

NO-DRAMA DISCIPLINE

THE WHOLE-BRAIN WAY TO
CALM THE CHAOS AND NURTURE YOUR
CHILD'S DEVELOPING MIND



FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHORS OF
THE WHOLE-BRAIN CHILD

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attention.

ALLIE: [Defensively, sitting up and turning toward her father]
Dad, I'm not even doing anything mean. We're just listening to music.

ROGER: I didn't say you're doing anything wrong. I'm asking whether you've noticed how Katie is feeling right now.

ALLIE: Yeah, but that's not my fault!

ROGER: Sweetheart, I totally agree that it's not your fault. Listen to my question: do you see that Katie isn't happy? I'm asking whether you've noticed.

ALLIE: I guess.

In that one admission, we see evidence that Allie's upstairs brain had become engaged in the conversation, if only a little. She was actually beginning to listen and think about what her father was saying. At this point Roger could target which part of the upstairs brain he wanted to appeal to and exercise. Not by telling Allie what she should think or feel, but by asking her to consider the situation for herself, and to pay attention to what someone else was experiencing.

ROGER: Why do you think she might be upset?

ALLIE: I guess because she wants Gina all to herself. But that girl came into my room! I didn't even ask her to.

ROGER: I know. And you may be right that Katie wants Gina all to herself. But do you think that's it, exactly? If she were standing here and told us how she felt, what would she say?

ALLIE: That it's her playdate, not mine.

ROGER: That's probably pretty close. Would she have a point?

ALLIE: I just don't see why we can't all listen to music together.
Seriously, Dad.

ROGER: I get it. I might even agree with you. But what would
Katie say to that?

ALLIE: That when we're all together Gina just wants to play with
me?

And with that question the empathy broke through. It was only an emerging awareness; we can't expect a huge Lifetime movie moment where a nine-year-old girl is moved to tears out of her compassion for her little sister's emotional pain. But it was a start. Allie was, at the very least, consciously beginning to consider the feelings of her sister (which, if you have young children, you know is no small parental victory). From there, Roger could direct the conversation so that Allie would think more explicitly about Katie's feelings. Then he could ask for Allie's help in coming up with a plan for handling the situation—"Maybe we listen to one more song, then I get ready for my slumber party?"—and in so doing he would further engage her upstairs brain by having her plan and problem-solve.

Initiating a redirection conversation like this won't always be successful. There will be times when a child will be unwilling (or even unable) to see a different perspective, to listen and consider the feelings of others. Roger might end up simply telling Allie she needs to find something else to do, just as Liz had to make the call when her daughter wouldn't give in about who was going to drive her to school. Or maybe he could play a game with all three girls, making sure everyone feels included.

INSTEAD OF COMMANDING AND DEMANDING...

You need to give the girls
time by themselves.



ENGAGE THE UPSTAIRS BRAIN



But notice that when he needed to redirect, Roger didn't immediately impose his own sense of justice on the situation. By facilitating empathy and problem solving, he gave his daughter a chance to exercise her upstairs brain. The more we give kids the opportunity to consider not only their own desires, but also the desires of others, and practice making good choices that positively impact the people around them, the better they'll be at doing so. Does a conversation like this one between Roger and Allie take longer than simply separating the girls? Of course. Is it harder to do? Yes, probably. But is collaborative and respectful redirection worth the effort and extra time? No question about it. And as it

becomes your default, it actually makes things easier on you and your entire family, since there will be fewer battles, and you'll be building your child's brain in such a way that less and less often will you even have to address misbehavior.

1-2-3 Discipline

In this chapter we want to take a closer look at the concept of redirection, which is actually what most people mean when they think of discipline. Redirection is how we respond when our kids do something we don't like, such as throwing something in anger, or when they're not doing something we want them to do, like brush their teeth and get ready for bed. After we've connected, how do we address uncooperative or reactive kids, redirecting them toward using their upstairs brain so they can make more appropriate decisions that become second nature over time?

As we've said, No-Drama Discipline is about connecting and being emotionally responsive to our children, while aiming for the short-term goal of gaining cooperation now, as well as the long-term goal of building our child's brain. A simple way to think about redirection is to take a 1-2-3 approach that focuses on one definition, two principles, and three desired outcomes. You don't need to memorize every detail of the approach (especially since we've given you a handy Refrigerator Sheet at the back of the book). Just use it as an organizing framework to help you focus on what's important when it comes time to redirect your kids.

One Definition

The place to begin when thinking about redirecting our kids toward better behavior is with the definition of discipline. When our

children make unwise decisions or can't manage their emotions, we need to remember that *discipline is about teaching*. If we forget this simple truth, we'll go off course. If discipline becomes about punishment, for example, we can miss the opportunity to teach. By focusing on the consequences of misbehavior, we limit the opportunity for children to experience the physiological and emotional workings of their inner compass.

One mom told us the story of finding a small box of crayons when she and her six-year-old were cleaning her daughter's room. They had been shopping for school supplies a few days before, and her daughter had fallen in love with these particular crayons. The mother had not bought the crayons, but her daughter had slipped them into her pocket anyway.

The mother said that when she found the crayons she decided to ask her daughter about them directly. When the little girl saw the crayons in her mom's cupped hand and the mother's look of confusion, her eyes got wide and full of fear and guilt. In a moment like this, the parental response is going to largely determine what a child takes away from the experience. As we explained in [Chapter 1](#), if the parent's focus is on consequences or punishment, and she immediately yells, spansks, sends the child to her room, or takes away an upcoming opportunity she's excited about, then the child's focus will immediately shift. Instead of having her attention on that "uh-oh" feeling bubbling up inside of her, or instead of thinking about the decision she made when she took the crayons from the store, all of her attention will focus on how mean or scary her parent is for punishing her in this way. She may even feel like a victim, who is somehow retroactively justified in swiping the crayons.

Instead, this mom offered a disciplinary approach focused on teaching rather than immediate consequences. She gave her daughter time to sit with and be aware of that uncomfortable,

valuable, natural guilt she was feeling as a result of having taken something that wasn't hers. Yes, guilt can even be healthy. It is evidence of a healthy conscience! And it can shape future behavior.

When the mother talked to her daughter, she knelt down (getting below eye level, as we discussed a few pages ago), and an endearing conversation ensued during which the six-year-old at first denied taking the crayons, then said she didn't remember, and then, with the mom patiently waiting, eventually explained that her mother had nothing to worry about, because "I waited till the saleslady with the big hair wasn't looking" to put the crayons in the pocket of her shorts. At this point the mother asked lots of questions that encouraged her daughter to think through concepts she hadn't yet considered: "Do you know what taking something that doesn't belong to you is called?" "Is stealing against the law?" "Did you know that the woman with the big hair in the store spent her money to buy those crayons so she could put them in her store?"

In response, the daughter dropped her head further; her bottom lip started to come forward, and big tears began to fall. She obviously felt bad about what she had done. As she quietly cried, the mom pulled her close, not distracting her or stopping the process of what was already happening naturally, but joining with her as she said, "You're feeling bad about it." The daughter nodded, and the tears continued. The mom could comfort and be with her daughter in this beautiful moment where the discipline process continued naturally without the mom even doing or saying anything. The mother held her and allowed her to cry and to feel, and after a couple of minutes she helped wipe away the tears and encouraged her daughter to take a deep breath. Then they continued their conversation briefly, talking about honesty, about respecting others' property, and about doing the right thing, even when it's hard.

By initiating this collaborative, reflective dialogue and allowing discipline to naturally arise simply by orienting her daughter's attention to the internal guilt she was already feeling, rather than just laying out instant consequences, the mother allowed her daughter to give her upstairs brain some exercise by considering her actions and how they affected others, and by learning some basic lessons about ethics and morality. Then they made plans for how best to return the crayons to "the saleslady with the big hair."

INSTEAD OF IMMEDIATELY GIVING CONSEQUENCES...



INITIATE A CONVERSATION

Can you tell me about these?



No-Drama Discipline is all about teaching, and that's what this mother focused on. She allowed her daughter to thoughtfully experience the feelings and thoughts associated with her decision to take the crayons. By allowing the child's own internal experience to remain at the forefront of her mind—rather than shifting the emotions into anger over a punishment handed out—she allowed her daughter's brain not only to become aware of that inner discomfort, but also to link it to the experience of making poor choices, in this case, stealing. Again, being punitive or doling out consequences, especially when we're angry and reactive, can be counterproductive because it distracts our children from the

physiological and emotional messages of their own conscience, which is a powerful force in developing self-discipline.

Remember, neurons that wire together fire together. And we want our kids to experience the natural linkage between making a bad decision in one moment, then feeling guilty and ill at ease the next. Because the brain is driven to avoid experiences that produce negative sensations, the aversive feelings that naturally arise within a child when she does something that violates her inner conscience can be very fleeting in her conscious mind. But when we help her become aware of these sensations and emotions, they can become the important basis for ethics and self-control. *This self-regulation or executive function that develops can then engage even when her parent isn't there, or when no one is looking.* This is how she internalizes the lesson on a synaptic level. Our own nervous systems can become our very best guides!

Different disciplinary situations will obviously call for different parental responses. This mother responded based on what lesson her daughter needed in that particular moment. In other circumstances she might respond differently. The point is simply that once we've connected with our kids in a disciplinary moment and it's time to redirect, we've got to keep in mind the importance of awareness and helping the brain learn. Reflection with a child helps him become aware of what's happening internally, and that optimizes learning. When we keep in mind the definition of discipline, we realize that sharing awareness helps learning occur. Discipline is all about teaching to optimize learning.

Two Principles

We also want to follow two main principles when redirecting our children, allowing those two principles to guide whatever we do.

These principles, along with the specific strategies that follow from them, encourage cooperation from kids and make life easier for adults and kids alike.

Principle #1: Wait Until Your Child Is Ready

Remember what we said in [Chapter 3](#): connection moves a child from reactivity to receptivity. So once you've connected and allowed your child to come to a place where he's ready to listen and use his upstairs brain, then it's time to redirect. Not before. One of the most self-defeating parenting recommendations we hear from time to time goes something like this: "When a child misbehaves, it's important that you address the behavior *right away*. Otherwise, they won't understand why they are being disciplined."

We actually don't think this is bad advice if you are running a behavioral conditioning lab with animals. For mice, or even dogs, it's good advice. For human beings, not so much. The fact is that there are times when it does make sense to address misbehavior right away. However, it's frequently the case that the absolute *worst* time to address a misbehavior is immediately after it's occurred.

The reason is simple. Misbehavior often happens because a child isn't able to regulate his big feelings. And when his emotions are dysregulated, his upstairs brain has gone off-line. It's temporarily out of order, meaning he's not able to accomplish the tasks his upstairs brain is responsible for: making good decisions, thinking about others, considering consequences, balancing his emotions and body, and being a receptive learner. So yes, we do recommend that you address a behavioral issue fairly soon when possible, but only when your child is in a calm and receptive state of mind—even if

you need to wait. Even children as young as three can remember what happened in recent history, including the day before. You can begin that conversation by saying, “I’d like to talk about what happened yesterday at bedtime. That didn’t go so well, did it?” Waiting for the right time is essential when it comes to teaching effectively.

So let’s go back to the suggestion we made in [Chapter 4](#). Once you’ve connected, and you’re wondering whether it’s time to move into the redirection phase, ask yourself one simple question: “Is my child ready? Ready to hear, ready to learn, ready to understand?” If the answer is no, then there’s no reason to try to redirect in that moment. Most likely, more connection is called for. Or, especially for older kids, you may just need to give them some time and space before they’ll be ready to hear you.

When we talk to educators, we often explain that there’s an optimal window, or sweet spot, for teaching. If students’ nervous systems are what we call *underaroused*—because they are sleepy, bored, or checked out for some other reason—then they are in an unreceptive state, meaning the students won’t be able to learn effectively. And the opposite is just as bad. If students’ nervous systems are *overaroused*—meaning they feel anxious or stressed-out, or their bodies are hyperactive with lots of motor activity and movement—that also produces an unreceptive state when it’s difficult for them to learn. Instead, we need to create an environment that helps them move into a state of mind that’s calm, alert, and receptive. That’s the sweet spot where learning really takes place. That’s the moment they’re ready to learn.

It’s the same with our kids. When their nervous systems are under- or overaroused, they won’t be nearly as receptive to what we want to teach them. So when we discipline, we want to wait until they are calm, alert, and receptive. Ask yourself: “Is my child ready?” Even after you’ve connected and soothed your child’s

negative state, it still might be best to wait for a time later in the day or even the next day to find a better moment for the explicit teaching and redirection. You can even say, “I’d like to wait until we’re really able to talk and listen to each other. We’ll come back and talk about it in a while.”

As a side note, just as it’s important to ask, “Is my child ready?” it’s also important to ask yourself, “Am I ready?” If you are in a reactive state of mind, it’s best to wait to have the conversation. You can’t be an effective teacher if you’re not in a calm and collected state. If you’re too upset to remain in control, you’re likely to approach the whole interaction in a way that’s counterproductive to your goals of teaching and building connection. In that case, it’s often better to say something like, “I’m too angry to have a helpful conversation right now, so I’m going to take some time to calm down, and then we’ll talk in a bit.” Then, once you are *both* ready, discipline will be more effective and feel better to both of you.

Principle #2: Be Consistent, but Not Rigid

There’s no question about it: consistency is crucial when it comes to raising and disciplining our children. Many parents we see in our offices realize that they need to work on being more consistent with their kids—whether it’s with bedtimes, limiting junk food or media, or just in general. But there are other parents who place such a high priority on consistency that it becomes a rigidity that’s not good for their kids, themselves, or the parent-child relationship.

Let’s get clear on the difference between the two terms. *Consistency* means working from a reliable and coherent philosophy so that our kids know what we expect of them and what they

should expect from us. *Rigidity*, on the other hand, means maintaining an unswerving devotion to rules we've set up, sometimes without having even thought them through, or without changing them as our kids develop. As parents, we want to be consistent, but not rigid.

Kids obviously need consistency. They need to know what our expectations are, and how we will respond if they break (or even bend) agreed-upon rules. Your reliability teaches them about what to expect in their world. More than that, it helps them feel safe; they know they can count on you to be constant and steady, even when their internal or external world is chaotic. This kind of predictable, sensitive, attuned care is actually what builds secure attachment. It lets us provide our kids with what's called "safe containment," since they have a secure base and clear boundaries to help guide them when their emotions are exploding. Limits you set are like the guardrails on the Golden Gate Bridge. For a child, living without clear boundaries is as anxiety-provoking as driving over that bridge without guardrails to stop you from plummeting into San Francisco Bay.

But rigidity is not about safety or reliability; it's about stubbornness. It keeps parents from compromising when necessary, or looking at context and the intention behind a behavior, or recognizing the moments when it's reasonable to make an exception.

One of the main reasons parents become rigid with their children is because they are practicing a form of *fear-based parenting*. They worry that if they ever give in and allow a soft drink at one meal, they'll create a slippery slope and their kids will be drinking Mountain Dew for breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the rest of their lives. So they stick to their guns and deny the soft drink.

Or their six-year-old has a nightmare and wants to climb into bed with them because he's scared, but they worry that they'll be

setting a dangerous precedent. They say, “We don’t want him to develop bad sleep habits. If we don’t nip it in the bud right now, he’ll be a bad sleeper his whole childhood.” So they stick to their guns and dutifully send him back to his bed.

We understand the fear. We’ve felt it ourselves in regard to our own kids. And we agree that parents should definitely remain aware of whatever patterns they are setting up for their children. That’s why consistency is so important.

But when fear-based parenting leads us to believe that we can *never* make an exception about a treat—or that we can’t comfort or nurture our frightened child in the middle of the night without damning him to a life of sleeplessness—then we’ve moved into rigidity. That’s parenting based on fear, not on what our child needs in that particular moment. That’s parenting with a goal of reducing *our own anxiety and fears*, rather than what will best teach our child’s emerging mind and mold the developing brain.

So how do we maintain consistency without crossing over to fear-based rigidity? Well, let’s start by acknowledging that there are some non-negotiables. For instance, under no circumstances can you let your toddler run through a busy parking lot, or your school-age child swim without supervision, or your teenager get into a car with a driver who’s been drinking. Physical safety is non-negotiable.

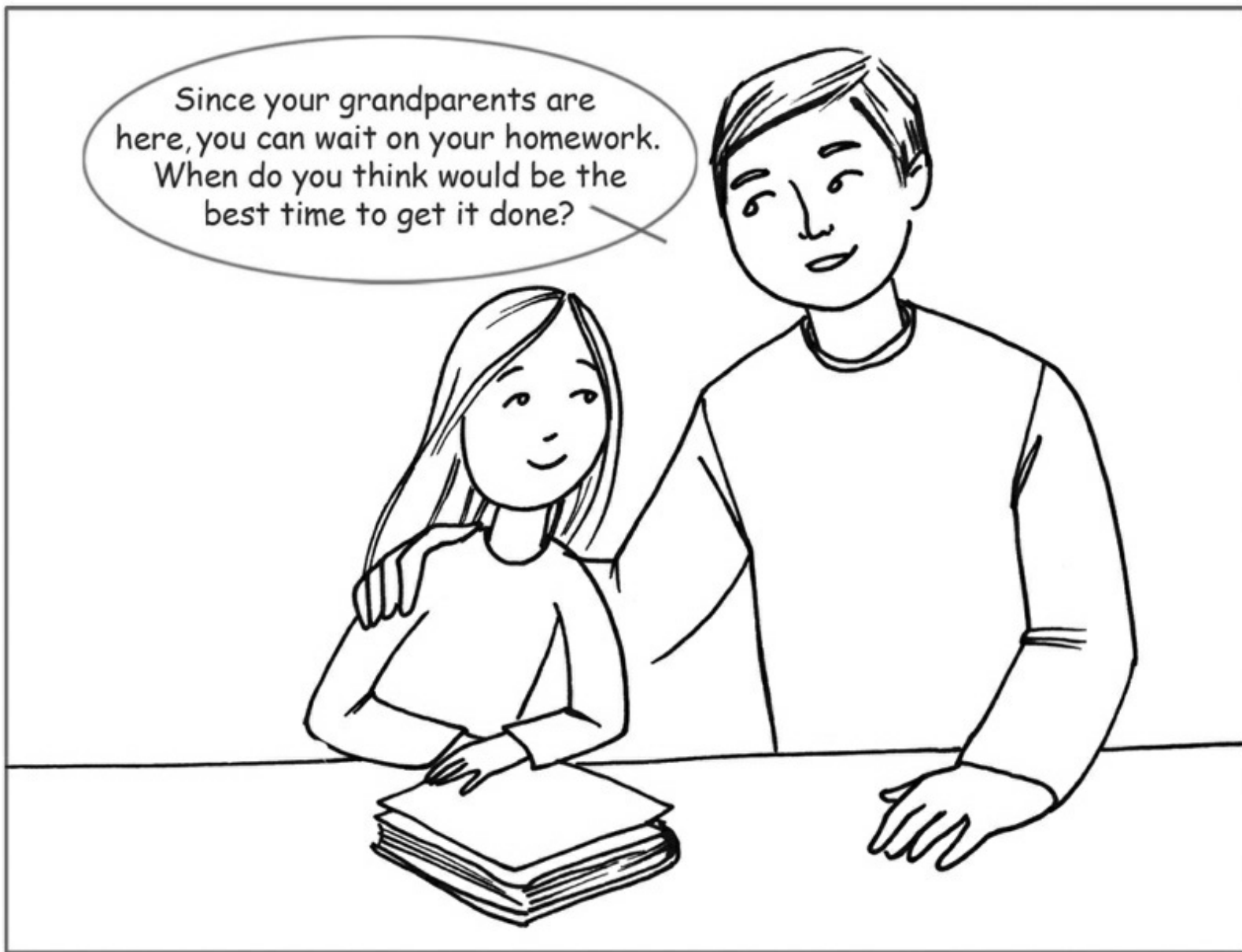
However, that doesn’t mean you can’t ever make exceptions, or even turn a blind eye from time to time when your child misbehaves. For instance, if you have a rule about no technology at the dinner table, but your four-year-old has just received a new electronic puzzle game that he’ll play with quietly while you have dinner with another couple, that might be a good time to make an exception to your rule. Or if your daughter has promised that she’ll finish her homework before dinner but her grandparents show up to take her on an outing, you might negotiate a new deal with her.

