the difficult child. Many approaches will actually backfire and make problem behaviors worse—for reasons that will be explained in chapters to come.

**This book is about a methodology designed specifically for the intense, difficult child. We call this methodology the Nurtured Heart Approach.**

Not only does this approach hold up to extremely challenging behaviors, it works beautifully at the other end of the continuum. It helps the average child thrive beyond any other style of parenting that we have observed. To withstand the pressures of peers and the stresses of our times, even the average child has to be significantly stronger on the inside than ever before. This model meets that need.

This approach is about strategically creating actual experiences of success for children within the context of their activities and their relationships. Success is powerful medicine. Even limit setting, with the right spin, can become a tremendous source of success.

We intend this guide to be user-friendly. You will find it filled with stories and metaphors from life. It is our objective to make the techniques and the reasons behind them completely understandable.

The sole purpose of this book is to give parents and educators all the skills and knowledge to which we ourselves have had access; and, in that way, **to coach parents toward the ultimate outcome of becoming their child's therapist.**

In the context of our book, “therapist” simply means agent of change. There is no quicker route to having your child live a life of success. You are the most powerful person in your child's life and therefore are in the best position to have a profound effect.

This book is constructed in steps. Each is defined by a recommended strategy and adds to the preceding ones in a way that builds a progressive framework and complete system for parenting even the most challenging child.

Take just one step at a time. Our recommendation is to introduce each new step for a period of a few days to a few weeks before incorporating the next strategy, depending on your child's response and your own comfort level. However, if you are highly motivated and want to move fast, you can initiate all the steps in a matter of a day or two. Either way, make sure to keep the strategies going for the long run.

These strategies are designed specifically for the difficult child. Although they work beautifully for the average child, the techniques need only be applied as intensively as the situation merits. Our rule of thumb in developing these methods over the years has been: *the more intense the child, the more intense the application required.* Normally, this simply translates into performing the techniques more frequently and with more detail, intent and emotion. This will be explained as we go.

Most authors in the field ultimately highlight the limitations and obstacles that form the texture of the life of a difficult child, whether that child is labeled as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Conduct Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or simply as being “challenging.”

Even though most books in the field are loaded with recommendations, the underlying message in most every one that we have seen is ultimately discouraging. A picture is invariably painted of a lifelong dilemma and a lifetime trail of accommodations such as medication, long-term treatment and some level of acceptance of undesirable behaviors.

No one seems to present the possibility of essentially changing the old pattern of challenges and failures to a new pattern of successes. No one seems

to believe that a “transformation” is a real possibility: that a challenging child can have an essential change of nature and can begin to consistently use his intensity in remarkably positive ways.

The Nurtured Heart Approach, however, has helped many thousands of parents exert lasting and powerful positive impact on their children. Best of all, parents who had previously felt as if their relationship with their child was hopelessly stuck in the deepening muck and mire of problems wound up feeling like they had a heroic influence in turning their child around.

*Changing the pattern to success is much easier than people think. You simply need to believe it can be done; you need to have a plan, the right techniques and the drive and resolve to follow through. Enjoy the journey.*

# How Quickly Things Can Change

MATTHEW, BRANDON AND MONIQUE

**M**atthew, age 7, pushes his sister to the ground after she tells him to leave her alone. He had been taunting her. His mother, angry and frustrated, lectures him on right and wrong, sends him to his room and promises that if he does it again he'll have no TV for the next two days. Does it work? It would have worked on an average child. It doesn't work on Matthew. He is back at it at the first opportunity. His mother feels betrayed and exhausted. She's run out of tricks. She's tried everything she has read in books and magazines. She worries about what her son will be like in six months and in six years if his seeming addiction to pushing the limits doesn't stop. Mother and child both deeply feel the pain of what has been happening at home and at school. She is a very well-intentioned mom with a bright and well-intentioned child who just can't seem to control himself.

**Brandon, age 4,** will not take "no" for an answer. He tantrums at the least bit of disappointment, whether in the form of a "no" to his demand for more sweets, or a "stop that, please!" to his efforts to explore the family stereo system. Everyone has been saying that he'd outgrow it, but the tantrums are getting worse... and everyone doesn't have to live with him! The tantrums are embarrassing in public and scary at home, because he has started to break things and to be mean to pets. Nothing his parents try or read about seems to work for more than a short while. His parents had even visited a psychologist a few times a year earlier for some consultations. They are beginning to feel as if people are staring at them—as if they are being seen as "parents from Hell." They are terrified of how Brandon will fit in at school. As things are going, the situation appears destined for disaster.

**Monique, age 13,** has habitually under-functioned for as long as her parents remember. She is a smart child who has been failing most of her classes and who would rather argue about homework or chores than just do them, no matter how simple they are. Her parents divorced when she was 11. They are tense all the time, largely over their distinctly differing opinions on how to deal with Monique. Her dad feels that she gets away with murder with her mom, and her mom feels that Monique's father is much too strict. Besides, neither style seems to work. Monique's defiance has brought her to the edge of growing up too fast. She wants to pile on the makeup and hang out with older kids

with questionable lifestyles. Her mom is positive Monique will find a way to get pregnant before too long. Monique knows exactly how to push her mom's buttons. The arguments, warnings and lectures that follow her defiance have become a way of life. All three children had several things in common. They had become stuck in patterns of negativity from which they could not extricate themselves, no matter how much individual advice they received.

All three children had the impression that they got more interesting reactions and larger responses from the adults in their lives as a result of their negativity than for successful choices. In essence, each child was able to get 'better broadband'—a stronger, richer connection—through negativity. And all three children were very smart young people who were seriously under-functioning, primarily because they expended the greater part of their intensity and intelligence in the unproductive endeavor of trying to get strong reactions to their troubling actions.

All the parents of these children also had several things in common. They were trying extremely hard to be good parents. In fact, they were trying every trick that they could mobilize. They had sought advice, read books and magazines, watched videos and observed the world around them for solutions. They basically had tried every reasonable traditional parenting possibility they could get their hands on. Not only that, but they tried things over and over, with as much conviction as they could muster. Despite their excellent intentions, nothing was working.