RIGID

Sorry,
I know your grandparents
are here, but our rule is homework
before dinner.



INSTEAD OF RIGIDLY COMMANDING AND DEMANDING...



The goal, in other words, is to maintain a *consistent but flexible* approach with your kids, so that they know what to expect from you, but they also know that at times you will thoughtfully consider all the factors involved. It goes back to what we talked about in the previous chapter: response flexibility. We want to intentionally respond to a situation in a way that considers what works best for our child and for our family, even if that means making an exception to our normal rules and expectations.

The question when it comes to consistent versus rigid discipline is what we're hoping to accomplish. Again, what do we want to teach? Under normal circumstances we want to consistently

maintain our rules and expectations. But we want to avoid being rigid, ignoring context and thus missing out on the chance to teach the lessons we want to teach. Sometimes when we discipline, we need to look for other ways to accomplish our goals, so we can more effectively teach what we want our kids to learn.

At times, for example, you might try a “do-over.” Instead of immediately offering a punishment for speaking disrespectfully, you can say something like, “I bet if you tried again, you could come up with a more respectful way to say that.” Do-overs allow a child a second chance to handle a situation well. It gives them practice doing the right thing. You’re still consistently maintaining your expectations, but you’re doing so in a way that’s often much more beneficial than a rigidly imposed, unrelated consequence.

After all, skill development is a huge part of what discipline is all about. And that requires repeated guidance and coaching. If you were coaching your child’s soccer team and she was having trouble kicking the ball straight, you wouldn’t give her consequences for every time she shanked it. Instead, you’d give her more practice, so that she gets better and better at kicking it where she wants it to go. You’d want her to have a clear, familiar feeling of what it’s like to hit the ball square and watch it sail into the goal. In the same way, when our kids behave in ways that don’t meet the expectations we’ve set up, sometimes the best thing we can do is to have them practice behaving in ways that do meet our expectations.

Another way to encourage skill building is to have your child come up with a creative response. As much as we wish it did, saying “I’m sorry” doesn’t actually fix the broken fairy wand that was thrown in anger. An apology note and using allowance money to buy a new wand might teach more and help develop skills related to decision making and empathy.


The point is that in your efforts to build skills, you can still be

consistent while remaining flexible and open to other alternatives. As kids learn about right and wrong, they also need to learn that life is not just about external reward and punishment. Flexibility, problem solving, considering context, and fixing our mistakes are also important. Most important is for children to understand the lesson at hand with as much personal insight as they are developmentally capable of, and to empathize with anybody they've hurt, then figure out how to respond to the situation and prevent it in the future.

INSTEAD OF RIGIDLY COMMANDING AND DEMANDING...



GIVE HIM PRACTICE DOING THE RIGHT THING



Let's have a do-over.
I know you can say that again
in a more respectful way.

In other words, there's a lot about morality that we want to teach our kids in addition to knowing right from wrong. We don't want to be their traffic cop, following them around telling them when to stop and when to go, and giving them tickets when they break the law. Wouldn't it be much better to teach them how to drive responsibly, and give them the skills, tools, and practice to make good decisions on their own? To do this successfully, sometimes we need to be open to seeing the gray areas, not just the black and white. We need to make decisions based not on an arbitrary rule we've previously set down, but on what's best for our kids and our family right now, in this particular situation. Consistent, yes, but not rigid.

Three Mindsight Outcomes

So 1-2-3 discipline focuses on *one* definition (teaching) and *two* principles (wait until your child is ready, and be consistent but not rigid). Now let's look at the *three* outcomes we're looking to achieve when we redirect.

If you've read *The Whole-Brain Child*, you're already familiar with the term "mindsight," which Dan coined and discusses at length in his books *Mindsight* and *Brainstorm*. Explained most simply, mindsight is the ability to see our own mind, as well as the mind of another. It allows us to develop meaningful relationships while also maintaining a healthy and independent sense of self. When we ask our children to consider their own feelings (using personal *insight*) while also imagining how someone else might experience a particular situation (using *empathy*), we are helping them develop mindsight.

Mindsight also involves the process of integration, which we discussed earlier. You'll remember that integration occurs when separate things become linked—like the right and left sides of the brain, or two people in a relationship. When integration does not occur, chaos or rigidity results. So when a relationship experiences an inevitable rupture in how we honor each other's differences, or when we don't link compassionately to each other, that's a break in integration. One example of creating integration is when we *repair* such a rupture. If you find that chaos or rigidity is popping up in your connection with your kids, repair is in order. We can take steps to repair the situation and make things right when we've made a bad decision or hurt someone with our words or actions. Let's discuss each of these outcomes (insight, empathy, and integration/repair) individually.

INSIGHT +
EMPATHY =
MINDSIGHT

Outcome #1: Insight

One of the best outcomes of redirection as part of a No-Drama Discipline strategy is that it helps develop personal insight in our children. The reason is that instead of simply commanding and demanding that our kids meet our expectations, we ask them to notice and reflect on their own feelings and their responses to difficult situations. This can be difficult, as you know, since a child's upstairs brain is not only the last to develop, but it is often off-line in disciplinary moments. But with practice and insight-building conversations—like the ones we've been discussing and will explain at greater length in the next chapter—children can become more aware and understand themselves more fully. They can develop personal mindsight that allows them to better understand what they're feeling, and have more control over how

they respond in difficult situations.

For young children we might facilitate this process simply by naming the emotions we observe: “When she took away the doll, it looked like you felt really mad. Is that right?” For older kids, open-ended questions are better, even if we have to “lead the witness” toward self-understanding: “I was watching you just before you blew up at your brother, and it looked like you were getting more and more annoyed that he was badgering you. Is that what you were feeling?” The hope is that his response is something like, “Yeah! And it makes me so mad when he ...” Every time a child gets specific and discusses his own emotional experience, he gains more insight into himself and deepens his own self-understanding. That’s a reflective conversation that cultivates mindsight. And such a focus on his insight can help him move toward the second desired outcome of redirection.

Outcome #2: Empathy

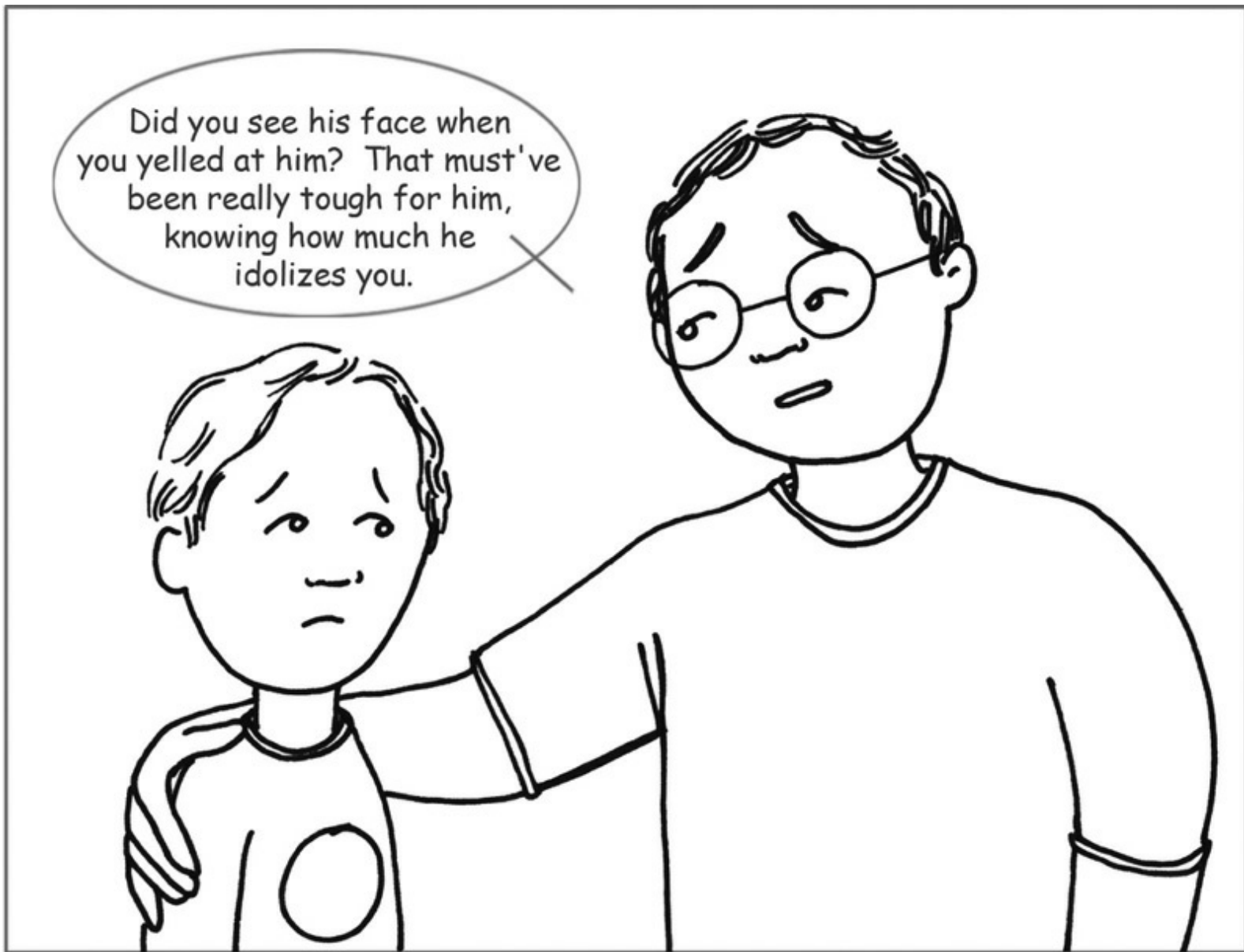
Along with developing insight into themselves, we want our kids to develop the other aspect of mindsight, empathy. The science of neuroplasticity teaches us that repeated practice of this reflection, as in our reflective dialogues with others, activates our mindsight circuitry. And with repeated focus of attention on our inner mental life, it also changes the wiring in the brain and builds and strengthens the empathic, other-centered part of the upstairs brain—what scientists call the social engagement circuitry of the prefrontal cortex. This is the part of the brain that makes mindsight maps not only of ourselves for insight and of others for empathy, but also of “we” for morality and mutual understanding. That’s what mindsight circuits create. So we want to give kids lots of practice reflecting on how their actions impact others, seeing things

from another's point of view, and developing awareness of others' feelings.



Simply asking questions and helping our children make observations like these will be much more effective than preaching sermons, delivering lectures, or giving consequences. The human brain is capable of extending itself in a way that allows us to comprehend the experiences of the people around us and even sense our connections as part of a “we” that develops with them. That’s how we experience not only empathy, but the important sense of our interconnectedness, the integrated state that is the basis of moral imagination, thinking, and action.

So the more we give our kids practice at considering how someone else feels or experiences a situation, the more empathic and caring they will become. And as these circuits of insight and empathy develop, they naturally set the foundation for morality, our inner sense of being not only differentiated, but linked into a larger whole. That's integration.



Outcome #3: Integration and the Repair of Ruptures

After helping our kids to consider their own feelings and then reflect on how their actions impacted others, we want to ask them what they can do to create integration as they repair the situation

and make things right. Which part of the brain do we appeal to now? You guessed it: the upstairs brain, with its responsibility for empathy, morality, considering the consequences of our decisions, and controlling emotions.

We appeal to the upstairs brain by asking questions, in this case about repairing a situation. “What can you do to make it right? What positive step can you take to help fix this? What do you think needs to happen now?” Repair builds on insight and empathy to then move to the mindsight map of “we” as a connection is reestablished with the other person. Once we’ve led our children toward empathy and insight, we want to aim for the outcome of taking action to address not only the situation their behavior has impacted, but also the other person and, ultimately, the relationship itself.

Taking action after hurting someone or making a bad decision isn’t easy for any of us, including our kids. Especially when children are little, or if they have a particularly shy temperament, parents may need to support them and help them with their apology. Sometimes it’s fine for the parent to actually deliver the apology *for* the child. You two can agree on the message beforehand. After all, not much good comes from forcing a child to offer an inauthentic apology when he’s not yet ready, or forcing him to apologize when doing so is going to flood his nervous system with anxiety. It comes back to asking whether your child is ready. Sometimes we have to wait for a child to be in the right frame of mind.

It’s never easy to go back and try to make up for a mistake. But No-Drama Discipline allows us to help kids learn to do so. It aims at achieving these three outcomes: focusing on giving our children practice at better understanding themselves with insight, seeing things from the perspective of others with empathy, then taking steps to improve a particular situation where they’ve done

something wrong. When children deepen their ability to know themselves, consider the feelings of others, and take action toward repairing a situation, they build and strengthen connections within the frontal lobe, which allows them to better know themselves and get along with others as they move into adolescence and adulthood. Basically, you are teaching your child's brain how to make mindsight maps of "me," "you," and "we."

1-2-3 Discipline in Action

Life gives us opportunity after opportunity to build the brain. That's what we saw when Roger talked to his daughter about monopolizing her sister's playdate. He could've easily called out to his daughter something like, "Allie, why don't you give Katie and Gina some time to themselves?" In doing so, though, he would have missed an opportunity to teach Allie and help build her brain.

His response, instead, offered a 1-2-3 approach. By initiating a conversation with his daughter ("Do you see that Katie isn't happy?") rather than laying down the law, he focused on the one definition of discipline: teaching. He also worked from the two key principles. First, he made sure his daughter was *ready* by making her feel listened to without judgment ("I totally agree that it's not your fault"). And second, he *avoided being overly rigid* and even asked Allie for help in coming up with a good response to the situation. And he achieved the three outcomes, helping his daughter think about her own actions ("Why do you think she might be upset?"), her sister's feelings ("If she were standing here and told us how she felt, what would she say?"), and what response she could take to best respond as an integrative repair to the situation ("Let's come up with a plan").

The approach works with older children as well. Let's look at an

example of how one couple applied it with their middle schooler.

At every major gift-giving occasion over the past year, Nila had consistently written the phrase “cell phone” at the top of her wish list. She repeatedly told her parents, Steve and Bela, that “all” the other kids had phones. Her mom and dad held out longer than many of their friends, but when she turned twelve, they relented. After all, Nila was reasonably responsible, she was spending more time independently from her parents, and a phone would make things more convenient for everyone. They took all the measures they knew were important—disabling the phone’s Internet capabilities, downloading apps that would filter out dangerous content, talking with her about issues like privacy and security—then moved on to this next phase in their parenting lives.

During the first few months, Nila made her parents’ decision look good. She kept track of the phone and used it appropriately, and they learned that they hadn’t overestimated the convenience factor.

But one night Bela heard Nila coughing an hour after lights-out, so she opened the door to her room to check on her. The blue glow hovering over Nila’s bed instantly disappeared, but it was obviously too late. She was busted.

Bela flipped on the overhead light, and before she could say anything, Nila hurried to explain: “Mom, I was worried about the test and couldn’t sleep, so I was just trying to get my mind on something else.”

Bela knew better than to overreact, especially when her primary goal in that moment was to get her daughter back to sleep, so she first connected: “I can understand needing to get your mind on something else. I hate it when I can’t sleep.” Then she simply said, “But let’s talk about it tomorrow. Hand me the phone, and I want you to go right to sleep.”

When Bela told Steve, she learned that he had had a similar

interaction with Nila just the previous week when Bela was gone, and he'd forgotten to mention it. So now they had two cases of their daughter blatantly disregarding rules about cell phone usage and sleep.

Taking a 1-2-3 approach, Steve and Bela focused on the one definition of discipline. What lesson did they want to teach here? They wanted to emphasize the importance of honesty, responsibility, trust, and following the rules the family members have all agreed to. As they considered how to respond to Nila's infractions, they kept this definition front and center in their minds.

Then they focused on the two principles. Bela demonstrated the first one—making sure her daughter was ready—when she simply took Nila's phone and asked her to go to sleep. Late at night, when everyone is tired and a child is up later than she should be, is rarely the best time to teach a lesson. Lecturing Nila right then would have likely turned into all kinds of drama, leaving both mother and daughter frustrated and angry. Not exactly a recipe for going right to sleep, or teaching a lesson, either. The better strategy was to wait for the next day, when Bela and Steve could find the right moment to address the issue. Not during the morning rush to eat breakfast and make lunches, but after dinner when everyone could discuss the issue calmly and from a fresh perspective.

As for their specific response, this is where the second principle came in: be consistent, but not rigid. Consistency is of course crucial. Steve and Bela had taken a clear stance about the importance of Nila being honest and responsible with her phone, and at least in this instance, she hadn't lived up to their agreement. So they needed to address that lapse with a consistent response.

But in doing so, they didn't want to make a rigid, snap decision that overshot the mark. Their first reaction was to take the phone

away altogether. But once they talked, and calmer heads prevailed, they recognized that in this case, that response would be too drastic. Outside of this one problem, Nila had acted responsibly with her phone. So rather than taking it away, they decided to discuss the issue with Nila, asking for her help coming up with policies to address the situation. In fact, she was the one who came up with a fix that was easy for everyone: she would leave her phone outside her room when she goes to bed. Then she wouldn't be tempted to check it every time it lit up—and Mom and Dad could be assured that Nila was recharging while her phone was as well.

This response made sense given Nila's general good decision making. They all agreed that if more problems arose, or if she demonstrated more extreme misuse of the phone, Steve and Bela would hold on to the phone except for certain prescribed times of the day.

With this response, which respected Nila enough to work *with* her and collaborate while still enforcing boundaries, Steve and Bela presented a consistent, united front that adhered to their rules and expectations, without becoming rigid and disciplining in ways that wouldn't benefit their daughter, the situation, or their relationship with her.

As a result, they gave themselves a much better chance at achieving their three desired outcomes: insight, empathy, and integrated repair. They helped encourage insight in their daughter by the collaborative approach they took in asking questions and engaging in dialogue. The questions focused on helping Nila pause and think about her decision to power up her phone when she wasn't supposed to: "How do you feel inside when you're doing something you know you shouldn't? Or when we walk in and see you on your phone? What do you think we feel about it?" Other questions led to insight into better options in the future: "*The next*

time you're having trouble sleeping, what could you do instead of being on your phone?" With questions like these, Nila's parents helped increase her personal insight and build her upstairs brain, allowing her to develop an internal compass and become more insightful in the future. Plus, by approaching the issue in a way that respected her and her desires, they increased the chances that Nila will come and talk with them about even bigger issues later, as she enters her teen years.

The empathy outcome in this situation is different from certain other discipline moments. Often when we encourage empathy in our children when they've made a bad decision, we try to lead them to think about the feelings of someone else who was hurt because of their behavior. In this case, no one was really harmed except for Nila herself, who lost some sleep. But Steve and Bela tried to lead her to understand that their trust in her had been dented, at least a bit. They knew better than to overdramatize the issue, or stoop to using guilt trips or self-pity, and they explicitly communicated to her that they weren't going to resort to these tactics. But they talked with her about how much their relationship with her means, and explained that it doesn't feel good when broken trust harms that relationship in any way.