Although some might have judged them to be bad parents based on the behaviors of their children, in actuality, just about everything they tried would have worked just fine with easier children. They had already reached their own conclusions that normal methods did not work with their child. They were also beginning to suspect that something was dreadfully wrong with their child. To say the least, they were not enjoying parenting, and they were half-crazed with thoughts of where this all was leading.

What these parents wound up doing, in each case, turned things completely around in only a month. They applied a wonderful combination of strategies designed specifically for the intense and challenging child. These simple but unusual methods created the changes that quickly and surely drew the child into a completely new focus on being successful.

In all three families, the parents took a four-part class that explained how intense and difficult children really operate. Each class gave them theories and techniques to carry them toward reversing the pattern of problems and shifting the child to a new pattern of successes.

**After the first class, the parents were clear that they no longer wanted to accidentally fall into the trap of feeding a pattern of negativity by having a**



**response that was not a true consequence.** They were beginning to realize that some of the conventional tactics for parenting a child with problem behaviors—tactics such as reprimands, words of concern, lectures, redirections, threats, discussions, yelling and other ways of making a big deal about negativity—were actually rewards rather than consequences, however unintended that result. They also left the class conscious of different ways they could make a big deal over several kinds of successes that had been going unnoticed. They were ready to apply some magic and strategically inspire their child into a world of successes.

All three parents began by briefly visiting their child several times a day—*before* the predictable behavior glitches occurred—and applying three techniques. They did a **form of recognition in which they verbally described what they saw the child doing.** They also gave their child **increased acknowledgment for skills, values and attributes that they wanted to see more often, and they consciously gave recognition for qualities like having a good attitude, using self-control, being respectful, getting along with others, being cooperative and so forth.** The parents needed to be very diligent and creative to ensure that this appreciation occurred whenever possible, at the slightest glimpse of the desired trait.

They also left the class ready and willing to give their child compliments throughout the day for instances when rules were not being broken. In this way, they were **teaching the rules by actually creating positive experiences: through pointing out when their child was not fighting, not whining, not arguing or not being disrespectful.** They were realizing that, inadvertently, they had always made it more interesting for their child to break rules by reacting more strongly when the rules were broken; and, in effect, rewarding disrespect and bad attitude by giving energy to the problem.

Now they were having more animated responses when things were going right, and they were using new techniques and creativity to make it happen. All this added up to *five minutes of intervention a day*—a far cry from the hours it typically took to discuss and solve problems.

**By the end of the second week,** they began to see shifts in a new and positive direction. They now could see how this emerging pattern of success was linked to the changes they had initiated. By understanding ever more clearly how *not* great it was when things went wrong, they became all the more willing to expand their expressions of recognition, appreciation and acknowledgment in moments when problems and issues were *not* happening. They were now crystal clear in their new intention to no longer give their energies when poor choices were made. They moved into a stronger gear of energizing successes and having a new perspective that enabled them to see beauty and greatness in their child where it had previously gone unacknowledged. They were growing comfortable with giving expression to what they were observing. Their eyes and hearts were

seeing things differently, and they liked what they saw.

**By the third week, the stage was set for consequences to really work.** The children now knew what the rules were. They now knew what happened when the rules weren't broken. They were beginning to trust that they would be noticed and acknowledged for not breaking rules, and this felt good and inspiring.

**Since the parents were no longer inadvertently feeding the negative behavior, they could now deliver a simple but effective consequence each and every time a rule was broken.** After initial testing, each child quickly reassessed his or her new circumstances and realized that all the interesting responses and connectedness happened when things were going well and when rules were NOT being broken. **And they also realized that all that happened when a rule was broken was a consequence, without the reward of a reaction.** The children began to deepen their investment in successes. By the fourth week, the parents were gaining confidence that these positive shifts weren't accidental. They were truly a function of their efforts. They were enjoying the direction of the impact they were having; they were feeling for the first time in a long while that things were changing. They were sensing that transformation was on the horizon. This child that so concerned them and who eluded their influence just a few short weeks before was going to be okay. Not only that: the child was on a path of learning to pour his intensity into *greatness*.

**Miracles happen.** What's more, miracles like these are driven by tactics that require a fraction of the time it ordinarily takes to handle problems. Such strategies ultimately gave these parents the satisfaction of feeling like they had turned things around. They stepped from feeling like parenting failures into feeling like gifted, talented parents.

The parents of these children, like many others who have come across the Nurtured Heart Approach, have realized that **it's all about how and when we choose to give our energy; and that the parenting and education of intense children simply requires a slightly different spin.**

As for Matthew, Brandon and Monique, they are all doing great, living out new scripts of success. And as for their parents, they are savoring both their own accomplishments and that of each of their children.

# A New Primer

## UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFICULT CHILD

**I**n order to best teach you the best techniques that make up the Nurtured Heart Approach, we'd like to introduce you to the basic premises that explain the thinking behind the techniques. This will greatly increase your therapeutic impact by helping you deeply understand what you are doing and why you are doing it.

This chapter is not about how—not about the techniques themselves—but the *why* that underlies and motivates the techniques. Even if you can't stand the suspense and want to jump ahead, hang in there for the next 35 pages. The techniques will follow. These first chapters will keep you briefly on hold while we explain the pieces of the puzzle that we think are crucial. Understanding the premises of this methodology will create just the right inspiration and longing to make the most of the strategies you will learn later in this book.

Keep one more thing in mind as you start reading. When we were bright young therapists fresh out of school, our theories—like those of many other bright young therapists—were complex and complicated. Now that we are older and much more direct, our theories are much simpler in nature. Fortunately, simplicity turns out to be far more powerful. What follows are a few of our core ideas:

### PLAYTHINGS 'R US.....

Think about your child's favorite toys. How many features do they have? Do they have five, 10 or even 100? Even if they had 1,000 features, they wouldn't come close to approaching the number of amazing features we people have.

Simply translated: **we are, by far, our child's favorite 'toys.'**

We have many more features than any other toy. We are much more animated, reactive and interactive than other toys. We also have the best remote control ever made.

We can walk and talk and do virtually anything under the sun. In addition to an endless array of actions, we can display a multitude of interesting emotions and moods in an infinite number of combinations, subtleties and gradations.