This part of the discussion about the relationship is a focus on integration, the connection of different parts. Integration is what makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts, and it's what creates love in a relationship. Focusing on insight and empathy and then on their relationship thus led naturally to the third desired integrative outcome, repair. Once a breach in a relationship has been created, no matter how small, we want to repair it as soon as possible. Nila's parents needed to give her that chance. In their discussion about what policies to put in place about late-night cell phone use, they asked questions that helped her think about the relational effects of not following through on commitments. Again,

they avoided manipulating her emotionally by making her feel guilty, and instead asked good-faith questions like “What’s something you could do to help us feel good about the trust we have in you?” They had to “lead the witness” a bit, helping Nila think about trust-building actions she could take—like using her phone to just call and check in with her parents from time to time, or leaving it outside her room at night without having to be asked. In doing so she thought about ways she could be intentional in rebuilding her parents’ trust in her.

Notice that this issue with Nila falls into the category of typical behaviors that parents have to deal with on a daily basis. At times, there are behavioral challenges where it can be helpful to involve professionals. More extreme behaviors that are difficult to handle and that last for longer periods of time can sometimes be a sign that something else is going on. If your child frequently experiences intense emotional reactivity that does not respond to repair efforts, it can be helpful to talk with a pediatric psychotherapist or child development specialist who can supportively explore the situation with you to see whether you and your child could benefit from some intervention. In our experience, children who display frequent and intense reactivity may be struggling with more innate challenges related to sensory integration, attention and/or impulsivity, or mood disorders. Additionally, a history of trauma, a really difficult experience from the past, or relational mismatches between parent and child can play a role in behavioral struggles, as they reveal an underlying challenge with self-regulation that may at times be a source of repeated ruptures in a relationship. We would encourage you to seek the help of someone who can help you walk through these questions and guide you and your child on the path toward optimal development.

In most discipline situations with your child, though, simply

taking a Whole-Brain approach will lead to more cooperation from your child and more peace and serenity in your household. 1-2-3 discipline isn't a formula or a set of rules to be strictly followed. You don't have to memorize it and inflexibly follow it. We're simply giving you guidelines to keep in mind when it comes time for redirection. By reminding yourself about the definition and purpose of discipline, the principles that should guide it, and your desired outcomes, you'll give yourself a much better chance of disciplining your kids, of teaching them, in a way that leads to more cooperation from them and better relationships among all members of the family.

Addressing Behavior: As Simple as R-E-D-I-R-E-C-T

Anna's eleven-year-old, Paolo, called her from school and asked whether he could go home with his friend Harrison that afternoon. The plan, Paolo explained, was to walk to Harrison's, where the boys would do homework, then play until dinner. When Anna asked whether Harrison's parents were aware of the plan, Paolo assured her they were, so Anna told him she'd pick him up before dinner.

However, when Anna texted Harrison's mother later that afternoon, telling her she'd be picking up Paolo in a few minutes, Harrison's mother revealed that she was at work. Anna then learned that Harrison's father hadn't been home, either, and that neither of them knew of the boys' plan for Paolo to come over.

Anna was mad. She knew there might have been some sort of miscommunication, but it really looked to her like Paolo had been dishonest. At best he had misunderstood the plan, in which case he should have let her know when he realized that Harrison's parents wouldn't be home and hadn't been contacted. At worst he had outright lied to her.

Once she and Paolo were in the car on the way home from Harrison's, she felt like launching into him, leveling consequences and angrily lecturing him about trust and responsibility.

But that's not what she did.

Instead, she took a Whole-Brain approach. Since her son was older and he wasn't in a reactive state of mind, the "connect" part

of her approach simply entailed hugging him and asking whether he'd had a good time. Then she showed him the respect of communicating with him directly. She told him about her text with Harrison's mother, then said simply, "I'm glad you and Harrison have so much fun together. But I have a question. I know you know how important trust is in our family, so I'm wondering what happened here." She spoke in a calm tone, one that didn't communicate harshness and instead expressed her lack of understanding and her curiosity about the situation.

This curiosity-based approach, where she began by giving her son the benefit of the doubt, helped Anna decrease the drama from the discipline situation. Even though she was angry, she avoided immediately jumping to the conclusion that the boys had purposely deceived their parents. As a result, Paolo could hear his mother's question without feeling directly accused. Plus, her curiosity put the responsibility of accounting for himself squarely on Paolo's own shoulders, so he had to think about his decision making, which gave his upstairs brain a little bit of exercise. Anna's approach showed Paolo that she worked from the assumption that he would make good decisions most of the time, and that she was confused and surprised when it appeared that he hadn't.

In this case, by the way, he hadn't made good decisions. He explained to his mother that Harrison had thought his father would be home, but when the boys arrived, Harrison's father wasn't there. He acknowledged that he should have let her know right away, but he just hadn't. "I know, Mom. I should've told you nobody else was home. Sorry."

Then Anna could respond and move from connection to redirection, saying something like, "Yes, I'm glad you're clear that you should have told me. Tell me more about why that didn't happen." But she knew she wanted her redirection to be about more than just addressing this one behavior. She rightly recognized

this moment as another opportunity to build important personal and relational skills in her son, and to help him understand that his actions had made a little dent in her trust and deviated from their family agreement to always check in if plans change. That's why, before she turned to redirection, she checked herself.

Before You Redirect: Keep Calm and Connect

Have you seen that British poster from World War II that's become so popular? The one that says, "Keep Calm and Carry On"? That's not a bad mantra to have at the ready when your child goes ballistic—or before *you* do. Anna recognized the importance of keeping calm when she addressed her problem with Paolo's behavior. Blowing up and yelling at her son wouldn't have done anyone any good. In fact, it would have alienated Paolo and become a distraction from what was important here: using this disciplinary moment to address his behavior, and to teach.

We'll discuss many redirection strategies below, looking at different ways to redirect children when they've made bad decisions or completely lost control of themselves. But before you decide on which redirection strategies to use as you redirect your kids toward using their upstairs brains, you should first do one thing: check *yourself*. Remember, just as it's important to ask, "Is my child ready?" it's also essential that you ask, "Am I ready?"

Imagine that you walk into your recently cleaned kitchen and find your four-year-old perched on the counter, an empty egg carton and a dozen broken shells by her side, stirring a sand bucket full of eggs. With her sand shovel! Or your twelve-year-old informs you, at 6:00 p.m. on Sunday, that his 3-D model of a cell is due the following morning. This despite the fact that he assured you that all his homework was done, then spent the afternoon playing

basketball and video games with a friend.

In the middle of frustrating moments like these, the best thing you can do is to pause. Otherwise your reactive state of mind might lead you to begin yelling, or at least lecturing about the fact that a four-year-old (or twelve-year-old) ought to know better.

Instead, pause. Just pause. Allow yourself to take a breath. Avoid reacting, issuing consequences, or even lecturing in the heat of the moment.

We know it's not easy, but remember: when your kids have messed up in some way, you want to redirect them back toward their upstairs brain. So it's important to be in yours, too. When your three-year-old is throwing a tantrum, remember that she's only a small child with a limited capacity to control her own emotions and body. Your job is to be the adult in the relationship and carry on as the parent, as a safe, calm haven in the emotional storm. *How you respond to your child's behavior will greatly impact how the whole scene unfolds.* So before you redirect, check yourself and do your best to keep calm. That's a pause that comes from the upstairs brain but also reinforces the strength of your upstairs brain. Plus, when you show abilities like this to your children, they're more likely to learn such skills themselves.

Staying clear and calm during a pause is your first step.

Then remember to connect. It really is possible to be calm, loving, and nurturing while disciplining your child. And it's so *effective*. Don't underestimate how powerful a kind tone of voice can be as you initiate a conversation about the behavior you're wanting to change. Remember that, ultimately, you're trying to remain firm and consistent in your discipline while still interacting with your child in a way that communicates warmth, love, respect, and compassion. These two aspects of parenting can and should coexist. That was the balance Anna tried to strike as she spoke with Paolo.

As you've heard us affirm throughout the book, kids need boundaries, even when they're upset. But we can hold the line while providing lots of empathy and validation of the desires and feelings behind our child's behavior. You might say, "I know you really want another ice pop, but I'm not going to change my mind. It's OK to cry and be sad and disappointed, though. And I'll be right here to comfort you while you're sad."



And remember not to dismiss a child's feelings. Instead, acknowledge the internal, subjective experience. When a child reacts strongly to a situation, especially when the reaction seems unwarranted and even ridiculous, the temptation for the parent is

to say something like “You’re just tired” or “It’s not that big of a deal” or “Why are you so upset about this?” But statements like these minimize the child’s experience—her thoughts, feelings, and desires. It’s much more emotionally responsive *and effective* to listen, empathize, and really understand your child’s experience before you respond. Your child’s desire might seem absurd to you, but don’t forget that it’s very real to him, and you don’t want to disregard something that’s important to him.

So when it’s time to discipline, keep calm and connect. Then you can turn to your redirection strategies.

Strategies to Help You R-E-D-I-R-E-C-T

For the remainder of this chapter we’ll focus on what you may have been waiting for: specific, No-Drama redirection strategies you can take once you’ve connected with your children and want to redirect them back to their upstairs brain. To help organize the strategies, we’ve listed them as an acronym:

Reduce words

Embrace emotions

Describe, don’t preach

Involve your child in the discipline

Reframe a no into a conditional yes

Emphasize the positive

Creatively approach the situation

Teach mindsight tools

Before we get into specifics, let us be clear: this isn’t a list you need to memorize. These are simply categorized recommendations that the parents we’ve worked with over the years have found to be the most helpful. (We’ve included the list, by the way, in the

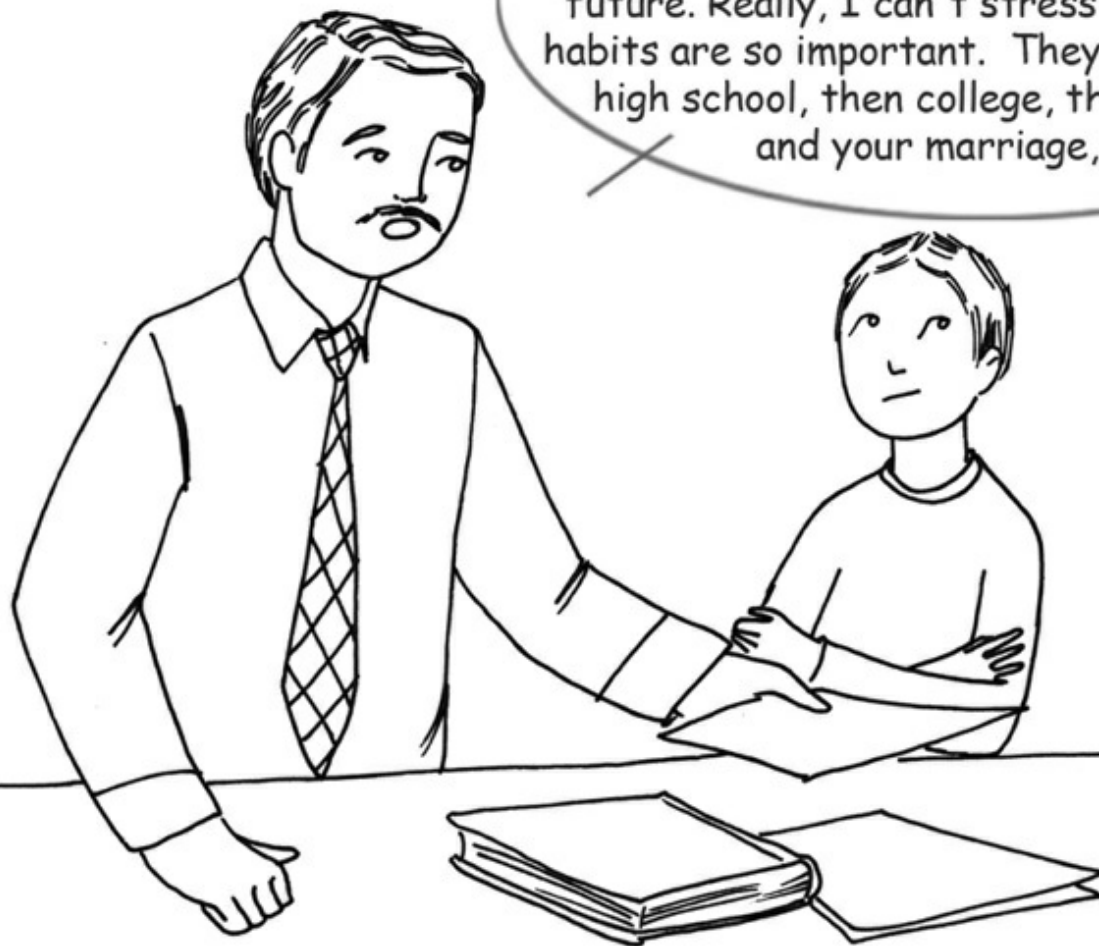
Refrigerator Sheet at the back of the book.) As always, you should keep all of these various strategies as different approaches in your parental tool kit, picking and choosing the ones that make sense in various circumstances according to the temperament, age, and stage of your child, as well as your own parenting philosophy.

Redirection Strategy #1: Reduce Words

In disciplinary interactions, parents often feel the need to point out what their kids did wrong and highlight what needs to change next time. The kids, on the other hand, usually already know what they've done wrong, especially as they get older. The last thing they want (or, usually, need) is a long lecture about their mistakes.

WHAT A PARENT SAYS:

It's so important that you be responsible with your schoolwork, because the effort you put in now will create habits for the future. Really, I can't stress it enough. Good habits are so important. They'll carry over into high school, then college, then your career and your marriage, then...



WHAT THE CHILD HEARS:



We strongly suggest that when you redirect, you resist the urge to overtalk. *Of course* it's important to address the issue and teach the lesson. But in doing so, keep it succinct. Regardless of the age of your children, long lectures aren't likely to make them want to listen to you more. Instead, you'll just be flooding them with more information and sensory input. As a result, they'll often simply tune you out.

With younger children, who may *not* have learned yet what's OK and what's not, it's even more important that we reduce our words. They often just don't have the capacity to take in a long lecture. So instead, we need to reduce our words.

If your toddler, for instance, hits you because she's angry that she doesn't have your attention while you're attending to your other child, there's simply no reason to go off on a long, drawn-out oration about why hitting is a bad response to negative emotions. Instead, try this four-step approach that addresses the issue and then moves on, all without using more than a few words:

ADDRESSING TODDLER MISBEHAVIOR IN FOUR STEPS

STEP 1: *Connect and address the feelings behind the behavior*



Step 2: Address the behavior



Step 3: Give alternatives



Step 4: Move on



By addressing the child's actions and then immediately moving on, we avoid giving too much attention to the negative behavior and instead quickly get back on the right track.

For younger and older kids both, avoid the temptation to talk too much when you discipline. If you do need to cover an issue

more fully, try to do so by asking questions and then listening. As we'll explain below, a collaborative discussion can lead to all kinds of important teaching and learning, and parents can accomplish their disciplinary goals without talking nearly as much as they typically do.

The basic idea here is akin to the concept of “saving your voice.” Politicians, businesspeople, community leaders, and anyone else who depends on effective communication to achieve their goals will tell you that often there are times when they strategically save their voice, holding back on how much they say. They don't mean their literal voice, as if they'll make their throats hoarse by talking so much. They mean they try to resist addressing the small points in a discussion or a voting meeting, so that their words will matter more when they want to address the really important issues.

It's the same with our kids. If they hear us incessantly telling them what to do and what not to do, and then once we've made our point we keep making it over and over again, they will sooner or later (and probably sooner) stop listening. If, on the other hand, we save our voice and address what we really care about, then stop talking, the words we use will carry much greater weight.

Want your kids to listen to you better? Be brief. Once you address the behavior and the feelings behind the behavior, move on.

Redirection Strategy #2: Embrace Emotions

One of the best ways to address misbehavior is to help kids distinguish between their feelings and their actions. This strategy is related to the concept of connection, but we're actually making a completely different point here.

When we say to embrace emotions, we mean that during

redirection, parents need to help their kids understand that their feelings are neither good nor bad, neither valid nor invalid. They simply *are*. There's nothing wrong with getting angry, being sad, or feeling so frustrated that you want to destroy something. But saying it's OK to *feel* like destroying something doesn't mean it's OK to actually do it. In other words, it's what we *do* as a result of our emotions that determines whether our behavior is OK or not OK.

So our message to our children should be, "You can feel whatever you feel, but you can't always do whatever you want to do." Another way to think about it is that *we want to say yes to our kids' desires, even when we need to say no to their behavior and redirect them toward appropriate action.*

So we might say, "I know you want to take the shopping cart home. That would be really fun to play with. But it needs to stay here at the store so other shoppers can use it when they come." Or we might say, "I totally get it that you feel like you hate your brother right now. I used to feel that way about my sister when I was a kid and was really mad at her. But yelling 'I'm going to kill you!' isn't how we talk to each other. It's perfectly fine to be mad, and you have every right to tell your brother about it. But let's talk about other ways to express it." Say yes to the feelings, even as you say no to the behavior.


When we don't acknowledge and validate our kids' feelings, or when we imply that their emotions should be turned off or are "no big deal" or "silly," we communicate the message, "I'm not interested in your feelings, and you should not share them with me. You just stuff those feelings right on down." Imagine how that impacts the relationship. Over time, our children will stop sharing their internal experiences with us! As a result, their overall emotional life will begin to constrict, leaving them less able to fully participate in meaningful relationships and interactions.

Even more problematic is that a child whose parents minimize or deny her feelings can begin to develop what can be called an “incoherent core self.” When she experiences intense sadness and frustration, but her mother responds with statements like “Relax” or “You’re fine,” the child will realize, if only at an unconscious level, that her internal response to a situation doesn’t match the external response from the person she trusts most. As parents, we want to offer what’s called a “contingent response,” which means that we attune our response to what our child is actually feeling, in a way that validates what’s happening in her mind. If a child experiences an event and the response from her caregiver is consistent with it—if it’s a match—then her internal experience will make sense to her, and she can understand herself, confidently name the internal experience, and communicate it to others. She’ll be developing and working from a “coherent core self.”

INSTEAD OF SQUELCHING EMOTIONS...



SAY YES TO THE FEELINGS AND NO TO THE BEHAVIOR



I know you feel like you hate your brother right now, but let's talk about other ways to express it.

But what happens if that match isn't there and her mother's response is inconsistent with the daughter's experience of the moment? One mismatch isn't going to have long-lasting effects. But if over and over again when she gets upset she is told something like "Stop crying" or "Why are you so upset? Everyone else is having fun," she's going to begin to doubt her ability to accurately observe and comprehend what's going on inside her. Her core self will be much more incoherent, leaving her confused, full of self-doubt, and disconnected from her emotions. As she grows into an adult, she may often feel that her very emotions are unjustified. She might doubt her subjective experience, and even have a hard

time knowing what she wants or feels at times. So it really is crucial that we embrace our children's emotions and offer a contingent response when they are upset or out of control.