The other toys can't compete. It isn't even close to a level playing field. **To our children, we are the closest things to a personal entertainment center imaginable.**

We can combine our actions and feelings into seemingly limitless interactive pairings. We can wash the dishes in a flourishing blend of glory, song and dance

on one day, and the very next day we can be doing the dishes in an utterly foul mood.

The volume buttons on this superior toy are readily and handsomely displayed, as are all the other buttons that, when pushed, really get the show going.

These buttons are fascinating to the sensibilities of a child in the throes of forming opinions of how the world works, along with opinions of his or her effect on the world.

Here's an illustration. When a child is slow to get ready for school, especially when his parent is in a rush to leave the house, what occurs? The parent, with the best of intentions and simply using mainstream methods of parenting, might express some annoyance or frustration. The parent might then give a few warnings or issue a few mild threats in attempts to move the situation along. If the situation continues, the parent could easily show some anger, give a stern lecture or fire off a reprimand or two. This would all be quite within the norm and might well have the desired effect on the average child.

In this case, the child gets a firsthand glimpse of one of many ways to get the “toy” to have a more animated reaction. This toy is simply more reactive and more energized under these adverse circumstances.

With this in mind, consider how easy it is for a child who is a bit more needy, or a bit more sensitive or intense, to reach a simple conclusion that can come to govern his life, albeit in a most unfortunate way.

The conclusion, again, is that *we* are by far their most fascinating toys; and that **these toys operate in much more interesting ways when things are going wrong.**

Unfortunately, given the traditional methods of parenting at our disposal, an intense child can have this perception despite our very best intentions.

## **THE FLATLINERS** .....

The energy, reactivity and animation that we radiate when we are pleased is relatively flat compared to our verbal and nonverbal responses to behaviors that cause us displeasure, frustration or anger.

Get out your Geiger counters.

Our cultural ways of saying “Thank you” and “Good job” pale in comparison to the sharper tones we display even in simple redirections such as “Leave your brother alone” or stronger reminders like, “Get your shoes on, the bus will be here in two minutes.” As a culture, we amp up the “nos,” but give little to no juice to the “yeses.”

**Traditional parenting approaches do not lend themselves to showing much excitement for positive behaviors or smaller successes.** Our normal tendency is to deliver a relatively neutral level of acknowledgment.

**However, as a culture, we jump all over every level of failure.** Non-success captivates us and draws our focused attention and our bigger reactions.

Children have what amounts to built-in energy detectors. They can easily sense when we become more animated. And their impressions stay on file. If you need an image to help hone in on just how judicious children can be in weighing when and how more can be had, just watch the next time your child splits hairs over which serving of dessert is bigger.

If a child perceives that mom or dad gives a bigger reaction to poor grades or annoying behavior, the child absorbs and measures this experience, and other like experiences, as part of her impression of the world and of how we operate. **The basic equation goes something like this: misbehavior or poor achievement plus parent equals lots and lots of energy and lively connection from parent to child.**

**Similarly, if a child sees that doing the chores, or doing homework, or having a good attitude or not breaking the rules nets *less* response, that child begins forming an operational view of reality that the greatest energetic payoffs of *connection* and *relationship* lie in not doing what the parents want.**

In light of experiences like these, the sensitive, needy or intense child is especially likely to become convinced that the payoff for *not* doing what a parent wants is much greater than the payoff for complying or behaving nicely.

It's much more about reaction than attention. The "toy's" responses are much juicier and far more present when things are going wrong. **Children are drawn in when we show up in more energized ways, whether that energy is positive or negative.**

"Payoff" is used here to refer to the level of energy or level of response that the child comes to perceive and believe is available in relation to every event that comprises his or her life. Many children will simply go for the bigger slice of life every time.

The question then becomes: "If we truly are in some fashion our child's interactive, virtual reality toy, then just what kind of toy are we going to choose to be?"

Can we regulate the flow of payoff, or the way we choose to radiate energy, to the advantage of our child and our family?

Fortunately, you can make great choices here—choices that make a world of difference.

## **VIDEO GAME THERAPY** .....

Have you ever noticed how many intense and challenging children are drawn to video games?

For the time they are playing, they are captivated, content, focused and alive.

The reason is that their lives make total sense while they are engaged in the game.

While they are avoiding dangers or attaining goals, they are constantly being acknowledged and recognized with landmarks of success. When they break a rule of the game, they get a clear and immediate consequence that efficiently resets them to the next opportunity to be successful. The timing is always perfect.

Children figure out in no time flat that the game is totally consistent and predictable. There's no getting around the program. It's unflappable. It can't be bullied or manipulated. No amount of tantrums, pleading, or nagging can change the format.

They not only come to accept the realities of the game very quickly, on their own, but they also figure out new games in the time it would take the average adult to locate the manual. And once they size the game up and assess that there's plenty of excitement and recognition for their wise and skillful actions and only a consequence for crossing the line, they throw themselves into performing at their top level. They typically don't waste their time trying to manipulate or bully the game. They direct their intelligence exclusively into doing well.

They seem to love video games, and well they should. Children typically throw themselves into the game with great zeal, and that feels good. They get to experience what it feels like to use their intensity in a successful manner. They constantly try to attain new levels and outdo their personal best and the personal best of friends and family members. They can both sense and see their attainment: the game provides evidence of their attainment and the excitement that is associated with success, every time, at every turn.

How many parents would give anything to see their children involve themselves in school life and home life in the same manner... investing and focusing their energies in increasingly successful ways?

The secret is simple. **Video games have the structure that more and more children need and demand.** Think about it. In a video game:

- Acknowledgment and consequences are reflected in completely straightforward ways.
- **There's no wiggle room, no unclear line to dance over, no inconsistency in terms of whether the child has overstepped a limit.**
- **Frequent audible "bells and whistles" and discernible continuous scoring reward the child's positive accomplishments as well as steps in the right direction.**
- **Conversely, clear and immediate consequences mark actions that are unacceptable. When the consequence is over, it's right back to scoring.**

Athletic events are similarly structured. There, the lines defining a

consequence are perfectly clear, and goals are achieved in clearly delineated ways. The cheering, encouragement and scoring always happen in-bounds, while simultaneously the knowledge exists that every transgression, no matter how slight, carries with it a consequence. The referee doesn't yell or scream at a player, but states the consequence neutrally while still holding the player fully accountable. **No excitement or energy is given to the broken rule—just a result.**

This structure consistently brings out the best that athletes have to give. Even athletes who lack internal structure and who can barely conduct themselves off the playing field without creating havoc seem to thrive within the structured parameters of the game.