One bonus to acknowledging our children's feelings during redirection is that doing so can help kids more easily learn whatever lesson we're wanting to teach. When we validate their emotions and acknowledge the way *they* are experiencing something—really seeing it through their eyes—that validation begins to calm and regulate their nervous system's reactivity. And when they are in a regulated place, they have the capacity to handle themselves well, listen to us, and make good decisions. On the other hand, when we deny our kids' feelings, minimize them, or try to distract our kids from them, we prime them to be easily dysregulated again, and to feel disconnected from us, which means they'll operate in a heightened state of agitation and be much more likely to fall apart, or shut down emotionally, when things don't go their way.

What's more, if we're saying no to their emotions, kids aren't going to feel heard and respected. We want them to know that we're here for them, that we'll always listen to how they feel, and that they can come to us to discuss anything they're worried about or dealing with. We don't want to communicate that we're here for them only when they're happy or feeling positive emotions.

So in a disciplinary interaction, we embrace our kids' emotions, and we teach them to do the same. *We want them to believe at a deep level that even as we teach them about right and wrong behavior, their feelings and experiences will always be validated and honored. When kids feel this from their parents even during redirection, they'll be much more apt to learn the lessons the parents are teaching, meaning that over time, the overall number of disciplinary moments will decrease.*

Redirection Strategy #3: Describe, Don't Preach

The natural tendency for many parents is to criticize and preach when our kids do something we don't like. In most disciplinary situations, though, those responses simply aren't necessary. Instead, we can simply describe what we're seeing, and our kids will get what we're saying just as clearly as they do when we yell and disparage and nitpick. And they'll receive that message with much less defensiveness and drama.

With a toddler we might say something like, "Uh-oh, you're throwing the cards. That makes it hard to play the game." To an older child we can say, "I still see dishes on the table," or "Those sound like some pretty mean words you're using with your brother." Simply by stating what we observe, we initiate a dialogue with our children that opens the door to cooperation and teaching much better than an immediate reprimand like "Stop talking to your brother that way."

The reason is that even young children know wrong from right in most situations. You've already taught them what's acceptable behavior and what's not. Often, then, all you need to do is call attention to the behavior you've observed. This is essentially what Anna did when she said to Paolo, "I know you know how important trust is in our family, so I'm wondering what happened here." *Kids don't need their parents to tell them not to make bad decisions. What they need is for their parents to redirect them, helping them recognize the bad decisions they're making and what leads up to those decisions, so they can correct themselves and change whatever needs to be changed.*

For all kids, and especially younger children and toddlers, you are of course teaching them good from bad, right from wrong. But again, a short, clear, direct message is going to be much more effective than a longer, overexplained one. And even with young

children, a simple statement of observation will typically get your point across—and invite a response from them, either verbally or behaviorally.

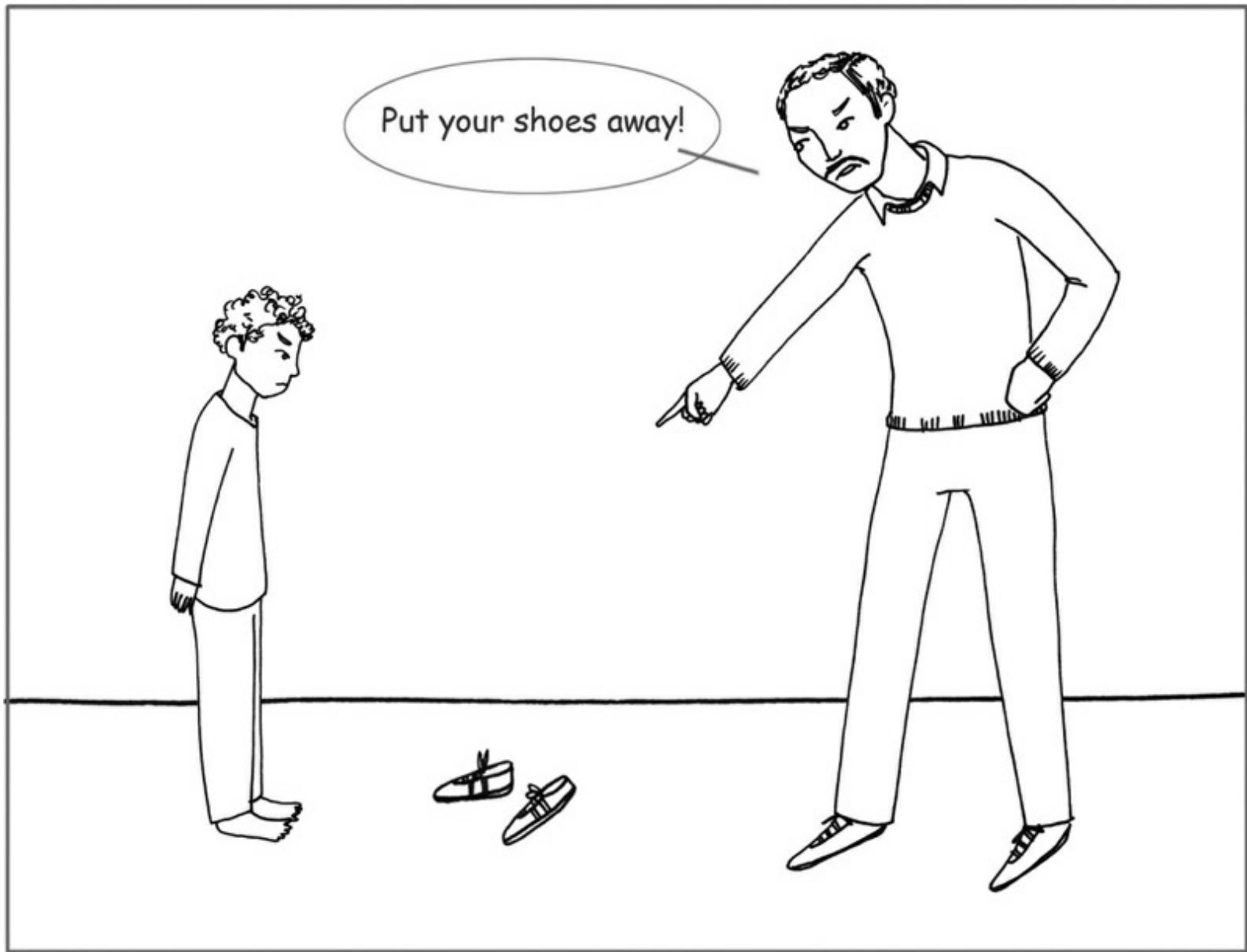
The idea here isn't that a description of what you see will be some sort of magical phrase that stops bad behavior in its tracks. We're simply saying that parents should, as we put it in [Chapter 5](#), “think about the how” and be intentional about *how* they say what needs to be said.

It's not that the phrase “Looks like Johnny wants a turn on the swing” is communicating something fundamentally different from the phrase “You need to share.” But the former offers several distinct advantages over the latter. First, it avoids putting a child on the defensive. She might still feel the need to defend herself, but not to the same degree as if we were to reprimand her or tell her what she's doing wrong.

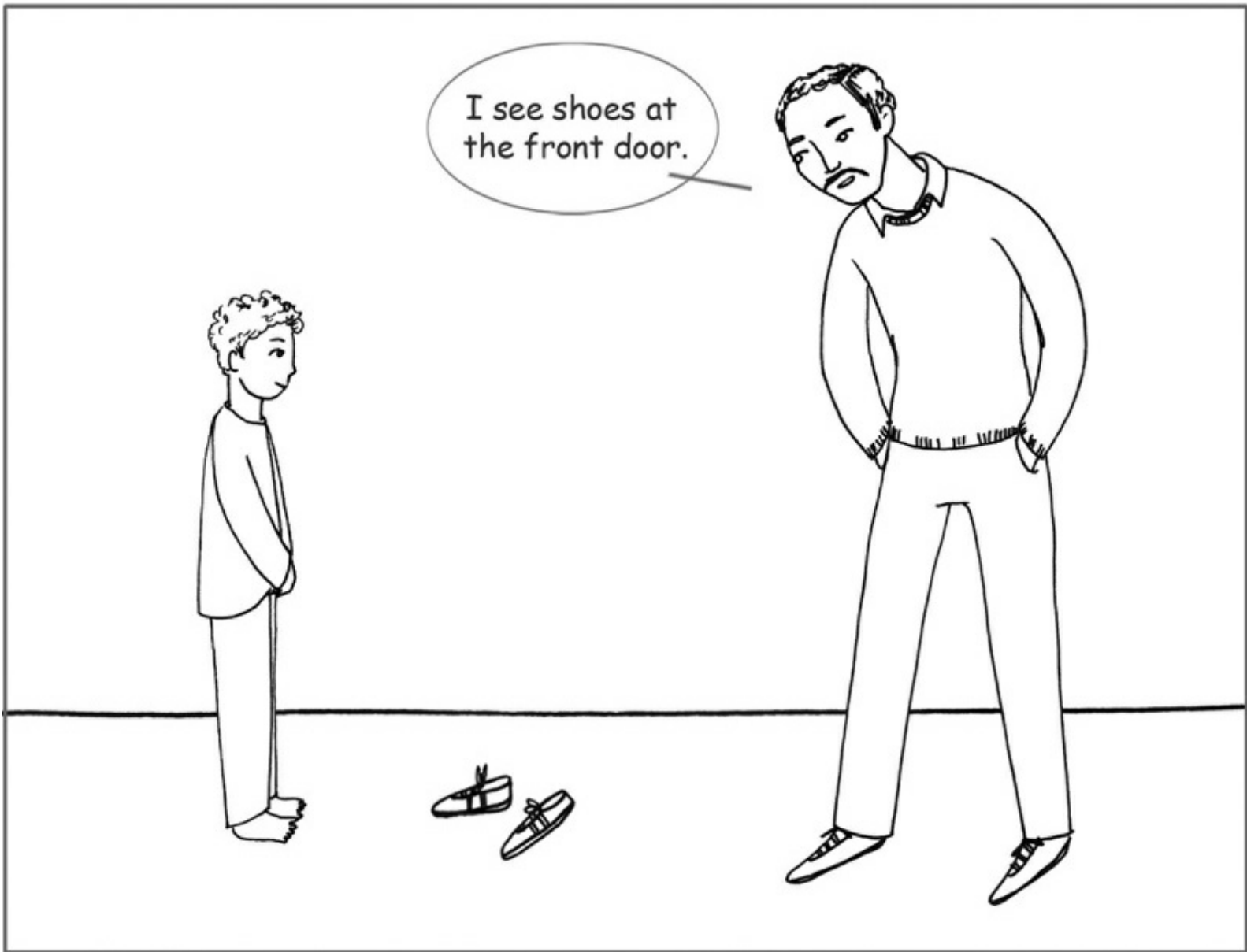
Second, describing what we see puts the onus for deciding how to respond to the observation on the child, thus exercising his upstairs brain. That's how we help him develop an internal compass, a skill that can last a lifetime. When we say, “Jake is feeling left out; you need to include him,” we are definitely getting our message across. But we're doing all the work for our child, not allowing him to increase his inner skills of problem solving and empathy. If instead we simply say, “Look at Jake sitting over there while you and Leo play,” we give our child the opportunity to consider the situation for himself, and determine what needs to happen.

Third, describing what we see initiates a conversation, thereby implying that when our child does something we don't like, our default response will be to visit with her about it, allow her to explain, and gain some insight. Then we can give her a chance to defend herself or apologize if necessary, and to come up with a solution to whatever problem her behavior might have caused.

INSTEAD OF COMMANDING AND DEMANDING...



DESCRIBE WHAT YOU SEE



INSTEAD OF CRITICIZING AND ATTACKING...

I can't believe you got a D on your test! You told me you studied!



DESCRIBE WHAT YOU ARE SEEING



“What’s going on?” “Can you help me understand?” “I can’t figure this out.” These can be powerful phrases when we’re teaching our kids. When we point out what we see, then ask our kids to help us understand, it opens up the opportunity for cooperation, dialogue, and growth.

Do you see how the two responses, even though their *content* isn’t all that different, would be apt to garner very different responses from the children, simply because of *how* the parents communicated their message? Once the parents describe what they’ve observed and ask for help in understanding, they can pause and allow the child’s brain to do its work. Then they can take an

active role in their response.

This redirection strategy leads directly into the next one, which is all about making discipline a collaborative, mutual process, rather than a top-down imposition of parental will.

Redirection Strategy #4: Involve Your Child in the Discipline

When it comes to communicating in a disciplinary moment, parents have traditionally done the talking (read: lecturing), and children have done the listening (read: ignoring). Parents have typically worked from an unexamined assumption that this one-directional, monologue-based approach is the best—and only viable—option to consider.

PARENT → CHILD

Many parents these days, however, are learning that discipline will be much more respectful—and, yes, effective—if they initiate a collaborative, reciprocal, bidirectional *dialogue*, rather than delivering a monologue.

PARENT ↔ CHILD

We're not saying that parents should forgo their roles as authority figures in the relationship. If you've read this far in the book, you know that we definitely don't advocate that. But we do know that *when children are involved in the process of discipline, they*

feel more respected, they buy into what the parents are promoting, and they are therefore more apt to cooperate and even help come up with solutions to the problems that created the need for discipline in the first place. As a result, parents and children work as a team to figure out how best to address disciplinary situations.

Remember our discussion of mindsight, and the importance of helping kids develop insight into their own actions and empathy for others? Once you've connected and your child is ready and receptive, you can simply initiate a dialogue that leads first toward insight ("I know you know the rule, so I'm wondering what was going on for you that led you to this") and then toward empathy and integrative repair ("What do you think that was like for her, and how could you make things right?").

For example, let's say your eight-year-old becomes out-of-control furious because his sister is going on *another* playdate, and he feels like he "never gets to do *anything!*" In his anger, he throws your favorite sunglasses across the room and breaks them.

Once you've calmed down and connected with your son, how do you want to talk with him about his actions? The traditional approach is to offer a monologue where you say something like, "It's OK to get mad—everyone does—but when you're angry you still need to control your body. We don't break other people's things. The next time you're that mad, you need to find an appropriate way to express your big feelings."

Is there anything wrong with this communication style? No, not at all. In fact, it's full of compassion and a healthy respect for your child and his emotions. But do you see how it's based on top-down, one-directional communication? You are imparting the important information, and your child is receiving it.

What if, instead, you involved him in a collaborative dialogue that asked him to consider how best to address the situation? Maybe you would begin with the D from R-E-D-I-R-E-C-T and

merely *describe* what you saw, then ask him to respond: “You got so mad a while ago. You grabbed my glasses and threw them. What was going on?”

Since you will have already connected, listened, and responded to his feelings about his sister’s playdate, he can now focus on your question. Most likely he’ll come back to his anger and say something like, “I was just so mad!”

Then you can simply describe, being intentional with your tone (since the how matters), what you saw: “Then you threw my glasses.” Here’s where you’re likely to get some sort of “Sorry, Mom.”

At this point you can move to the next phase of the conversation and focus explicitly on teaching: “We all get mad. There’s nothing wrong with getting angry. But what could you do the next time you’re that mad?” Maybe you could even smile and throw in some subtle humor he’d appreciate: “You know, besides destroying something?” And the conversation could go on from there, with you asking questions that help your young son think about issues like empathy, mutual respect, ethics, and handling big emotions.

Notice that the overall message remains the same, whether you offer a monologue or initiate a dialogue. But when you involve your child in the discipline, you give him the opportunity to think about his own actions, and whatever resulted from them, at a much deeper level.

You help him recruit more complex neural pathways that build mindsight capacities, and the result is deeper and longer-lasting learning.

Involving your kids in the discipline discussion is also a great way to dial back any patterns or behaviors that may have unintentionally been set up in your home. A one-directional, top-down discipline approach might lead you to storm into the living room and declare, “You’re spending way too much time on video

games these days! From now on, no more than fifteen minutes a day.” You can imagine the response you might receive.

INSTEAD OF DELIVERING A MONOLOGUE...



INVOLVE YOUR CHILD IN THE DISCIPLINE



What if, instead, you waited until dinnertime, and once everyone was at the table, you said, “I know you’ve been getting to play video games a lot lately, but that’s not really working very well. It puts off homework, and I also want to make sure you’re spending time on other activities as well. So we need to come up with a new plan. Any ideas?”

You will probably still experience resistance when you broach the possibility of curtailing screen time. But you will have initiated a discussion about the issue, and when your kids know that you’re talking about cutting back, they’ll definitely be invested in being a part of the conversation to determine what limits will be set. You

can remind them that you will be making the final decision, but let them see that you're inviting their input because you respect them, want to consider their feelings and desires, and believe they are helpful problem solvers. Then, even if they don't love the final call you make, they'll know they were at least considered.

The same would go for any number of other issues: "I know we've been doing homework after dinner, but that's not been working well, so we need a new plan. Any ideas?" Or "I've noticed that you're not too happy about having to practice piano before school in the mornings. Is there a different time when you'd feel better about practicing? What would work for you?" Often they'll come up with the same solution you would have imposed on the situation anyway. But they will have exercised their upstairs brain to do so and felt your respect along the way.

One of the best results from involving kids in the discipline process is that frequently they'll come up with great new ideas for solving a problem, ideas you hadn't even considered. Plus, you might be shocked to find out how much they are willing to bend to bring about a peaceful resolution to a standoff.

INSTEAD OF COMMANDING AND DEMANDING...

You're spending way too much time on video games these days! From now on, fifteen minutes a day. No more!



INVOLVE YOUR KIDS IN THE DISCIPLINE

You've been getting a lot of screen time lately, but that's not really working well for our family. Let's come up with a new plan.



Tina tells the story of a time when her four-year-old absolutely *had* to have a treat—specifically, a bag of fruit snacks—at nine-thirty in the morning. She told him, “Those fruit snacks are delicious, aren’t they? You can have them after you have a good lunch in a little while.”

He didn’t like Tina’s plan and began to cry and complain and argue. She responded by saying, “It’s really hard to wait, isn’t it? You want the fruit snacks, and I want you to have a healthy lunch first. Hmm. Do you have any ideas?”

She saw his little cognitive wheels turn for a few seconds, then his eyes got big with excitement. He called out, “I know! I can

have one *now* and save the rest for after lunch!”

He felt empowered, the power struggle was averted, and Tina was able to give him an opportunity to solve a problem. And all it cost her was allowing him to have *one* fruit snack. Not such a big deal.

Again, there are of course times that you can't give any wiggle room, and there may be times to allow your child to deal with a no or give him the opportunity to learn about waiting or handling disappointment. But usually when we involve the child in the discipline, it results in a win-win solution.

Even with very young children, we want to involve them as much as possible, asking them to reflect on their actions and consider how to avoid problems in the future: “Remember yesterday, when you got angry? You're not usually someone who hits and kicks. What happened?” With questions like these, you give your child the opportunity to practice reflecting on her behavior and developing self-insight. Granted, you may not get great answers from a young child, but you're laying the groundwork. The point is to let her think about her own actions.

Then you can ask her what she can do differently the next time she gets so mad. Discuss what she would like you to do to help her calm down. This type of conversation will deepen her understanding of the importance of regulating emotions, honoring relationships, planning ahead, expressing herself appropriately, and on and on. It will also communicate how important her input and ideas are to you. She'll understand more and more that she's an individual, separate from you, and that you are interested in her thoughts and feelings. Every time you involve your children in the process of discipline, you strengthen the parent-child bond, while also increasing the odds that they'll handle themselves better in the future.

Redirection Strategy #5: Reframe a No into a Conditional Yes

When you have to decline a request, it matters, once again, *how* you say no. An out-and-out no can be much harder to accept than a yes with conditions. No, especially if said in a harsh and dismissive tone, can automatically activate a reactive state in a child (or anyone). In the brain, reactivity can involve the impulse to fight, flee, freeze, or, in extreme cases, faint. In contrast, a supportive yes statement, even when not permitting a behavior, turns on the social engagement circuitry, making the brain receptive to what's happening, making learning more likely, and promoting connections with others.

This strategy will differ according to the age of your children. To a toddler who is asking for more time at her grandmother's when it's time to leave, you can say, "Of course you can have more time with Nana. We need to go now, but Nana, would it be OK if we came back to your house this weekend?" The child may still have trouble accepting no, but you're helping her see that even though she's not getting exactly what she wants right now, she'll be told yes again before too long. The key is that you've identified and empathized with a feeling (the desire to be with Nana) while creating structure and skill (acknowledging the need to leave now and delaying the gratification of the desire).

Or if your son can't get enough of the Thomas the Tank Engine hands-on display at the local toy store and is unwilling to set down Percy the Engine so you can exit the store, you can offer him a conditional yes. Try something like, "I know! Let's take Percy up to the saleswoman over there, and explain to her that you want her to hold him for you and keep him safe until we come back for story time on Tuesday." The saleswoman will likely play along, and the whole potential fiasco can be avoided. What's more, you'll be teaching your child to develop a prospective mind, to sense the

possibilities for the future and to imagine how to create future actions to meet present needs. These are executive functions that, when learned, can be skills that last a lifetime. You are offering guidance to literally grow the important prefrontal circuits of emotional and social intelligence.

INSTEAD OF AN OUTRIGHT NO...



REFRAME THE NO INTO A CONDITIONAL YES



Notice that this isn't at all about protecting kids from being frustrated or providing them with everything they want. On the contrary, it's about giving them practice at tolerating their disappointment when things inevitably don't go their way. They aren't attaining their desires in that moment, and you're assisting them as they manage their disappointment. You're helping them develop the resilience that will aid them every time they are told no throughout their lives. You're expanding their window of tolerance for not getting their way and giving them practice at delaying gratification. These are all prefrontal functions that develop in your child as you parent with the brain in mind. Instead

of discipline simply leading to a feeling of being shut down, now your child will know, from actual experiences with you, that the limits you set often lead toward learning skills and imagining future possibilities, not imprisonment and dismissal.

The strategy is effective for older children (and even adults) as well. None of us like to be simply told no when we want something, and depending on what else has been happening, a no may even push us over the edge. So instead of offering an outright refusal, we can say something like, “There’s a lot happening today and tomorrow, so yes, let’s invite your friend over, but let’s do it on Friday, when you’ll have more time with him.” That’s a lot easier to accept, and it gives a child practice in handling the disappointment, as well as in delaying gratification.

Say, for instance, a group of your nine-year-old’s friends are going to a concert to see the latest pop sensation, who, in your opinion, represents all the things you want your daughter *not* to emulate. Regardless of how you deliver the news, she’s not going to be happy to hear that she’s not going to the concert. But you can at least mitigate some of the drama by being proactive and getting ahead of the curve on the issue.

You might, for example, ask her about upcoming concerts she’d like to attend, and offer to take her and a friend to the movies in the meantime. If you want to go the extra mile, you could even get online and look for a different concert she’d be interested in attending in the near future. Pay close attention to your tone of voice. Particularly if you’re having to deny a child something she really wants, it’s important that you avoid coming across as patronizing or overly dogmatic in your opinion. Again, we’re not saying this strategy will make everything easy and keep your child from feeling angry, hurt, and misunderstood. But by coming up with some sort of conditional yes, rather than a simple “No, you’re not going,” you at least decrease the reactivity and show your child

that you're paying attention to her desires.

Granted, there are times we simply have to deliver the dreaded outright no. But it's more often the case that we can find ways to avoid having to turn our kids down without at least finding some measure of a yes that we can also deliver. After all, the things kids want are often the things we want for them, too—just at a different time. They may want to read more stories, or play with their friends, or eat ice cream, or play on the computer. These are all activities we want them to enjoy at some point as well, so usually we can easily find an alternative time to make it happen.

In fact, there's an important place for negotiation in parent-child interactions. This becomes more and more important as kids get older. When your ten-year-old wants to stay up a little later and you've said no, but then he points out that tomorrow is Saturday and he promises to sleep an hour later than usual, that's a good time to at least rethink your position. Obviously, there are some non-negotiables: "Sorry, but you can't put your baby sister in the dryer, even if you do line it with pillows." But compromise isn't a sign of weakness; it's evidence of respect for your child and his desires. In addition, it gives him an opportunity for some pretty complex thinking, equipping him with important skills about considering not only what he wants, but also what others want, and then making good arguments based on that information. And it's a *lot* more effective in the long run than just saying no without considering other alternatives.

Redirection Strategy #6: Emphasize the Positive

Parents often forget that discipline doesn't always have to be negative. Yes, it's usually the case that we're disciplining because something less than optimal has occurred; there's a lesson that

needs to be learned or a skill that needs to be developed. But one of the best ways to deal with misbehavior is to focus on the positive aspects of what your kids are doing.

For example, think about that bane of parental existence, whining. Who doesn't get tired of hearing our kids shift to that droning, complaining, singsong tone of voice that makes us grit our teeth and want to cover our ears? Parents often respond by saying something like, "Stop whining!" Or maybe they'll get creative and say, "Turn down the whine," or "What's that? I don't speak whine. You'll have to tell me in another language."

We're not saying these are the worst possible approaches. It's a problem, though, when we resort to negative responses, because it gives all of our attention to the behavior we don't want to see repeated.

Instead, what if we emphasized the positive? Instead of "No whining," we could say something like, "I like it when you talk in your normal voice. Can you say that again?" Or be even more direct in teaching about effective communication: "Ask me again in your powerful, big-boy voice."

The same idea goes for other disciplinary situations. Instead of focusing on what you *don't* want ("Stop messing around and get ready, you're going to be late for school!"), emphasize what you *do* want ("I need you to brush your teeth and find your backpack"). Rather than highlighting the negative behavior ("No bike ride until you try your green beans"), focus on the positive ("Have a few bites of the green beans, and we'll hop on the bikes").

INSTEAD OF FOCUSING ON THE PROBLEM...



EMPHASIZE THE POSITIVE



There are plenty of other ways to emphasize the positive when you discipline. You may have heard the old suggestion to “catch” your kids behaving well and making good decisions. Anytime you see your older child, who’s usually so critical of her younger sister, giving her a compliment, point it out: “I love it when you’re encouraging like that.” Or if your sixth grader has had a hard time getting his homework in on time, and you notice that he’s making a special effort to work ahead on the report that’s due next week, affirm him: “You’re really working hard, aren’t you? Thanks for thinking ahead.” Or when your kids are laughing together rather than fighting, make a point of it: “You two are really having fun. I

know you argue, too, but it's great how much you enjoy each other."

EMPHASIZE THE POSITIVE BY CATCHING YOUR KIDS BEHAVING WELL





Thanks for thinking ahead on this report.



In emphasizing the positive, you give your focus and attention to the behaviors you want to see repeated. It's a gentle way to also encourage those behaviors in the future without the interaction becoming about rewards or praise. Simply giving your attention to your child and stating what you see can be a positive experience unto itself.

We're not saying you're not going to have to address negative behaviors as well. Of course you are. But as much as possible, focus on the positive and allow your kids to understand, *and to feel from you*, that you notice and appreciate when they're making good decisions and handling themselves well.

Redirection Strategy #7: Creatively Approach the Situation

One of the best tools to keep ready in your parenting toolbox is creativity. As we've said time and again throughout the book, there's no one-size-fits-all discipline technique to use in every situation. Instead, we've got to be willing and able to think on our feet and come up with different ways to handle whatever issue arises. As we put it in [Chapter 5](#), parents need response flexibility, which allows us to pause and consider various responses to a situation, applying different approaches based on our own parenting style and each individual child's temperament and needs.

When we exercise response flexibility, we use our prefrontal cortex, which is central to our upstairs brain and the skills of executive functions. Engaging this part of our brain during a disciplinary moment makes it far more likely that we'll also be able to conjure up empathy, attuned communication, and even the ability to calm our own reactivity. If, on the other hand, we become *inflexible* and remain on the rigid bank of the river, we become much more reactive as parents and don't handle ourselves as well. Ever had that kind of moment? We have, too. Our downstairs brain will take charge and run the show, allowing our reactive brain circuitry to take over. That's why it's so important that we strive for response flexibility and creativity, especially when our kids are out of control or making bad decisions. Then we can come up with creative and innovative ways to approach difficult situations.

For example, humor is a powerful tool when a child is upset. Especially with younger children, you can completely change the dynamics of an interaction simply by talking in a silly voice, falling down comically, or using some other form of slapstick. If you are six years old and furious with your father, it's not as easy to stay mad at him if he's just tripped over a toy in the living room and

enacted the longest, most drawn-out fall to the ground you've ever seen. Likewise, leaving the park is a lot more fun if you get to chase Mom to the car while she cackles and screams in pretend fear. Being playful is a great way to break through a child's bubble of high emotion, so you can then help him gain control of himself.

It applies to interactions with older kids, too; you just have to be more subtle, and willing to receive an eye roll or two. If your eleven-year-old is on the couch, less than inclined to join you and his younger siblings in a board game, you can shift the mood by playfully sitting on him. Again, this has to be done in a considerate way and fit with his personality and mood, but a playfully apologetic "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't see you there" can at least draw a pretend-frustrated "Daaaad" and, again, change the dynamics of the situation.

One reason this type of playfulness and humor can be effective with kids—and adults as well, by the way—is that the brain loves novelty. If you can introduce the brain to something it hasn't seen before, something it didn't expect, it will give that something its attention. This makes sense from an evolutionary perspective: something that's different from what we usually see will pique our interest on a primitive and automatic level. After all, the brain's first task is to appraise any situation for safety. Its attention immediately goes to whatever is unique, novel, unexpected, or different, so that it can assess whether the new element in its environment is safe or not. The appraisal centers of the brain ask, "Is this important? Do I need to pay attention here? Is this good or bad? Do I move toward it or away from it?" This attention to novelty is a key reason that humor and silliness can be so effective in a disciplinary moment. Also, a respectful sense of humor communicates the absence of threat, which allows our social engagement circuitry to engage, which in turn opens us up to connect with others. Creative responses to disciplinary situations

prompt our kids' brains to ask these questions, become more receptive, and give us their full attention.

INSTEAD OF COMMANDING AND DEMANDING...



BE CREATIVE AND PLAYFUL



Creativity comes in handy in all kinds of other ways, too. Let's say your preschooler is using a word you don't like. Maybe she's saying things are "stupid." You've tried ignoring it, but you keep hearing the word. You've tried rephrasing it with a more acceptable synonym—"You're right, those swim goggles are just wacky, aren't they?"—but she keeps saying the goggles are stupid.

If ignoring and re-languaging don't turn out to be effective strategies, then instead of forbidding the word—you know how well that works—get creative. One gifted preschool director came up with an inspired way to address the use of the word. Anytime he heard a child say something was stupid, he would explain, in a

matter-of-fact tone, that the word is really only meant to be used in a particular context: “ ‘Stupid’ is such a great word, isn’t it? But I’m afraid you’re using it wrong, my dear. You see, that’s a very particular word that’s really meant to be used only when talking to baby chickens. It’s sort of a farm word. Let’s come up with another term to use in this situation.”

There are plenty of ways to approach a situation like this. You might suggest devising a code word that means “stupid,” so that you two share a secret language that no one else understands. Maybe the new term could be “glooby” or some other fun word to say, or it could even be a hand signal you make up together. The point is that you find a way to creatively redirect your child toward behavior that will work better for everyone involved, and even give you a fun sense of connection.

Let’s acknowledge one thing, though: sometimes you don’t *feel* like being creative. It feels like it takes too much energy. Or maybe you’re not too happy with your kids because of the way they’re acting, so you’re not exactly thrilled with the idea of mustering the energy to help them shift their mood or see things in a new light. In other words, sometimes you just don’t want to be playful and fun. You want them to just get in the car seat without a song and dance! You want them to just put on their stinking shoes! You want them to just get their homework done, or turn off the video game, or stop fighting, or whatever!

We get it. Boy, do we get it.

However, compare the two options. The first is to be creative, which often demands more energy and goodwill than we can easily muster when we don’t like the way our kids are acting. Ugh.

The other option, though, is to continue to have to participate in whatever battle the discipline situation has created. Double ugh. Doesn’t it usually end up taking much more time and much more energy to engage in the battle? *The fact is, we can often completely*

avoid the battle by simply taking just a few seconds to come up with an idea that's fun and playful.

So the next time you see trouble coming with your kids, or if there is a particular issue that you typically end up battling over, think about your two options. Ask yourself: “Do I really want the drama that’s on the horizon?” If not, try playfulness. Be silly. Even if you don’t feel like it, muster up the energy to be creative. Sidestep the drama that sucks the life out of you and takes the fun out of your relationship with your child. We promise, this option is more fun for everyone.

Redirection Strategy #8: Teach Mindsight Tools

The final redirection strategy we’ll discuss is perhaps the most revolutionary. You’ll recall that mindsight is all about seeing our own minds, as well as the minds of others, and promoting integration in our lives. Once kids begin to develop the personal insight that allows them to see and observe their own minds, they can then learn to use that insight to handle difficult situations.

We discussed this idea in detail in our previous book, *The Whole-Brain Child*, focusing on several Whole-Brain strategies parents can use to help their children integrate their brains and develop mindsight. As we’ve taught the fundamentals of that book to audiences of parents, therapists, and educators, we’ve further refined those ideas.

The overall point of this final redirection strategy is one that even small children can understand, although older kids can obviously grasp the message in more depth: *You don’t have to get stuck in a negative experience. You don’t have to be a victim to external events, or internal emotions. You can use your mind to take charge of how you feel, and how you act.*

We realize that this is an extraordinary promise to make. But we are enthusiastic about this approach because of how it has worked for so many people through the years. Parents really can teach their kids and themselves mindfulness tools that will help them weather emotional storms and deal more effectively with difficult experiences, thus leading them to make better decisions and enjoy less chaos and drama when they are upset. *We can help our children increasingly have a say in how they feel, and in how they look at the world.* Not through some mysterious, mystical process available only to the gifted, but by using emerging knowledge about the brain and applying it in simple, logical, practical ways.

For example, you may have heard about the famous Stanford marshmallow experiment from the 1960s and 1970s. Young children were brought into a room one at a time, and a researcher invited them to sit down at a table. On the table was a marshmallow, and the researcher explained that he would leave the room for a few minutes. If the child resisted the temptation to eat the marshmallow while he was gone, he would give the child two marshmallows when he returned.

The results were predictably hilarious and adorable. Search online and you can view video of numerous replications of the study, which show children variously closing their eyes, covering their mouths, turning their back to the marshmallow, stroking it like a stuffed animal, slyly nibbling at the corners of the marshmallow, and so on. Some children even grab the sugary treat and eat it before the researcher can finish delivering the instructions.



Much has been written about this study and follow-up experiments focusing on children's ability to delay gratification, demonstrate self-control, apply strategic reasoning, and so on. Researchers have found that kids who demonstrated the ability to wait longer before eating the marshmallow tended to have many improved life outcomes as they grew up, such as doing better in school, scoring higher on the SAT, and being more physically fit.

The application we want to highlight here is what a recent study revealed about how children could use mindsight tools to be more successful at delaying gratification. Researchers found that if they provided the kids with mental tools that gave them a perspective or strategy to assist in containing their impulse to eat the marshmallow—thus helping them manage their emotions and desires in that moment—the children were much more successful at demonstrating self-control. In fact, when the researchers taught the kids to imagine that it wasn't an actual marshmallow in front of them, but instead only a picture of a marshmallow, they were able to wait much longer than the kids who weren't given any strategies to help them wait! In other words, simply by using a simple mindsight tool, the children were able to more effectively manage their emotions, impulses, and actions.

You can do the same for your kids. If you've read *The Whole-Brain Child*, you know about the hand model of the brain. Here's

how we introduced it in a “Whole-Brain Kids” cartoon for parents to read to their children.

WHOLE-BRAIN KIDS: Teach Your Kids About Their Downstairs and Upstairs Brain

YOUR DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN AND YOUR UPSTAIRS BRAIN



MAKE A FIST WITH YOUR HAND. THIS IS WHAT WE CALL A HAND MODEL OF YOUR BRAIN. REMEMBER HOW YOU HAVE A LEFT SIDE AND A RIGHT SIDE TO YOUR BRAIN? WELL, YOU ALSO HAVE AN UPSTAIRS AND A DOWNSTAIRS PART OF YOUR BRAIN.



THE UPSTAIRS BRAIN IS WHERE YOU MAKE GOOD DECISIONS AND DO THE RIGHT THING, EVEN WHEN YOU ARE FEELING REALLY UPSET.



NOW LIFT YOUR FINGERS A LITTLE BIT. SEE WHERE YOUR THUMB IS? THAT'S PART OF YOUR DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN, AND IT'S WHERE YOUR REALLY BIG FEELINGS COME FROM. IT LETS YOU CARE ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE AND FEEL LOVE. IT ALSO LETS YOU FEEL UPSET, LIKE WHEN YOU'RE MAD OR FRUSTRATED.



THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH FEELING UPSET. THAT'S NORMAL, ESPECIALLY WHEN YOUR UPSTAIRS BRAIN HELPS YOU CALM DOWN. FOR EXAMPLE, CLOSE YOUR FINGERS AGAIN. SEE HOW THE UPSTAIRS THINKING PART OF YOUR BRAIN IS TOUCHING YOUR THUMB, SO IT CAN HELP YOUR DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN EXPRESS YOUR FEELINGS CALMLY?



SOMETIMES WHEN WE GET REALLY UPSET, WE CAN FLIP OUR LID. RAISE YOUR FINGERS LIKE THIS. SEE HOW YOUR UPSTAIRS BRAIN IS NO LONGER TOUCHING YOUR DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN? THAT MEANS IT CAN'T HELP IT STAY CALM.

FOR EXAMPLE:



THIS IS WHAT HAPPENED TO JEFFREY WHEN HIS SISTER DESTROYED HIS LEGO TOWER. HE FLIPPED HIS LID AND WANTED TO SCREAM AT HER.



BUT JEFFREY'S PARENTS HAD TAUGHT HIM ABOUT FLIPPING HIS LID, AND HOW HIS UPSTAIRS BRAIN COULD HUG HIS DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN AND HELP HIM CALM DOWN. HE WAS STILL ANGRY, BUT INSTEAD OF SHOUTING AT HIS SISTER, HE WAS ABLE TO TELL HER HE WAS ANGRY AND ASK HIS PARENTS TO CARRY HER OUT OF HIS ROOM.



SO THE NEXT TIME YOU FEEL YOURSELF STARTING TO FLIP YOUR LID, MAKE A BRAIN MODEL WITH YOUR HAND. (REMEMBER IT'S A BRAIN MODEL, NOT AN ANGRY FIST!) PUT YOUR FINGERS STRAIGHT UP, THEN SLOWLY LOWER THEM SO THAT THEY'RE HUGGING YOUR THUMB. THIS WILL BE YOUR REMINDER TO USE YOUR UPSTAIRS BRAIN TO HELP YOU CALM THOSE BIG FEELINGS IN THE DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN.

Dan recently received an email from a school principal about a new kindergarten student who was struggling. The child's teacher had taught her class the hand model of the brain, and she saw immediate results:

Yesterday a teacher came to me very concerned about the behavior of a new kindergarten student. He had just come to our school, and he was crawling under tables and saying he hated everything. (He is living with a family member, as his mom is incarcerated, and now he's had to leave a teacher he really liked.)