**The basic translation is: energy, reaction and payoff for the good stuff and “Oops, broke a rule—here’s your consequence—no energy, reaction and payoff for violations.”** The accountability is clean; then, it's right back to the excitement of participation and success. The outcome is predictable and consistent every time the game is played.

It's the same in the venue of the video game. The essential feature is that the excitement and fireworks occur when the child is on track, busily attaining the goals and avoiding the obstacles. “Scoring” equals recognition and emotional nutrition. When things go awry, the game's response is straightforward. The consequence occurs in a simple, unceremonious fashion, and when it's over, it's right back to successes.

The structure is brilliant and simple. It's a beautiful blend of recognition and limits and a beautiful outcome of mastery and accomplishment for the child.

We've never seen a child play these games to lose. That quality of attainment, carried over to important areas of functioning, can have delightful meaning in the life of a difficult child and family members.

We are not enamored by the subject matter of most video games that we've seen on the market. The gratuitous violence and frequently inane content are unwelcome guests in our homes. However, the crucial question is: can we observe, learn and apply these principles to parenting our challenging children away from failures and toward new patterns of success?

## **THE BIG BANG THEORY** .....

Children are attracted to energy. Very early in their lives, they become sensitized to the energy of interaction with other people, and they quickly perceive what it is that produces fireworks.

When July 4th comes around every year, if fireworks displays are available and in the plans, chances are we'd rather see a significant display than just a few firecrackers. Does a child want to see a few sparklers in the back yard or get to a real show? And does a child want to see the first few minutes of the show and

leave or stick around for the grand finale?

Let's return to the video game analogy for a second. Players are quick to determine that flashing lights and high scores are more exciting. It is easy to see that the energy of success has the bigger payoff.

How does this affect a child's view of his or her parent as a personal entertainment center?

Unfortunately, when a child perceives that far more energy and animation are available for negative behavior, he or she quickly becomes increasingly drawn to repeated attempts to light up all the lights. If the bigger fireworks best capture the child's interest, then he or she might just discover a few circumstances under which this favorite toy tends to have some pretty interesting reactions. Many intense, intelligent children have fixated the greater part of their wits and intelligence on figuring out just how to elicit the strongest possible reactions from adults in their worlds.

Of course, this represents a horrible waste for the child and a miserable state of day-to-day warfare for the parent. However, the child feels, at some level, as if he has hit the jackpot...the grand finale! This is why these situations tend to escalate until and beyond the point where the parents are tearing their hair out, wondering where they've gone wrong and why their child is *out to get them*.

The risk of this phenomenon increases when the child has a high level of energy and sensitivity, along with heightened intensity and commensurate need for connection. When the child figures out that negativity is the best or only way to get the bells, lights and whistles really going, he or she will weather the content of the lecture, warning, or reprimand just to get that heady hit of adult energy...as long as there's *more*, that's motivation enough. Under these conditions, the child quickly figures out the "video game" and realizes that *not* doing what the parent wants essentially gets far more reaction and emotion. They discover that they get better broadband when things are going wrong, and a weak signal when things are going right—and they are drawn to the bandwidth of greater connectivity.

Many parents aptly describe this experience in video game-friendly terms: "He really knows how to *push my buttons*." We all have particular behaviors that are especially frustrating or especially annoying to us. Some of us openly advertise where those buttons are and exactly what it takes to push them. Most of us do this to one extent or another without realizing it. We all have buttons, and this isn't going to change. You aren't going to turn into a saint who isn't bothered by anything. The good news is that you can create better buttons!

When our children are feeling especially needy, sensitive, or energized, they are expert at dialing into our reactions by manifesting particular behaviors that will draw us into the trap. We are particularly vulnerable when we are



stressed or distracted and our child takes note that we are otherwise unavailable. We might as well wear neon signs declaring that the only way our attention is available is to push a button and extract a reaction, albeit negative in nature. To a child who is feeling needy, certainly no crime in itself, **any** response is better than no response at all.

*It is a trap...* unless we can demonstrate, to the child's satisfaction, that the payoffs—the ways in which we choose to give our energies—are substantially greater for the good stuff.

We must create a new perception: that **in our roles as “toys” or “entertainment centers,” we radiate greater responses when the challenging behaviors are not happening and when successful behaviors are happening.**

And we have to be convincing. We cannot just give lip service to this idea. We have to demonstrate that we truly radiate more excitement, animation and energy to everything that is not a problem.

Our challenging children are not out to get us. They are simply seeking the best possible broadband: the greatest level of connectivity to the core energy of the adults in their lives. **Always remember that the child's ultimate goal is greater connection with you; and that relationship is the access point of this connectivity of expanded bandwidth.**

# Patterns

## MOVING MOUNTAINS

**P**arents who seek help because of a difficult child are truly caught between a rock and a hard place. They are almost always doing something amazing: they are invariably doing the very best job they can with the tools they have. It may not appear that way to an outsider and it may not feel that way to them. However, without a doubt, when examined closely, *most parents of difficult children are using highly acceptable, well-researched, standard methods of parenting that would have an excellent chance of working well with a child with an easier temperament.*

The problem is that traditional and conventional forms of parenting—the kinds that we are surrounded by on television, in film, books and magazines, as well as in our extended families of relatives, friends and acquaintances—invariably fall short of the mark when applied to children with strong needs and stronger manifestations of temperament. It’s also virtually impossible to avoid the influence of the most formidable part of our personal parenting training: having been a child in an environment where we were liberally exposed to conventional techniques and philosophy.

Conventional methods of parenting, unlike video games, respond in a low-key way to everyday events that are going well, but as soon as something goes wrong, the energy tends to really explode in the form of lectures, warnings, consequences, and punishments. The worse the situation gets, the more we tend to lean in, offering up increasingly juicier life force and expressions of frustration. These are, typically, far more energetic and emotional responses than those the child gets from “being good.”

Despite the best of intentions, attempts to apply conventional parenting or teaching techniques to the difficult child are doomed to failure. Most frequently, the situation worsens because conventional methods put the payoffs in the wrong place. These methods are, energetically, *upside down*. A child can quickly but subtly form a pattern of negative behavior in exchange for that payoff—and this can become a significant disruptor of family life before parents even have a chance to figure out what hit them.

### IMAGINE .....

Imagine your child playing a video game that had upside-down payoffs, with more points and bigger rewards for doing the wrong things and minimal recognition for avoiding obstacles and achieving the goals of the game.

If scoring and level of excitement were the most important thing, which to children’s perceptions they most often are, you’d probably see players becoming adept at doing the wrong things.

The parents and the teachers we meet are, without a doubt, trying as hard as they can with the tools they have. But these tools are like that fantasy upside-down video game: they accentuate the negative and fail to acknowledge success with the same vivid detail and enthusiasm.

If you were asked to knock down a brick wall and given a rubber mallet to perform the job, you could be wailing away for an eternity without accomplishing the task. No matter how hard you tried, you would not get the job done. Pretty soon, you would begin to feel self-conscious. People might walk by and roll their eyes and look at you as if you were dysfunctional. You might even begin to doubt yourself and wonder if it were true.

Not the right tool for the job.

However, if you were then given tools with more power, such as a sledgehammer, a jackhammer or a bulldozer, you’d have the job done in a flash. “What’s next?” you’d say, pumped with your accomplishment.

**THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR THE JOB** .....

The job of parenting a difficult child is exactly the same. The more intense the child, the more intense the intervention needed, and the more dramatically conventional methods fall short of the mark.

The same applies to teaching methods. We can’t tell you how many times we’ve heard teachers say they’re overwhelmed because they have a handful of difficult kids in a class. They are absolutely trying as hard as they can with the tools they have. When these same teachers are given stronger and more encompassing strategies and a new slant on how to proceed, things change quickly and dramatically.

Have you ever noticed how technology has evolved in virtually every area of our lives, with many generations of change occurring in a relatively short period of time? Look at computers and the information industry or think about all the advances in the areas of transportation and communications. The progress is phenomenal. Quantum leaps in technology unfold in orchestrated response to the heightening needs and intensities of our ever-expanding lives.

This has distinctly *not* occurred in the field of working with children. Without doubt, new and interesting approaches to working with kids continue to be developed; however, on a level of structural properties—the components of approaches relevant to working with children who are more intense—existing approaches are more or less the same as in years past: the equivalent of trying to knock down a brick wall with a rubber mallet. It just will not work.

**BALLONS... BALLOONS FOR SALE** .....

Imagine putting air into a balloon. It's pretty much a perfect fit and a perfect container. You can tie a knot and bat it around the room and it will essentially hold up. If you substitute water in the balloon, the fit is compromised. The structural properties of the water exceed those of the balloon in a precarious manner. A balloon usually will hold water under non-stressful conditions, but if the container is bumped, bruised or dropped, it's likely to explode.

If you substitute a substance like liquid metal or another denser substance for the air, the container will quickly show itself to be flawed, even though it may hold small amounts at a time. It really doesn't matter whether the balloon is red, yellow, green or blue. The more intense substances will inevitably not be contained.

The very same is true for parenting methods. Even though numerous approaches have been developed that all work to varying degrees with easier children, they are unable to deal with the intensity of the more challenging child. Hailed as new and innovative approaches, they are structurally the same yellow, green or blue balloons.

So many parents we have met have gone the extra mile to study this, that and the other thing in attempts to help their child. They sense that their children are stuck in a pattern that they cannot escape on their own. They desperately search for new methods in books, magazines and parenting classes. Many parents of difficult children have other, easier children, and see for themselves that what works for that easier child is not going to cut it with this more demanding child. Frustration grows as method after method fails, and the intense child continues his reign of terror.

**STRUCTURE** .....

**Intense children need to perceive that the container that is each new environment can hold them safely, competently and fearlessly.** In a child's eyes, every new milieu is orchestrated by the adult in charge, whether or not the adult is present. A difficult child, in particular, must test every new adult he or she meets to see if that person can handle him or her. If it is determined that the adult can adequately create a positive structure and therefore a suitable container, the child settles down fairly quickly. If not, the testing continues.

Children cannot conceptualize or verbalize what is going on inside them, but they certainly can sense their own needs. Acting-out is their way of expressing this. If additional structure is not forthcoming in positive ways, then the acting-out typically escalates as the child pushes to have his need met. **Any consequent acting-out is a way of saying, "I need more structure. I need more structure!"**

Unfortunately, what many parents worry about is true. Children with a high

need for structure will continue their quest, finding themselves attracted to the alternative forms of structure available in the community. Numerous forms of positively structured experiences are available in most towns and cities—like team sports, scouting and various interest groups. Unfortunately, children with high need for structure who tend to get energized connection and relationship in negative ways will often seek out negative types of structure—which are all too easy to find.

**What drugs, alcohol, gangs, involvement with the juvenile justice system and getting pregnant as a teen have in common is that they are all highly structured experiences.** They take over one’s life and dictate the course of the day. They all distinctly limit one’s freedom.

However, when we intervene with structure in a positive way, choices made by the difficult child begin to fall into new patterns of successful endeavors. Success can become second nature, like breathing, and can take over one’s life as well... in expansive and healthy ways. It becomes no longer necessary to shuttle an intense child into the traditional solution of ‘burning off’ excess energy in sports, dance or other forms of active expression. You’ll see this child pour her intensity into a much bigger field of endeavor... *greatness*.

This may cause you to feel just as out-of-control as you did when her intensity was going awry and she was falling into a frightening array of poor choices. Eventually, however, you’ll find yourself trusting that this child’s new inner compass is continually defining and refining great ways to format her amazing life force...that this new manifestation represents a *great* way of being out of control!

**ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE**.....

All parenting can roughly be divided into two general categories:

- *All that we do to be positive:* all the acknowledgment, recognition, affection, loving remarks and gestures, as well as the support, encouragement, modeling and education we offer daily.
- *All that we do to set limits:* coaching, instructing, warning, admonishing, redirecting and administering consequences.

Every parenting paradigm that we have come across—from formal approaches to very informal approaches—have these two elements in common. Even families that appear to have no approach whatsoever, when examined by way of these categories, will almost certainly be making at least rudimentary attempts to provide positives and to set limits.