Today our teacher retaught Brain-in-the-Hand. This was new to him. He was under the table most of the

time while she taught. Soon after, he motioned to her, showed the flipped lid with his hand, and, on his own, went to the cool-off spot for a long time. (He almost fell asleep.)

When he finally got up, he approached her while she was teaching, pointed to his hand/brain with his lid closed, and joined the group.

After a bit she complimented him for his participation, and he said, “I know. I told you.” And he pointed to his hand/brain with the lid closed.

It was a huge moment, and she and I celebrated for him that he must really have needed that language!

Later today I went in during choice time and played “restaurant” with him. At one point he took a single flower out of a vase and handed it to me. My heart melted. Yesterday his teacher was comparing him to a child who truly struggles. Today he’s seeking every opportunity to connect with us. I’m so thankful that we’re learning this.

What did this teacher do? She gave her student a mindsight tool. She helped him develop a strategy for understanding and expressing what was happening around and within him, so he could then make intentional choices about how to respond.

Another way to say it is that we want to help kids develop *a dual mode of processing the events that occur in their lives*. The first mode is all about teaching children to be aware of and simply sense their subjective experiences. In other words, when they’re dealing with something difficult, we don’t want them to deny that experience, or to squelch their emotions about it. We want them to talk about what’s going on as they describe their inner experience, communicating what they’re feeling and seeing in that moment.

That's the first mode of processing: to simply acknowledge and be present with the experience. This teacher, in other words, didn't want this little boy to deny how he was feeling. His feeling was his experience, and this "experiencing mode" is all about simply sensing inner subjective experience as it is happening.

But also we want our kids to be able to *observe* what's going on within them, and how the experience is impacting them. Brain studies reveal that we actually have two different circuits—an experiencing circuit and an observing circuit. They are different, but each is important, and integrating them means building both and then linking them. We want our kids to not only feel their feelings and sense their sensations, but also to be able to *notice* how their body feels, to be able to *witness* their own emotions. We want them to pay attention to their emotions ("I'm noticing that I'm feeling kind of sad," or "My frustration isn't grape-size right now; it's like a watermelon!"). We want to teach them to survey themselves, and then problem-solve based on this awareness of their internal state.

That's what this boy did. He both lived in his experience *and* observed it. This allowed him to *own* what was going on. He had the perspective to be able to observe his experience as he was experiencing it. He could bear witness to the unfolding of experience, not just be in the experience. And then he could *narrate* what had happened, using language to express to others and to himself an understanding of what was going on. Using the hand model as his tool, he surveyed himself and recognized that he had "flipped his lid," and he took steps in response, thus changing his internal state. Then when he was back in control of his emotions, he rejoined the group.

We see kids and parents in our work who become stuck in an experience they're dealing with. Of course they need to deal with what's happened to them. But that's only one mode of processing.

They also need to look at and think about what's going on. They need to use mindsight tools to become aware of and observe, almost like a reporter, what is happening. One way to explain it is that we want them to be the actor, experiencing the scene in the moment, but also to be the director, who watches more objectively and can, from outside the scene, be more insightful about what's taking place on camera.

When we teach kids to be both actor and director—to embrace the experience and also to survey and observe what's happening within themselves—we give them important tools that help them take charge of how they respond to situations they're faced with. It allows them to say, "I hate tests! My heart is pounding, and I'm starting to freak out!" but then also to observe, "That's not weird. I really want to do well on it. But I don't have to freak out. I just need to skip that TV show tonight and put in some extra study time."

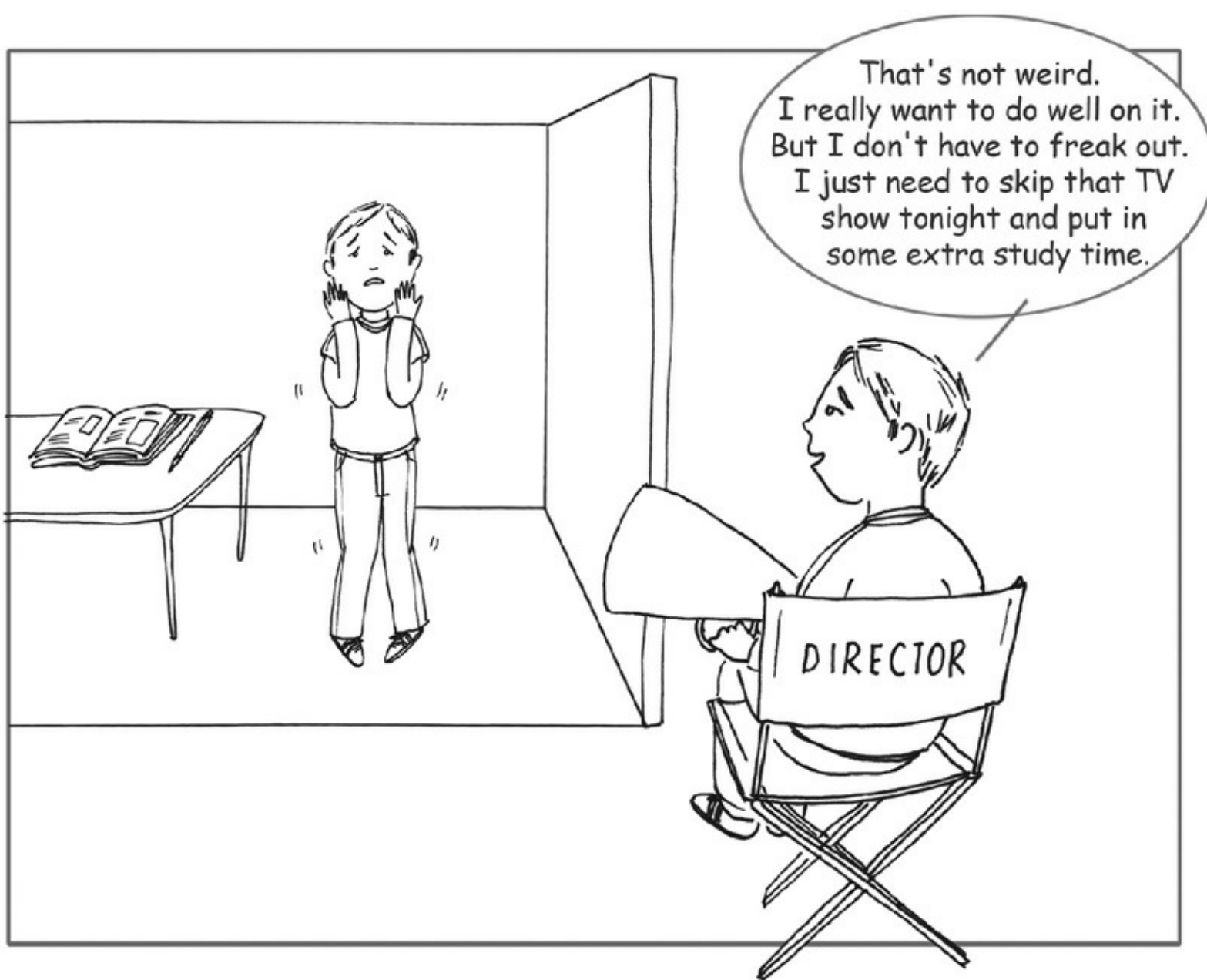
Again, this is about teaching kids that they don't have to be stuck in an experience. They can also be observers and therefore change agents. Let's say, for example, that the child described above remains overly concerned about tomorrow's test. He begins a cascade of worrying that takes him into a spiral of panic about the test and his semester grade, and what that might mean in terms of graduating with the right GPA to get into a good college.

This would be a great time for his parents to teach him that he can change his emotions and his thinking by moving his body, or simply by altering his physical posture. In *The Whole-Brain Child*, we call this particular mindsight tool the "move it or lose it" technique. The boy's parents could have him sit "like a noodle," completely relaxed and "floppy," for a couple of minutes. They all could then observe together how his feelings, thoughts, and body began to feel different. (It really is amazing how effective this particular strategy can be when we're tense.) Then they could go

back and talk about the exam from an “unstuck place” where he could see that he had some options.

I hate tests! My heart is pounding, and I'm starting to freak out!





There are limitless ways you can teach your kids about the power of the mind. Explain the concept of shark music, and have a conversation about what experiences from the past might be impacting their decision making. Or explain the river of well-being. Show them the picture from [Chapter 3](#), and walk them through a discussion of a recent experience when they were especially chaotic or rigid. Or when they are feeling scared about something, tell them, “Show me what your body looks like when you’re brave, and let’s see what that feels like.” Recent studies are suggesting that simply holding our bodies in various postures can actually shift our emotions, along with the way we view the world.

Opportunities to teach mindfulness tools are everywhere. In the car, when your nine-year-old is upset about an important shot she missed in her basketball game, direct her attention to the splashes on your windshield. Say something like, “Each spot on the windshield is something that has happened or will happen this month. This one here is your basketball game. That’s real, and I know you’re upset. I’m glad you’re able to be aware of your feelings. But look at all the other splashes on the windshield. This one here is the party this weekend. You’re pretty excited about that, aren’t you? And that one next to it represents your math grade from yesterday. Remember how proud you felt?” Then continue the conversation, putting the missed shot into context with her other experiences.

The point of an exercise like this isn’t to tell your daughter not to worry about her basketball game. Not at all. We want to *encourage* our kids to feel their feelings, and to share them with us. The sensing mode that lets us experience directly is an important mode of processing. But along the way, we want to give them perspective and help them understand that they can focus their attention on other aspects of their reality. This comes from having our *observing* circuits well developed, too, not just our *sensing* circuits. It’s not a matter of one or the other. Both are important, and together they make a great team. That’s one way we can help our kids develop integration by differentiating and then linking their sensing and absorbing capacities. Having built both circuits, our kids can use their minds to think about things other than what’s upsetting them in a particular moment, and as a result, they see the world differently and feel better. When we teach our kids mindfulness tools, we give them the gift of being able to regulate their emotions, rather than being ruled by them, so they don’t have to remain victims of their environment or their emotions.

The next time a discipline opportunity comes up in your house,

introduce your kids to some mindsight tools. Or use one of the other redirection strategies we've presented here. You might have to try several different approaches. No one strategy will apply in every situation. But if you work from a No-Drama, Whole-Brain perspective that first connects, then redirects, you can more effectively achieve the primary goals of discipline: gaining cooperation in the moment and building your children's brains so they can be kind and responsible people who enjoy successful relationships and meaningful lives.

CONCLUSION

On Magic Wands, Being Human, Reconnection, and Change: Four Messages of Hope

We've emphasized throughout this book that No-Drama Discipline allows for a much calmer and more loving disciplinary interaction. We've also said that a No-Drama, Whole-Brain approach not only is better for your children, their future, and your relationship with them, but actually makes discipline more effective and your life easier as well, since it increases the cooperation you'll receive from your kids.

Still, even with the best ambitions and the most intentional methods, sometimes everyone walks away from a disciplinary interaction feeling angry, confused, and frustrated. In our closing pages, we want to offer four messages of hope and solace for those difficult moments we all inevitably face at one time or another as we discipline our children.

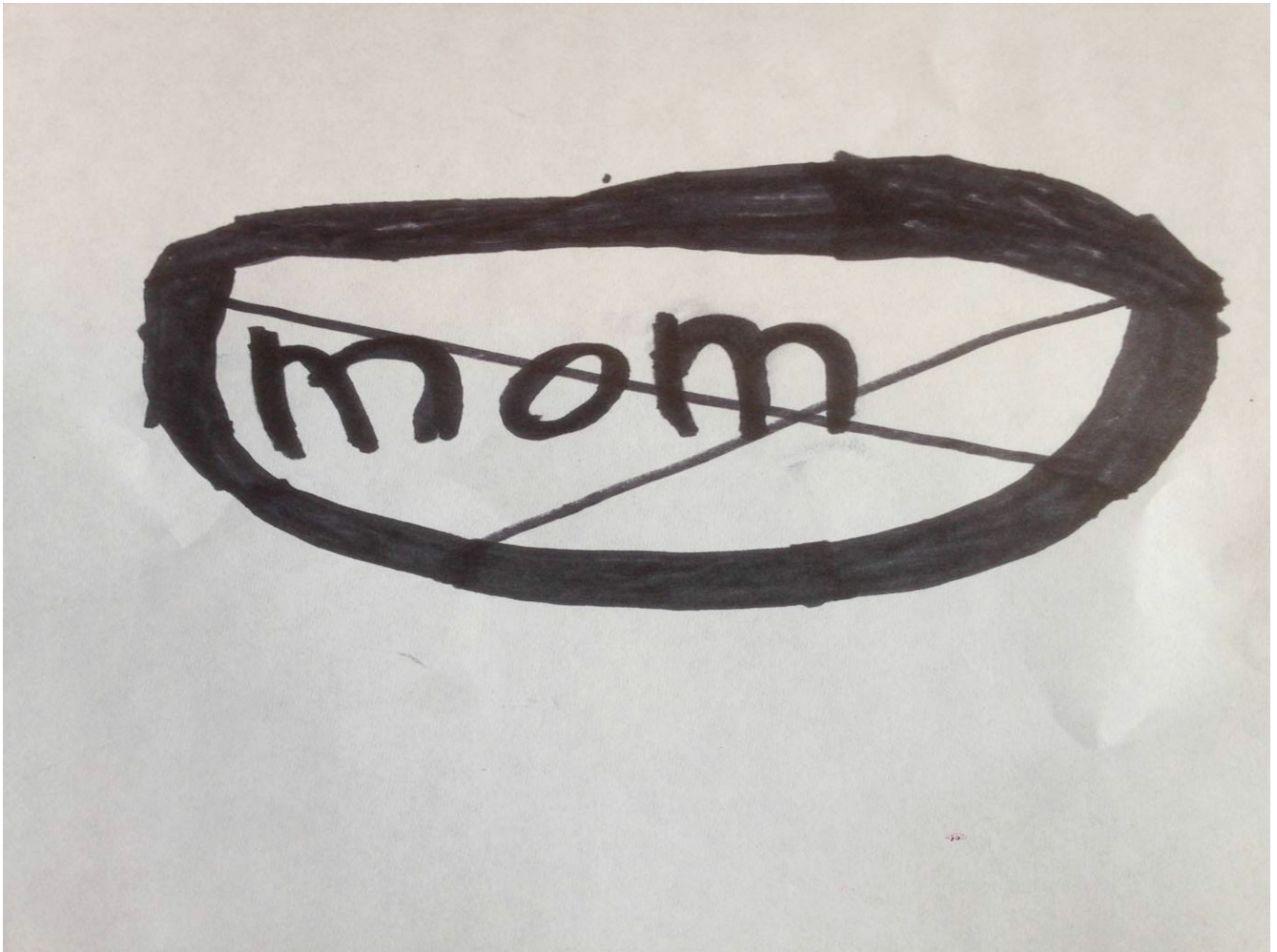
First Message of Hope: There Is No Magic Wand

One day Tina's seven-year-old became furious with her because she told him it wouldn't work that day to invite a friend over to play. He stormed off to his room and slammed the door. Less than a minute later, she heard the door open, then slam again.

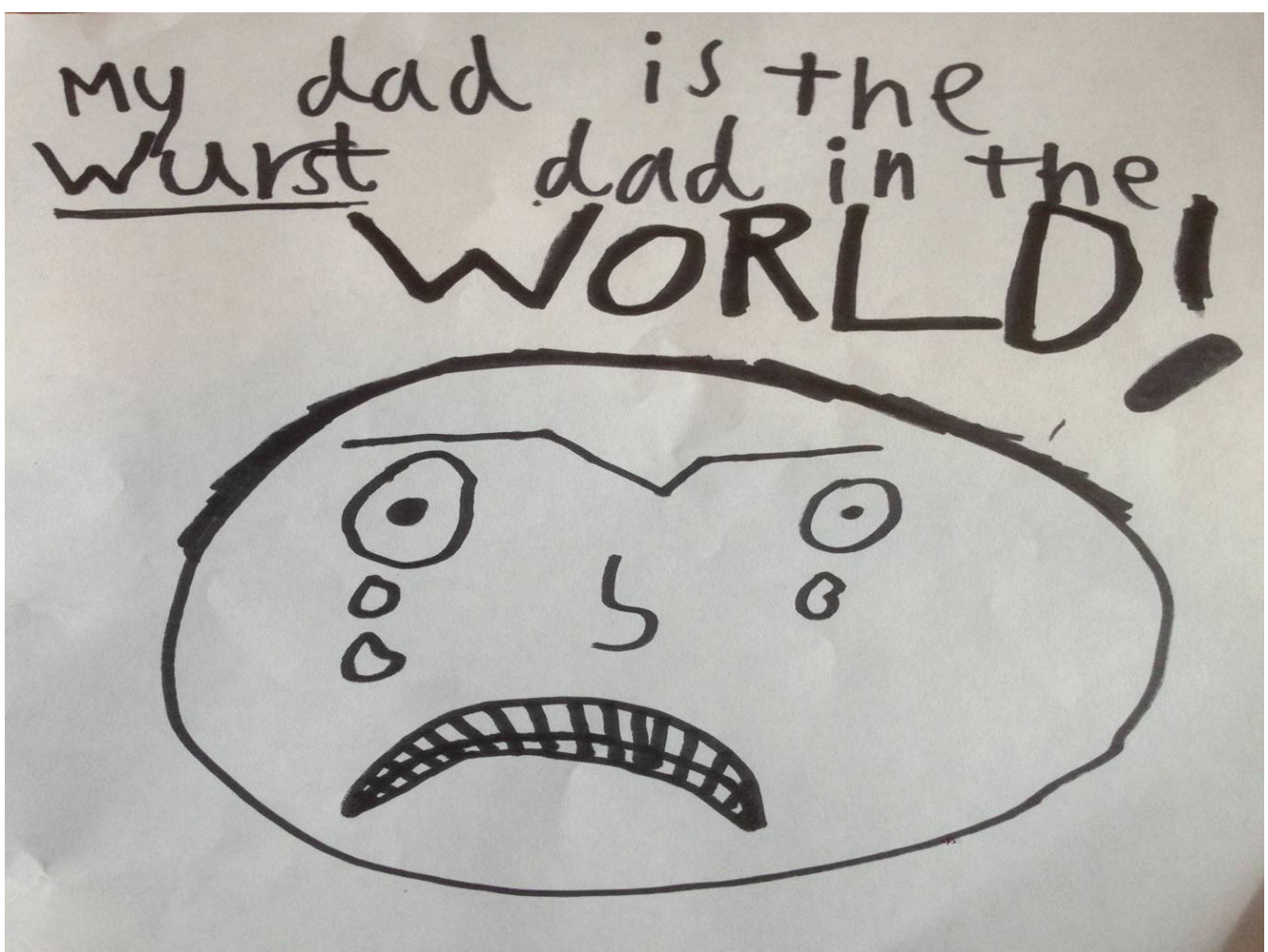
Here's how Tina tells the story.

I went to check on my son, and taped to the outside of

his door, I saw this picture.



(You can see from the drawing below that he regularly uses his artistic talents to communicate his feelings about his parents.)



I went into his room and saw what I knew I'd see: a child-size lump under the covers on his bed. I sat next to the lump and put my hand on what I assumed was a shoulder, and suddenly the lump moved away from me, toward the wall. From beneath the covers, my son cried out, "Get away from me!"

At times like this I can become childish and drop down to my child's level. I've even been known to say things like, "Fine! If you won't let me cut that toenail that's hurting, you can stay in pain all week!"

But this particular day, I maintained control and handled myself pretty well, trying to address the situation from a Whole-Brain perspective. I first tried to connect by acknowledging his feelings: "I know it makes you mad that Ryan can't come over today."

His response? "Yes, and I hate you!"

I stayed calm and said, “Sweetie, I know this is upsetting, but there’s just not time to have Ryan over today. We’re meeting your grandparents for dinner in a little while.”

In response, he curled tighter and moved as far away from me as possible. “I said get away from me!”

I went through a series of strategies, the ones we’ve been discussing in the previous chapters. I comforted, using nonverbal connection. I tried to relate to his changing, changeable, complex brain. I chased the why and thought about the how of my communication. I validated his feelings. I tried to engage in a collaborative dialogue and reframed my no, offering a playdate the next day. But at that moment, he couldn’t calm down and wasn’t ready to let me help him in any way. No amount of connection did the trick.

Moments like these highlight a reality that’s important for parents to understand: sometimes there’s just nothing we can do to “fix” things when our kids are having a hard time. We can work to stay calm and loving. We can be fully present. We can access the full measure of our creativity. And still, we may not be able to make things better right away. Sometimes all we have to offer is our presence as our children move through the emotions. When kids clearly communicate that they want to be alone, we can respect what they feel they need in order to calm down.

This doesn’t mean we’d leave a child crying alone in his room for long periods of time. And it doesn’t mean we don’t keep trying different strategies when our child needs our help. In Tina’s case, she ended up sending her husband into her son’s room, and the change of dynamic helped him begin to calm some, so that later he and his mom could come back together and talk about what

happened. But for a few minutes, all Tina could do was say, “I’m here if you need me,” then leave him in his room for a few minutes, shut the door with the anti-Mom sign on it, and let him ride it out the way he needed to, on his own timing and in his own way.

The same goes for sibling conflict. The ideal is to help each sibling return to a good state of mind, then work with them, individually or together, and teach them good relational and conversation skills. But there are times this just isn’t possible. If even just one of them is emotionally dysregulated, it can prevent anything like a peaceful resolution, since reactivity is trumping receptivity. Sometimes the best you can do is separate them until you can all come together again once everyone has calmed down. And if cruel fate decrees that you’re all trapped in the minivan when the conflict erupts, you may just need to explicitly acknowledge that things are not going well and turn up the music. In doing so, you’re not surrendering. You’re just acknowledging that at this moment, effective discipline isn’t going to happen. In cases like this, you can say, “This isn’t a good time for us to talk this through. You’re both mad, and I’m mad, so let’s just listen to some Fleetwood Mac.” (OK, maybe that’s not the best choice in music to win your kids over, but you get the idea.)

We, Dan and Tina, are both trained child and adolescent psychotherapists who write books about parenting. People come to us for advice on how to handle problems when their kids are struggling. And we want to make it clear that for us, like you, there are times when there just isn’t a magic wand we can wave to magically transport our kids to peace and happiness. Sometimes the best we can do is to communicate our love, be available when they do want us close, and then talk about the situation when they’re ready. It’s just like the Serenity Prayer says: “May I have the courage to change the things I can, the serenity to accept the things

I can't, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

So that's our first message as we conclude the book: sometimes there's no magic wand. And it doesn't make you a bad parent if you do your best, and your child stays upset.

Second Message of Hope: Your Kids Benefit Even When You Mess Up

Just as it doesn't make you a bad parent if your discipline techniques aren't always effective in the moment, you're also not a bad parent if you make mistakes on a regular basis. What you are is human.

The fact is that none of us are perfect, especially when it comes time to deal with our kids' behavior. Sometimes we handle ourselves well and feel proud of how loving, understanding, and patient we remain. At other times, we lower ourselves to our kids' level and resort to the childishness that upset us in the first place.

Our second message of hope is that when you respond to your kids from a less-than-optimal place, you can take heart: most likely you're still providing them with all kinds of valuable experiences.

For example, have you ever found yourself so frustrated with your kids that you call out, a good bit louder than you need to, “That's it! The next one who complains about where they're sitting in the car can walk!” Or maybe, when your eight-year-old pouts and complains all the way to school because you made her practice the piano, you deliver these sarcastic and biting words as she departs the minivan: “I hope you have a great day, now that you've ruined the whole morning.”

Obviously, these aren't examples of optimal parenting. And if you're like us, you can be hard on yourself for the times you don't handle things like you wish you had.

So here's hope: those not-so-great parenting moments are not

necessarily such bad things for our kids to have to go through. In fact, they're actually incredibly valuable.

Why? Because our messy, human, parental responses give kids opportunities to deal with difficult situations and therefore develop new skills. They have to learn to control themselves even though their parent isn't doing such a great job of controlling herself. Then they get to see you model how to apologize and make things right. They experience that when there is conflict and argument, there can be repair, and things become good again. This helps them feel safe and not so afraid in future relationships; they learn to trust, and even expect, that calm and connection will follow conflict. Plus, they learn that their actions affect other people's emotions and behavior. Finally, they see that you're not perfect, so they won't expect themselves to be, either. That's a lot of important lessons to learn from one parent's loud, impulsive declaration that he's sending back all the presents because his kids complained about having to help put up the holiday decorations.

Abuse, of course, is different, whether physical or psychological. Or if you're significantly harming the relationship or scaring your child, then the experience can result in substantially harmful effects. These are toxic ruptures, and ruptures without repair. If you find yourself in that situation repeatedly, you should seek the help of a professional right away in order to make whatever changes are necessary so that your children are safe and know that they are protected.

But as long as you nurture the relationship and repair with your child afterward (more about that below), then you can cut yourself some slack and know that even though you might wish you'd done things differently, you've still given your child a valuable experience, by learning the importance of repair and reconnection.

We hope it's obvious that we're not saying that parents should intentionally rupture a connection or that we shouldn't aim for the

best when we respond to our kids in a high-stress situation (or any other time). The more loving and nurturing we can be, the better. Those non-ideal moments of non-optimal interactions will happen to all of us, even those of us who write books on this subject. We're just saying that we can offer grace and forgiveness to ourselves when we're not acting as we'd like to, because even those situations provide moments of value as well. Having a goal, an intention in mind, is important. And being kind to ourselves, having self-compassion, is essential not only to create an internal sanctuary, but also to offer our children a role model for being kind to themselves as well as to others. These experiences with us give our kids opportunities to learn important lessons that will prepare them for future conflict and relationships, and even teach them how to love. How's that for hope?

Third Message of Hope: You Can Always Reconnect

There's no way we can avoid experiencing conflict with our kids. It's going to happen, sometimes multiple times per day. Misunderstandings, arguments, conflicting desires, and other breakdowns in communication will lead to a rupture in the relationship. Ruptures can result from conflict around a limit that you're setting. Maybe you decide to enforce a bedtime or keep your child from seeing a movie you've decided isn't good for him. Or maybe your daughter thinks you're taking her sister's side in an argument, or she gets frustrated that you won't play another game of Chutes and Ladders.

Whatever the reason, ruptures occur. Sometimes they are bigger, sometimes smaller. But there's no way to avoid them. Each child presents a unique challenge to maintaining attuned connection, one that depends on our own issues, on our child's temperament, on the

match between our history and our child's characteristics, and on whom our child may remind us of in our own un-worked-through past.

In most of our adult relationships, if we mess up, we eventually own up to it, or address it in some way, and then make amends. But many parents, when it comes to their relationship with their child, just ignore the rupture and never address it. This can be confusing and hurtful for children, just like it can be for adults. Can you imagine someone you care about being reactive and talking to you really rudely, then never bringing it up again and just pretending it never happened? That wouldn't feel great, would it? It's the same for our kids.

What's key, then, is that you repair any breach in the relationship as quickly as possible. You want to restore a collaborative, nurturing connection with your child. Ruptures without repair leave both parent and child feeling disconnected. And if that disconnection is prolonged—and especially if it's associated with your anger, hostility, or rage—then toxic shame and humiliation can grow in the child, damaging her emerging sense of self and her state of mind about how relationships work. It's therefore vital that we make a timely reconnection with our kids after there's been a rupture.

It's our responsibility as parents to do this. Maybe we reconnect by granting forgiveness, or by asking for it (“I'm sorry. I think I was just reacting because I'm extra tired today. But I know I didn't handle myself very well. I'll listen if you want to talk about what that was like for you”). Maybe laughter's involved, maybe tears (“Well, that didn't go very well, did it? Anyone care to play back for me how crazy I was?”). Maybe there's just a quick acknowledgment (“I didn't handle that how I would have liked. Will you forgive me?”). However it happens, make it happen. By repairing and reconnecting as soon as we can, and in a sincere and

loving manner, we reconnect and send the message that the relationship matters more than whatever caused the conflict. Plus, in reconnecting with our kids, we model for them a crucial skill that will allow them to enjoy much more meaningful relationships as they grow up.

So that's the third message of hope: we can always reconnect. Even though there's no magic wand, our kids will eventually soften and calm down. They'll eventually be ready to sense our positive intentions and receive our love and comfort. When they do, we reconnect. And even though we're going to mess up as parents over and over again because we are human, we can always go to our kids and repair the breach.

REPAIR A RUPTURE ASAP



In the end, then, it all comes back to connection. Yes, we want to redirect. We want to teach. Our children need us to help them learn how to focus their desires in positive ways; how to recognize and deal with limits and boundaries; how to discover what it means to be human and to be moral, ethical, empathic, kind, and giving. So yes, redirection is crucial. But ultimately, it's your relationship with your child that must always stay at the forefront of your mind. *Put any particular behavior on the back burner, and keep your relationship with your child always on the front burner.* Once that relationship has been ruptured in any way, reconnect as soon as possible.

Fourth Message of Hope: It's Never Too Late to Make a Positive Change

Our final message for you is the most hopeful of all: it's never too late to make a positive change. Having read this book, you may now feel that your discipline approach up to this point has at least partially run counter to what's best for your children. Perhaps you feel that you're undermining your relationship with them by the way you discipline. Or maybe you realize that you're overlooking and missing out on opportunities to build the parts of their brains that will help them achieve optimal growth. You might now see that you're using disciplinary strategies that are simply not effective, are just contributing to more drama and frustration in your family, and are actually keeping you from enjoying your kids because you end up having to deal with the same behaviors over and over.

If any of that's the case, have hope. It's not too late. Neuroplasticity, as we've said, shows us that the brain is amazingly changeable and adaptive across a lifetime. You can change the way you discipline at any age—yours or your child's. No-Drama Discipline shows you how. Not by offering a formula to follow. Not by providing a magic wand that will solve every problem and make you a parent who never misses the mark. The hope comes in that you now have principles that can guide you toward disciplining your children in ways you can feel good about. You now have access to strategies that actually sculpt the brain in positive ways, allow your kids to be emotionally intelligent and make good choices, strengthen your relationship with them, and help them become the kind of people you want them to be.

When you respond to your kids with connection—even and especially when they do something that frustrates you—you put your primary focus not on punishment or obedience, but on

honoring both your child and the relationship. So the next time your toddler throws a tantrum, your second grader punches his sister, or your middle schooler talks back, you can choose to respond in a No-Drama, Whole-Brain fashion. You can begin with connection, then move on to redirection strategies that teach kids personal insight, relational empathy, and the importance of taking responsibility for the times they mess up.

Along the way, you can be more intentional about how you activate certain circuits of your kids' brains. Neurons that fire together wire together. The circuitry that is repeatedly activated will be strengthened and further developed. So the question is, which part of your kids' brains do you want to strengthen? Discipline with harshness, shouting, arguments, punishment, and rigidity, and you'll activate the downstairs, reactive part of your child's brain, strengthening that circuitry and priming it to be easily activated. Or discipline with calm, loving connection, and you'll activate the reflective, receptive, regulating mindsight circuitry, strengthening and developing the upstairs section of the brain to create insight, empathy, integration, and repair. *Right now, in this moment, you can commit to giving your children these valuable tools. You can help them develop this increased capacity to regulate themselves, to make good choices, and to handle themselves well—even in challenging times, and even when you're not around.*

You're not going to be perfect, and you're not going to discipline from a No-Drama, Whole-Brain perspective every time you get the chance. Neither do we. Nobody does.

But you can decide that you'll take steps in that direction. And every step you take, you'll give your kids the gift of a parent who is increasingly committed to their lifelong success and happiness, and to making them happy, healthy, and fully themselves.

Further Resources

Click [here](#) to download a PDF of *Connect and Redirect Refrigerator Sheet*

CONNECT AND REDIRECT REFRIGERATOR SHEET

No-Drama Discipline

by Daniel J. Siegel, M.D., and Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D.

FIRST, CONNECT

- **Why connect first?**

- *Short-term benefit:* It moves a child from reactivity to receptivity.
- *Long-term benefit:* It builds a child's brain.
- *Relational benefit:* It deepens your relationship with your child.

- **No-Drama connection principles**

- *Turn down the "shark music":* Let go of the background noise caused by past experiences and future fears.
- *Chase the why:* Instead of focusing only on behavior, look for what's *behind* the actions: "Why is my child acting this way? What is my child communicating?"
- *Think about the how:* What you say is important. But just as important, if not more important, is *how* you say it.

- **The No-Drama connection cycle: help your child feel felt**

- *Communicate comfort:* By getting below your child's eye

level, then giving a loving touch, a nod of the head, or an empathic look, you can often quickly defuse a heated situation.

- *Validate*: Even when you don't like the behavior, acknowledge and even embrace feelings.
- *Stop talking and listen*: When your child's emotions are exploding, don't explain, lecture, or try to talk her out of her feelings. Just listen, looking for the meaning and emotions your child is communicating.
- *Reflect what you hear*: Once you've listened, reflect back what you've heard, letting your kids know you've heard them. That leads back to communicating comfort, and the cycle repeats.

THEN, REDIRECT

• **1-2-3 discipline, the No-Drama way**

- One definition: Discipline is teaching. Ask the three questions:
 1. Why did my child act this way? (What was happening internally/emotionally?)
 2. What lesson do I want to teach?
 3. How can I best teach it?
- Two principles:
 1. Wait until your child is ready (and you are, too).
 2. Be consistent but not rigid.

- Three mindsight outcomes:

- 1 . *Insight*: Help kids understand their own feelings and their responses to difficult situations.

- 2 . *Empathy*: Give kids practice reflecting on how their actions impact others.

- 3 . *Repair*: Ask kids what they can do to make things right.

- **No-Drama redirection strategies**

- Reduce words

- Embrace emotions

- Describe, don't preach

- Involve your child in the discipline

- Reframe a no into a yes with conditions

- Emphasize the positive

- Creatively approach the situation

- Teach mindsight tools

You're Not the Only One

Just because we write books about parenting and discipline doesn't mean there aren't times when we mess up with our own kids. Here are two stories—one from each of us—that, while pretty funny in retrospect, show that the reactive brain can get us all.

Dan's "Crepes of Wrath" Moment (adapted from Dan's book *Mindsight*)

One day my thirteen-year-old son, my nine-year-old daughter, and I stopped into a small shop for a snack after a movie. My daughter said she wasn't hungry, and so my son ordered a small crepe for himself from the counter and we sat down. The simple crepe arrived, aromas wafting from the open kitchen behind the counter where my son had placed his order. After my son took his first forkful of crepe, my daughter asked if she could try some. My son looked at the small crepe and said that he was hungry and she could order her own. It was a reasonable suggestion, I thought, so I offered to get another crepe for her—but she said she wanted only a small bite to see how it tasted. That also seemed reasonable, so I suggested that my son share a piece with his sister.

If you have more than one child at home, or if you've grown up with a brother or sister, you may be very familiar with the game of sibling chess, an ever-present strategy match composed of movements aimed to assert power and achieve parental recognition and approval. But even if this was not such a sibling assertion game, the small cost of buying the additional crepe from this little family-run crepe shop would have been quite a simple one to pay to avoid what you may guess was about to happen. Instead of making the purchase, I made a parental blunder and took sides in this sibling game. I firmly insisted that my son share his crepe with his sister. If this was not a sibling chess match before, it certainly became one after I stepped into their interaction.

"Why don't you just give her a small piece so she can see how it tastes?" I urged.

He looked at me, then at his crepe, and with a sigh he gave in. Even as a young teenager he was still listening to me. Then, using his knife like a scalpel, he extracted the smallest piece of crepe you can imagine, one you'd almost need tweezers to pick up. Under

other circumstances, I might have laughed and seen this as a creative move in the sibling chess game.

My daughter took the specimen, placed it on her napkin, and said that it was too small. And that it was “the burnt part.” Another great younger-sister move.

An outsider looking in at us at the table may have seen nothing out of the ordinary: a dad and his two animated kids out for some food. But inside, I was about to explode. When the bantering continued, turning into a full-blown argument, something inside me shifted. My head began to spin, but I told myself that I’d remain calm and appeal to reason. I could feel my face tense up, my fists get taut, and my heart begin to beat faster, but I tried to ignore these signals that my downstairs brain was hijacking the upstairs. That was it for me.

Feeling overwhelmed by the ridiculousness of the whole encounter, I got up, took my daughter’s hand, and went outside to wait on the sidewalk in front of the shop until my son finished his crepe. A few minutes later he emerged and asked why we had left. As I stormed off toward the car, my daughter in tow and my son hurrying to keep up, I told them that they should learn to share their food with each other. He pointed out in a matter-of-fact tone that he did give her a piece, but by then I was boiling over with frustration, and at that point there was no turning off the heat under the kettle. We got to the car, and, fired up, I ignited the engine and away we went toward home. They had been normal siblings out for movies and a snack. I became a father out of my mind.

I couldn’t let it go. Sitting next to me in the passenger seat, my son countered everything I came up with by some rational, measured response, as any teenager would do. In fact, he seemed quite adept at staying calm as he dealt with his now irrational father.

In that state, I became more and more irate, eventually resorting to cursing, calling him names, and even threatening to take away his beloved guitar—all inappropriate consequences for things he didn't even do.

I'm not proud to tell you any of this. But Tina and I do feel that since such explosive episodes are quite common, it is essential that we acknowledge their existence and help each other understand how mindsight can diminish their negative impact on our relationships and on our world. In our shame, we often try to ignore that a meltdown has occurred. But if we own the truth of what has happened, we can not only begin to repair the damage—which can be quite toxic to ourselves as well as to others—but actually decrease the intensity of such events and the frequency with which they occur.

So when I got home, I realized that I needed to calm down and connect with my son. I knew repair was crucial, but my vital signs were through the roof, and I had to bring them into balance before doing anything else. Knowing that being outside and exercising could help alter my state of mind, I went skating with my daughter, during which time she helped me regain mindsight. I achieved more personal insight (recognizing that I reacted to my son the way I did at least partially because I was unconsciously identifying him with my own older brother) and empathy for how my son experienced our encounter.

When I finally cooled down after talking and skating and reflecting, I went to my son's room and asked if we could talk. I said that I thought I had gone off the deep end, and that it would be helpful for us to discuss what had happened. He told me that he thought I was too protective of his sister. He was absolutely right. Although the embarrassment of having become irrational created an urge to speak up to defend myself and my reactions, I just kept quiet. My son went on to tell me that my getting "upset" was

unnecessary because he really hadn't done anything wrong. He was right. Again I felt a defensive urge to lecture him about sharing. But I reminded myself to remain reflective and focus on my son's experience, not mine. The essential stance here was not to judge who was right, but to be accepting and receptive to him. You can imagine that this all required mindsight, for sure. I was thankful my prefrontal region was back at work.