**Conventional parenting and teaching approaches consistently fail with the difficult child for two main reasons:**

- 1. Efforts to provide positives and set limits are not well enough coordinated.**
- 2. These efforts do not possess the intensity required for the job.**

Most parenting and teaching approaches also have the energetic payoffs in the wrong places. **While excitement may be generated by high-level events like great grades or special achievement, most everyday responses to positives are low-key, vague and infrequent.**

Even parents and teachers who are under the impression that they take a strong view on limit setting typically let things go by giving warnings or ignoring incidents. When the limits continue to be pushed, dramatically stronger emotional reactions to problem behaviors occur, either verbally or non-verbally.

These are the straws that break the camel's back, because a child who senses she can get more out of negativity will perceive these bigger reactions as rewards—the very opposite of what was intended. **Some children even think that they only receive focused, quality time when they've broken a rule and they get a lecture or a reprimand. That is the only time they perceive that they are getting the underlying closeness they've longed for—despite an obviously converse context.**

In many ways, typical parenting wisdom is upside down. We try to teach delicious qualities like good attitude, responsibility and self-control when those qualities are not being used. An example is having a strong emotional reaction to a child's bad attitude. Energy given to the bad attitude actually *reinforces* the very thing we want to see happening *less often*.

In effect, as a culture, **we try to teach the rules and limits when they are being broken, in the midst of unfolding problems. But there's a backlash: the energy given to the broken rules actually reinforces the undesirable behavior.**

Not only is the time when transgressions have just occurred one of poor receptivity to learning, but the structure also is inverted. With conventional methods of parenting, corrective pressure ends up making things worse by making the payoffs for problem behaviors bigger than they already are.

Imagine being a chiropractor, ushering a new client into your office. Your first glance was shocking. You noticed that his hips were where the shoulders should be and vice versa. You might quickly conclude that this inversion of structure couldn't possibly work. You first need to get things in their right order structurally. A great degree of basic successful functioning will fall into place

right away when this occurs.

Some approaches recommend explicitly telling your children how you feel when they act-out. “It hurts my feelings when you annoy your sister.” “It makes me sad when your teacher tells me you were not paying attention in school.” These approaches, although potentially effective for the average child, backfire with the intense child.

Not only are you explicitly displaying where the buttons are for future use by the difficult child, but you wind up giving payoff to the problem behavior in the form of your energy and relationship.

Other approaches call for other kinds of lengthy discussions or discourses in relation to the problem behaviors. Any way you slice it, it adds up to *more energetic payoffs for exactly the behaviors that you least want to reinforce*. Why water weeds?

### **PATTERNS, PATTERNS, PATTERNS...** .....

Children figure out where the greatest available parental relational energies exist, and gravitate toward whatever it takes to obtain the highest volume of response and connection. This pattern is hard to prevent unless we are extremely skillful and careful—and in possession of a methodology that works in the right direction. Inadvertent patterns form all too easily.

If, for example, your child is under the impression that the only time he sees you animated, emotional and excited is when he is being demanding or rude or interrupting your phone calls, he will dial this excitement up when he desires a connection or some refueling. Although this is far from a subversive plot, patterns can easily form around such a perception.

The pattern has nothing to do with a particular problem behavior. Its essence has to do with obtaining a connection with you and your intense reactions. Although the pattern may make you feel that your child is out to make your life miserable, the attraction is simply to *you* and *your life force*; the behaviors that follow are mostly subconscious.

This is actually excellent news in that what may appear to be a deep-seated psychological problem is far more likely to be simply a habit. Habits can be changed.

**For intense, high-energy children, the tendency to stumble into a pattern of pulling for negative attention is significantly stronger than for children with an even temperament.** Their need for relationship, connection and response is profound. At various times during the day, it becomes their be-all, end-all, and driving force. If adults are available, it typically is then that their energies are in highest demand. Reactions of other children also can figure importantly in the equation.

**It's almost as if these children were desperately seeking a million-dollar check. It is far more captivating than a one-dollar check. They don't quite register that it has a negative sign in front of it.** They are just riveted on what they perceive to be a big payoff.

**FUZZY: WAS HE?** .....

Our children cannot live their lives with clear knowledge of who they are unless we construct their environments in clear ways. The more complex and confusing the world gets, the more evident it is that we require a clear inner guiding voice to keep us sane in an often insane world.

Intense children, who have a proclivity for impulsiveness and lack of inhibition, have a strong tendency to lead confusing lives because they often get more out of the world by acting out than by using good control. What could be more confusing? They very well know that we want them to be well behaved. They see and feel the resulting distress in the lives of everyone concerned when they aren't. We give them strong messages along those lines. In effect, however, we pay them more for the very opposite of what we want.

Children who lead confusing lives proliferate confusion wherever they go. This does not stop when childhood ends. Adults who emerge from childhood with this pattern have to work extremely hard to pull themselves out of this constant tailspin. They lead guarded lives, forever regretting their intensity and forever fighting their tendency to be drawn to chaotic situations, thereby subconsciously sabotaging potential successes.

If we use new technology to reverse the confusion, we effectively make these children's lives clearer. Then, their energies get realigned in new habits of success and they emerge from childhood with a clear inner compass.

They consequently can be drawn to clearer relationships with other people in their careers and in other endeavors. They come to possess the ability to give *themselves* nurturing relationship and recognition for both the small and large successes in their lives.

This minimizes their need to attract attention and gain a reaction for extraneous matters such as doing poorly, acting out, arguing, getting sick or having an outrageous appearance.

They become invested in *not* pushing the limits. They can then also apply control and bring themselves to a halt before they cross the line, despite their intense feelings and intense energies. Rather, they get to a place where they can apply their intense energies to healthy endeavors.

If difficult children experience and integrate clarity early in their lives, they undoubtedly will be better able to provide the same for their own children later on. This in itself is worth the parenting work required now. It certainly beats dreading



that our difficult children will bring us difficult grandchildren.

Clarity now makes all the difference in the world later.

## **JUNK FOOD** .....

As you read the rest of this first section describing the thinking behind our techniques, keep the following in mind:

A difficult child can be getting a tremendous amount of negative relationship and attention throughout the course of a day and still be literally starving to be noticed. Some children actually remain restless at bedtime or have poor sleeping patterns because their intense hunger for psychological nutrition remains unmet, despite having had an amazing amount of negative attention. Just as it's hard to fall asleep when you're hungry for food, it's hard to fall asleep when you're hungry for emotional nutrition.

We know this from working with hundreds of children who had sleep issues among their presenting problems, and who spontaneously and remarkably changed for the better when their parents were able to deliver a higher grade of nurturing attention. The salient feature here is that **negative attention is like junk food. You can get it all day long and still be hungry. It has no nutritional value.** Even worse than the low level of nutrition, however, is the fact that negative attention and relationship get encoded by the child as failure.

Children do not necessarily know how to decipher their experiences, just as a letter entering the post office doesn't know which bin to go into to get to its destination. By observing the way *we*, the adults in their lives, respond, our children sort experiences in their memory banks.

If we observe our challenging child testing a limit and we blurt out some version of "Cut it out," "Stop it," or "Quit it," or anything else tinged with a tone of criticism, it is very likely the experience will be sorted psychologically into the bin intuited as "FAILURE."

Of course, this is far from the intention of the parent, who is trying to parent well. Every parent wants to create a successful child. **However, as the child continues to amass experiences intuited as failures, the critical mass of messages downloaded as representing it begin to have a life of their own.** The child's feelings of worth falter because his or her sense of self-esteem is centered around and tied to the experiences for which he or she is noticed most intently.

For the challenging child, unfortunately, these are experiences connected with poor choices. **Poor behaviors thus lead to poor self-esteem.** Experience has taught the child that he or she is most worthy of a parent's time and energy when having problems and issues.

**ORDINARY COMPLIMENTS FALL SHORT** .....

And so, what happens when we try to tell these children that they are really wonderful or tell them that they have done a good job?

Often, at these moments, we can discern the effects of poor self-esteem and poor self-worth. All too often, these children may reject ordinary positive comments because inside, they are doubtful at their very core that anything positive about themselves could possibly be true. They are basing this on their primary experiences of themselves, which consists of their frequent actual experiences and confirmations of negativity and failure.

These children tend to combat attempted nurturing with an inner, subconscious monologue along the lines of, “I am *not* a good kid. I’m always getting in trouble.”

Their cumulative experience of themselves becomes hinged on their perceived experiences of failure. Ordinary positive remarks like “Good job!” or “Thank you” often backfire, and play right into the child’s self-confirmation that everything is *not* good.

This is a major source of frustration for the parent of a difficult child, who—despite desperate attempts to be positive—cannot quite get under the child’s radar of low self-esteem.

We cannot make that “FAILURE” reel magically disappear. However, we can loosen its hold and create new and healthier software of substantially more power.

**FLYING UNDER THE RADAR:  
DIGESTIBLE EMOTIONAL NUTRITION** .....

If you were working with a person who had had a stroke and lost the ability to swallow, you would have to evaluate whether you were going to attempt to feed her solid food and weigh the serious side effects you might encounter. Most likely you would arrive at any number of solutions that involve advances in technology: from introducing nutrition through an intravenous line into the bloodstream, to more complex but advantageous methods of pumping nutrition directly into the stomach. In any case, you would be able to circumnavigate the problem.

The same is true for our work with the difficult child. Is there a version of technology that will allow us to deliver powerful and nutritious emotional attention such that the child cannot block, defend against or “choke” on it?

Yes. With this methodology, we shoot for *primal nutrition*...nourishment at a soul level. We introduce dense, rich emotional and psychological nutrition that finds its way past all barriers.

A bit more explanation will provide the necessary jumping-off point.

## FINDING THE RIGHT BLEND OF STRUCTURE .....

If you asked a difficult child to be kind to himself *and* to set limits on his impulses when necessary, he probably would have little or no idea what you meant. He lacks the internal experiences and reference points through which to make these vital connections. Any attempt to comply would, without a doubt, be short-lived.

**Challenging children need a level of structure that gets past the defenses—a blend of recognition and limits that matches their level of intensity and consistently envelops their lives.** Over time, the child integrates the process: becomes able to give himself recognition and appreciation and at the same time to set inner limits. How many adults can do that? If this were a universal set of skills, the self-help books that line the shelves of every bookstore would quickly become obsolete.

## THERAPEUTIC TENSION .....

Imagine having a nagging back problem that brings you to the point of needing help. A friend points you to the orthopedic section of your local drug store. For starters, you get one of those banded elastic braces that the folks in lumberyards use. After a few days you decide that you need added support. So you bite the bullet and visit your doctor, who recommends a more sophisticated orthopedic support.

It turns out to be a brace that comes in two sections. It has two molded sides that fit the contours of your sides. It hooks together in the back and is then cinched up in the front by a series of connectors from the top to the bottom. The more you cinch in just the right places, the more the dynamic tension. When you get the tension just right, your back feels some blessed relief.

One morning, you wake up and cannot find one side of the brace. The dog has dragged it somewhere and hidden it. At some point you realize that it can't be found and that you're running late for work, so you start getting ready for the day. Your back hurts. Out of frustration, you put the one remaining side up to your back and try to attach it. No matter which way you try, half of the brace lends no support.

This is very similar to attempts to parent by either being positive or by setting limits. It also is all too easy to flip-flop from one approach to the other without ever working the two elements in combination.

You can truly be the world's best limit setter and not achieve the necessary level of dynamic tension or 'therapeutic physics' unless the limits are used in combination with strong positives.

Or you can be the world's most positive person and still be compromised in working with a difficult child unless the positives are used in conjunction

with excellent limit setting.

It is only through working both sides of the bracing, in union, that the right therapeutic physics occurs. By combining limit setting and positives interactively and turning up the dial, the required dynamic tension is achieved.

Neither of these two aspects of the bracing can have anywhere near the desired impact without the foundation that allows the structure to work in the first place. In the context of the challenging child, this means establishing that there is no longer any energetically and relationally rewarding response to negativity. Taking this stand is what allows positives and consequences to have powerful impact.

### **TAKING THE NECESSARY STANDS** .....

If we are going to produce a strong structure based on the components of 1. effective limit setting and 2. being positive in a new and effective way, then it is absolutely imperative that we take three very distinct **stands**.

For our purposes, a stand is a consistent, resolute, committed position, based on specific and targeted strategies. Taking a stand means being *immovable*, *relentless* and *unflappable*.

The three stands are as follows:

#### **Stand I:**

- **Absolutely No! I refuse to get drawn into giving my child greater responses, more animation and other unintended “payoffs” for negative behaviors.** I won't accidentally foster failures and reward problems with my energy. There will be consequences for negative choices, but all my energy will go toward energizing successes.

#### **Stand II:**

- **Absolutely Yes! I resolve to purposefully create and nurture successes.** I will relentlessly and strategically pull my child into a new pattern of success by giving expression to appreciation, recognition and acknowledgment.

#### **Stand III:**

- **Absolute Clarity! I will maintain total clarity about the rules that demonstrate fair and consistent boundaries and consequences.** When a rule is broken I resolve to give a true and effective consequence that will quickly lead once again to energizing success.

## THE BIG MISTAKE .....

A tremendous mistake that many well-intentioned people make when viewing the family of a difficult child is to walk in and declare that what needs to happen to get things back in order is really very simple.

Typically, the family feature that jumps out for the observer is that something is *very wrong* here. “How can you let that child get away with murder?”

If only you had stronger rules and stronger consequences; *that* would fix him.” In reality, the family has already intuitively sensed that and has been trying every version of stronger consequences they could imagine.

The reason this is a mistake is: **If a child has a pre-existing perception that she gets more out of life for acting negatively, and we take only the stand of intensifying the rules or the harshness of the consequences, we will make things worse.**

A child in this situation will size up the new circumstances and conclude that by breaking the new rules, she can now get a new array of reactions and payoffs. This may pique her interest, and **she will often surmise that she and her parents now are simply playing for bigger and more interesting stakes.**

She will not be doing this on purpose, but the addictive side of the habit will draw her toward the prospect of a larger response. The tougher rules and consequences will only add incentive to act out further. No matter how good the rules and no matter how substantial the consequences, the child’s intensity will continue to be centered on pushing the limits. **If the third stand is taken alone, it will simply be a new video game...unless the other stands are taken first.**

Many family therapists make this same mistake, regardless of their level of experience. We ourselves have certainly had this experience until we woke up, smelled the coffee, and took note of the damaging effects of first intervening with stronger limit setting.

It’s much akin to conducting individual treatment with difficult children by dealing directly with the problems. These are children who are already out of control in connection with getting much too much secondary gain and too many benefits from their negative actions...and *here we are, giving their negativity additional response, energy and relationship!*

It is not an accident that these children do not readily progress in individual treatment or that they progress temporarily and then slide back. They quickly assess that all the special connection and relationship they desperately seek would cease if they were to do more than give lip service to improvements. More typically, they keep up a steady stream of juicy incidents to fuel the engaging nature of the therapy. **It’s not that they don’t wish to change, but they cannot as long as we accidentally play into the very addiction that we wish to alter.**

Before we can effectively take a stand with limits and introduce consequences

in a way that will finally have the desired result of breaking the child's habit of pushing the limits, we must first establish, to the satisfaction of the child's perceptions, that there are indeed viable alternatives to getting responses in negative ways.

**We must establish trust that nutritious attention and gratifying responses for their successes are abundantly available.** That, in fact, a minefield of potential successes awaits them; and that it is virtually impossible to avoid the excitement for all the things that are going right.

Starting with a stronger version of limit setting would be like trying to put the second story on a house before the first floor is in place. It simply wouldn't work, no matter how desperately one wanted the master bath with the jacuzzi tub before anything went in on the ground floor. However, **the more carefully one prepares the groundwork and the first essential steps, the better the second phase will proceed.**

For the pivotal steps of that first floor - new positive relationship and success generating appreciation - to even get off the ground it must be established that the energy and gift of you is no longer available through negativity. That is the cement that supports the entire structure.

**THE NATURE OF HEALING** .....

We want to call to your attention two aspects of healing that apply to our methods.

Have you ever noticed how a wound heals? This occurs when new tissue forms and attaches to existing healthy tissue, eventually expanding to the point where the damaged tissue is minimized or dissolved.

This is, in effect, comparable to our view of the healing of the damaged sensibilities of the difficult child. Week by week, as the parents of the child expand their new repertoire of tools and strategies, the healthy aspects of the child's behavior that have always existed but resided in the shadows of negativity become increasingly prominent and override the problem areas. Farfetched? Wait until you see the results. Once you apply the approach, you'll see firsthand that this is true.

This is not unlike another aspect of healing shared by holistic approaches. Instead of dealing directly with the symptom—as is common in allopathic Western medicine—many alternative medicine practices respect the connected, systemic, miraculous nature of the human being. They conduct treatments that strengthen the inner sanctums of the body: the spirit, the heart, the mind, natural resilience, the immune system. When these vital energies are restored or bolstered, many health issues are resolved and the person frequently comes through the therapy into a higher level of functioning.

This is nothing less than the path that you are embarking on in this journey to transform your difficult child. As the child's energy is shifted from failure to success externally, via your efforts, his inner world takes on a new and healthier focus. Behavioral issues that once seemed disconnected from one another and from the influences of the environment disappear as the child's inner wealth increases.

Difficult children simply are stuck in patterns from which they cannot extricate themselves without skillful help from the parent/therapist. If seeing yourself as a therapist seems scary, consider that parent as therapist is not entirely a new concept. Therapist simply means agent of change. Change occurs simply and smoothly with a new set of tools that fit the task and a new approach that makes the process doable and understandable.

The skillful guidance of a professional counselor or therapist can be great, but ultimately no one is as well suited for the job of being the change agent as the primary caregivers, who spend infinitely more time with the child than anyone whose office might be visited now and then for help. Your child will always seek the domain of your relatedness anyway. You might as well take full benefit of its healing advantages.

Caregivers are optimally influential because they exist in context with the child, and their roles in this context have purpose and meaning. The child relies on caregivers for his or her basic needs.

Parents and teachers and other important adults are the central figures in the child's life. They have the most power to make crucial changes toward inner strengthening occur in the quickest and most decisive manner. With your strategic help, your child's intensity will move to a higher level of functioning and acquire new and welcome patterns of success.