After listening to him, I acknowledged that I had in fact taken his sister's side (unfairly), that I could see how this felt unjust to him, and that my explosion seemed irrational—because in fact it was. As an explanation—not an excuse—I let him know what had happened in my mind, seeing him as a symbol of my brother, so that we both could make sense of the whole encounter. Even though I probably looked awkward and clumsy in his teenage mind, I could tell that he knew my commitment to our relationship was deep and my effort to repair the damage was genuine. My mindsight had returned, our two minds connected again, and our relationship was back on track.

Tina Threatens an Amputation

When my oldest child was three years old, he hit me one day. As a young and idealistic parent who, at that time, believed that my best alternative was to have a rational conversation with a three-year-old in which he would magically see things from my point of view, I guided him to the bottom of our stairway, sat next to him, and smiled. I lovingly (and naively) said, "Hands are for helping and loving, not for hurting."

While I was uttering this truism, he hit me again.

So I tried the empathy approach. Still naive, my voice perhaps sounding a bit less loving, I said, "Ouch! That hurts Mommy. Be gentle with my body."

At which point he hit me again.

I then tried a more firm approach: “Hitting is not OK. We don’t hit. If you’re mad, you need to use your words.”

Yup, you guessed it. He hit me again.

I was lost. I felt I needed to up the ante, but I didn’t know how. In my most powerful voice, I said, “Now you’re in time-out at the *top* of the stairs.” (The technical, scientific term for this parenting strategy is “Flying by the seat of your pants.” Not exactly intentional parenting.)

I marched him to the top of our stairs. He was probably thinking, “Cool! We’ve never done this before I wonder what will happen next if I keep hitting her?”

At the top of the stairs, I bent over at the waist, my finger wagging, and said, “*No more hitting!*”

He didn’t hit me again.

He kicked me in the shin.

(As he points out these days when we retell the story, he was technically obeying my no-hitting instructions.)

At this moment virtually all of my self-control was gone, as were any viable options I could think of. I grabbed his arm and pulled him into my room at the top of the stairs, yelling, “Now you’re in time-out in Mommy and Daddy’s room!”

Again, I had no strategy, no plan or approach. And as a result, my young son continued to escalate the situation while his increasingly red-faced mother yanked him from location to location in the house.

By this point I was by turns cajoling, scolding, commanding, reacting, and reasoning (waaaay too much talking): “You may not hurt Mommy. Hitting and kicking are not how we do things in our family Blah blah blah ...”

And that’s when he made his biggest mistake. He stuck out his tongue at me.

In response, my rational, empathic, responsible, problem-solving upstairs brain was hijacked by my primitive, reactive, downstairs brain, and I yelled, “*If you stick that tongue out one more time, I’m going to rip it out of your mouth!*”

In case you’re wondering, neither Dan nor I recommend in any circumstance threatening to remove any of your children’s body parts. This was not a good parenting moment.

And it wasn’t effective discipline, either. My son dropped to the ground, crying. I’d scared him, and he kept saying, “You’re a mean mommy!” He wasn’t thinking about his own behavior at all—he was solely focused on *my* misbehavior.

What I did next was probably the only thing I did right in the whole interaction, and it’s essential each time we have these types of ruptures in our relationship with our children: I repaired with him. I immediately realized how awful I’d been in that reactive, angry moment. If anyone else had treated my child as I just had, I would’ve come unglued. I knelt down and joined my young son on the floor, held him close, and told him how sorry I was. I let him talk about how much he didn’t like what had just occurred. We retold the story to make sense of it for him and I comforted him.

I usually get big laughs when I tell this story because parents so identify with this type of a moment, and I think they enjoy hearing that a parenting expert can totally lose it, too. As I explain to my audiences, we need to be patient, understanding, and forgiving—not only with our children, but with ourselves as well. (People always ask what I would do differently now. See [Chapter 6](#), where we discuss addressing toddler misbehavior in four steps—with illustrations!)

Though these stories are a bit embarrassing to relate, we offer them as (yes, humorous) evidence that we are all potentially prone

to such downstairs dis-integrations when we lose control and handle ourselves poorly. Episodes like these shouldn't become a regular occurrence, though. If you find yourself repeatedly losing it in intense ways, we recommend that you consider seeking professional help to assist you in making sense of your own emotional needs or woundings that may be contributing to frequently reactive ways of relating to your children. But if you go down the low road only every so often, as most of us do, that's just part of parenting. The key is recognizing when these moments happen, putting an end to them as quickly as possible to minimize the hurt they cause, and then making a repair. We need to regain what was truly lost—mindsight—and then use insight and empathy to reconnect with ourselves and repair with those for whom we care so deeply.

Our Discipline Approach in a Nutshell

You are an important person in the life of our child or children. You're helping determine who they're becoming by shaping their hearts, their character, and even the structures of their brains! Because we share this incredible privilege and responsibility of teaching them how to make good choices and how to be kind, successful human beings, we want to also share with you how we handle behavioral challenges, in hopes that we can work together to give our children a consistent, effective experience when it comes to discipline.

Here are the eight basic principles that guide us:

1. *Discipline is essential.* We believe that loving our kids and giving them what they need includes setting clear and consistent boundaries and holding high expectations for them—all of which helps them achieve success in relationships and other areas of their lives.
2. *Effective discipline depends on a loving, respectful relationship between adult and child.* Discipline should never include threats or humiliation, cause physical pain, scare children, or make them feel that the adult is the enemy. Discipline should feel safe and loving to everyone involved.
3. *The goal of discipline is to teach.* We use discipline moments to build skills so kids can handle themselves better now and make better decisions in the future. There are usually better ways to teach than giving immediate consequences. Instead of

punishment, we encourage cooperation from our kids by helping them think about their actions, and by being creative and playful. We set limits by having a conversation to help develop awareness and skills that lead to better behavior both today and tomorrow.

4. *The first step in discipline is to pay attention to kids' emotions.* When children misbehave, it's usually the result of not handling big feelings well and not yet having the skills to make good choices. So being attentive to the emotional experience *behind a behavior* is just as important as the behavior itself. In fact, science shows that addressing kids' emotional needs is actually the most effective approach to changing behavior over time, as well as developing their brains in ways that allow them to handle themselves better as they grow up.
5. *When children are upset or throwing a fit, that's when they need us most.* We need to show them we are there for them, and that we'll be there for them at their absolute worst. This is how we build trust and a feeling of overall safety.
6. *Sometimes we need to wait until children are ready to learn.* If kids are upset or out of control, that's the worst time to try to teach them. Those big emotions are evidence that our children need us. Our first job is to help them calm down, so they can regain control and handle themselves well.
7. *The way we help them be ready to learn is to connect with them.* Before we redirect their behavior, we connect and comfort. Just like we soothe them when they are physically hurt, we do the same when they're emotionally upset. We do this by validating their feelings and by giving them lots of nurturing empathy. Before we teach, we connect.
8. *After connecting, we redirect.* Once they've felt that connection

with us, kids will be more ready to learn, so we can effectively redirect them and talk with them about their behavior. What do we hope to accomplish when we redirect and set limits? We want our kids to gain insight into themselves, empathy for others, and the ability to make things right when they make mistakes.

For us, discipline comes down to one simple phrase: *Connect and redirect*. Our first response should always be to offer soothing connection; then we can redirect behaviors. *Even when we say no to children's behavior, we always want to say yes to their emotions, and to the way they experience things.*

Even Great Parents Make

Because we're *always* parenting our children, it takes real effort to look at our discipline strategies objectively. Good intentions can be replaced by less-than-effective habits quickly, and that can leave us operating blindly, disciplining in ways that might not bring out our best—or the best in our children. Here are some common discipline mistakes made by even the best-intentioned, most well-informed parents. These mistakes crop up when we lose sight of our No-Drama, Whole-Brain goals. Keeping them in mind can help us to avoid them or to step back when we start heading down the low road.

1. Our discipline becomes consequence-based instead of teaching-based.

The goal of discipline is not to make sure that each infraction is immediately met with a consequence. The real goal is to teach our children how to live well in the world. But many times we discipline on autopilot, and we focus so much on the consequences that those become the end goal, the entire focus. So when you discipline, ask yourself what your real objective is. Then find a creative way to teach that lesson. You can probably find a better way to teach it without even using consequences at all.

2. We think that if we're disciplining, we can't be warm and nurturing.

It really is possible to be calm, loving, and nurturing while disciplining your child. In fact, it's important to combine clear and consistent boundaries with loving empathy. Don't underestimate how powerful a kind tone of voice can be as you have a conversation with your child about the behavior you want to change. Ultimately, you're trying to remain strong and consistent in your discipline while still interacting with your child in a way that communicates warmth, love, respect, and compassion. These two aspects of parenting can and should coexist.

3. We confuse consistency with rigidity.

Consistency means working from a reliable and coherent philosophy so that our kids know what we expect of them. It doesn't mean maintaining an unswerving devotion to some sort of arbitrary set of rules. So at times you might make exceptions to the rules, turn a blind eye to some sort of minor infraction, or cut your child some slack.

4. We talk too much.

When kids are reactive and having a hard time listening, we often need to just be quiet. When we talk and talk at our upset children, it's usually counterproductive. We're just giving them a lot of sensory input that can further dysregulate them. Instead, use more nonverbal communication. Hold them. Rub their shoulders. Smile or offer empathic facial expressions. Nod. Then, when they begin to calm down and are ready to listen, you can redirect by bringing in the words and addressing the issue on a more verbal, logical level.

5. We focus too much on the behavior and not enough on the *why*

behind the behavior.

Any good doctor knows that a symptom is only a sign that something else needs to be addressed. Children's misbehavior is usually a symptom of something else. It will keep occurring if we don't connect with our kids' feelings and their subjective experiences that lead to the behavior. The next time your child acts out, put on your Sherlock Holmes hat and look *through* the behavior to see what feelings—curiosity, anger, frustration, exhaustion, hunger, and so on—might be causing the behavior.

6. We forget to focus on *how* we say what we say.

What we say to our kids matters. Of course it does. But just as important is *how* we say it. Although it's not easy, we want to aim for being kind and respectful every time we communicate with our kids. We won't always be able to hit this mark, but that should be our goal.

7. We communicate that our kids shouldn't experience big or negative feelings.

When your child reacts intensely when something doesn't go his way, do you ever shut down that reaction? We don't mean to, but parents can often send the message that we're interested in being with our kids only if they're happy, and not when they're expressing negative emotions. We may say things like, "When you're ready to be nice, then you can rejoin the family." Instead, we want to communicate that we will be there for them, even at their absolute worst. Even as we say no to certain behaviors or to how certain feelings get expressed, we want to say yes to our kids' emotions.

8. We overreact, so our kids focus on our overreaction, not their own actions.

When we overshoot the mark with our discipline—if we're punitive, or we're too harsh, or we react too intensely—our children stop focusing on their own behavior and focus instead on how mean or unfair they feel we are. So do whatever you can to avoid building mountains out of molehills. Address the misbehavior and remove your child from the situation if you need to, then give yourself time to calm down before saying much, so you can be calm and thoughtful when you respond. Then you can keep the focus on your child's actions rather than your own.

9. We don't repair.

There's no way we can avoid experiencing conflict with our kids. And there's no way we'll always be on top of our game in how we handle ourselves. We'll be immature, reactive, and unkind at times. What's most important is that we address our own misbehavior and repair the breach in the relationship as soon as possible, most likely by offering and asking for forgiveness. By repairing as soon as we can in a sincere and loving manner, we model for our children a crucial skill that will allow them to enjoy much more meaningful relationships as they grow up.

10. We lay down the law in an emotional, reactive moment, then realize we've overreacted.

Sometimes our pronouncements can be a bit "supersized": "You can't go swimming for the rest of the summer!" In these moments, give yourself permission to rectify the situation. Obviously, follow-through is important or you'll lose credibility. But you can be consistent and still get out of the bind. For example, you can offer

the “one more chance” card by saying, “I didn’t like what you did, but I’m going to give you another try at handling things the right way.” You can also admit that you overreacted: “I got mad earlier, and I wasn’t thinking things through very well. I’ve thought about it again and I’ve changed my mind.”

11. We forget that our children may sometimes need our help making good choices or calming themselves down.

When our kids begin to get out of control, the temptation is to demand that they “stop that right now.” But sometimes, especially in the case of small children, they actually may not even be *capable* of immediately calming themselves down. That means you may need to move in and help them make good choices. The first step is to connect with your child—with both words and nonverbal communication—to help him understand that you’re aware of his frustration. Only after this connection will he be prepared for you to redirect him toward making better choices. Remember, we often need to wait before responding to misbehavior. When our kids are out of control, that’s not the best time to rigidly enforce a rule. When they are calmer and more receptive, they’ll be better able to learn the lesson anyway.

12. We consider an audience when disciplining.

Most of us worry too much about what other people think, especially when it comes to how we parent our kids. But it’s not fair to your children to discipline differently when someone else is watching. In front of in-laws, for example, the temptation might be to be harsher or more reactive because you feel that you’re being judged as a parent. So remove that temptation. Pull your child aside and quietly talk to just him, without anyone else listening.

Not only will this keep you from worrying how you sound to the others in the room, it will also help you get better focus from him, and you can better attune to his behavior and needs.

13. We get trapped in power struggles.

When our kids feel backed into a corner, they instinctually fight back or totally shut down. So avoid the trap. Consider giving your child an out: “Would you like to get a drink first, and then we’ll pick up the toys?” Or negotiate: “Let’s see if we can figure out a way for both of us to get what we need.” (Obviously, there are some non-negotiables, but negotiation isn’t a sign of weakness; it’s a sign of respect for your child and her desires.) You can even ask your child for help: “Do you have any suggestions?” You might be shocked to find out how much your child is willing to bend in order to bring about a peaceful resolution to the standoff.

14. We discipline in response to our habits and feelings instead of responding to our individual child in a particular moment.

We sometimes lash out at our child because we’re tired, or because that’s what our parents did, or because we’re fed up with his brother, who’s been acting up all morning. It’s not fair, but it’s understandable. What’s called for is to reflect on our behavior, to really be in the moment with our children, and to respond only to what’s taking place in that instant. This is one of the most difficult tasks of parenting, but the more we can do it, the better we can respond to our kids in loving ways.

15. We embarrass our kids by correcting them in front of others.

When you have to discipline your child in public, consider her

feelings. (Imagine how you'd feel if your significant other called you out on something in front of other people!) If possible, step out of the room, or just pull her close and whisper. This isn't always possible, but when you can, show your child the respect of not adding humiliation to whatever else you need to do to address the misbehavior. After all, embarrassment will just take her focus off the lesson you want to teach, and she's unlikely to hear anything you want to tell her.

16. We assume the worst before letting our kids explain.

Sometimes a situation looks bad and it really is. But sometimes things aren't as bad as they seem. Before lowering the boom, listen to your child. She may have a good explanation. It's really frustrating to believe you have a rationale for your actions, yet to have the other person say, "I don't care. I don't want to hear it. There's no reason or excuse." Obviously, you can't be naive, and any parent needs to wear her critical-thinking cap at all times. But before condemning a child for what seems obvious at first blush, find out what she has to say. Then you can decide how best to respond.

17. We dismiss our kids' experience.

When a child reacts strongly to a situation, especially when the reaction seems unwarranted and even ridiculous, the temptation is to say something like, "You're just tired," "Stop fussing," "It's not that big a deal," or "Why are you crying about this?" But statements like these minimize the child's experience. Imagine someone saying one of these phrases to you if you were upset! It's much more emotionally responsive and effective to listen, empathize, and really understand your child's experience before

you respond. Even if it seems ridiculous to you, don't forget that it's very real to your child, so you don't want to dismiss something that's important to him.

18. We expect too much.

Most parents would say that they know that children aren't perfect, but most parents also expect their children to behave well all the time. Further, parents often expect too much of their children when it comes to handling emotions and making good choices—much more than is developmentally appropriate. This is especially the case with a firstborn child. The other mistake we make in expecting too much is that we assume that just because our child can handle things well sometimes, she can handle things well all the time. But especially when kids are young, their capacity to make good decisions really fluctuates. Just because they can handle things well at one time doesn't mean they can at other times.

19. We let "experts" trump our own instincts.

By "experts," we mean authors and other gurus, as well as friends and family members. It's important that we avoid disciplining our kids based on what someone else thinks we ought to do. Fill your discipline toolbox with information from lots of experts (and non-experts), then listen to your own instincts as you pick and choose different aspects of different approaches that seem to apply best to your situation with your family and your unique child.

20. We're too hard on ourselves.

We've found that it's often the most caring and conscientious parents who are too hard on themselves. They want to discipline

well every time their kids mess up. But it's just not possible. So give yourself a break. Love your kids, set clear boundaries, discipline with love, and make up with them when you mess up. That kind of discipline is good for everyone involved.

AN EXCERPT FROM

The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind

by Daniel J. Siegel, M.D., and Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D.

You've had those days, right? When the sleep deprivation, the muddy cleats, the peanut butter on the new jacket, the homework battles, the Play-Doh in your computer keyboard, and the refrains of "She started it!" leave you counting the minutes until bedtime. On these days, when you (again?!!) have to pry a raisin from a nostril, it seems like the most you can hope for is to *survive*.

However, when it comes to your children, you're aiming a lot higher than mere survival. Of course you want to get through those difficult tantrum-in-the-restaurant moments. But whether you're a parent, grandparent, or other committed caregiver in a child's life, your ultimate goal is to raise kids in a way that lets them *thrive*. You want them to enjoy meaningful relationships, be caring and compassionate, do well in school, work hard and be responsible, and feel good about who they are.

Survive. Thrive.

We've met with thousands of parents over the years. When we ask them what matters most to them, versions of these two goals almost always top the list. They want to survive difficult parenting moments, and they want their kids and their family to thrive. As parents ourselves, we share these same goals for our own families. In our nobler, calmer, saner moments, we care about nurturing our kids' minds, increasing their sense of wonder, and helping them reach their potential in all aspects of life. But in the more frantic,

stressful, bribe-the-toddler-into-the-car-seat-so-we-can-rush-to-the-soccer-game moments, sometimes all we can hope for is to avoid yelling or hearing someone say, “You’re so mean!”

Take a moment and ask yourself: What do you really want for your children? What qualities do you hope they develop and take into their adult lives? Most likely, you want them to be happy, independent, and successful. You want them to enjoy fulfilling relationships and live a life full of meaning and purpose. Now think about what percentage of your time you spend intentionally developing these qualities in your children. If you’re like most parents, you worry that you spend too much time just trying to get through the day (and sometimes the next five minutes) and not enough time creating experiences that help your children thrive, both today and in the future.

You might even measure yourself against some sort of perfect parent who never struggles to survive, who seemingly spends every waking second helping her children thrive. You know, the PTA president who cooks organic, fully balanced meals while reading to her kids in Latin about the importance of helping others, then escorts them to the art museum in the hybrid that plays classical music and mists lavender aromatherapy through the air-conditioning vents. None of us can match up to this imaginary superparent. Especially when we feel like a large percentage of our days is spent in full-blown survival mode, where we find ourselves wild-eyed and red-faced at the end of a birthday party, shouting, “If there’s one more argument over that bow and arrow, nobody’s getting *any* presents!”

If any of this sounds familiar, we’ve got great news for you: *the moments you are just trying to survive are actually opportunities to help your child thrive.* At times you may feel that the loving, important moments (like having a meaningful conversation about compassion or character) are separate from the parenting challenges (like

fighting another homework battle or dealing with another meltdown). But they are not separate at all. When your child is disrespectful and talks back to you, when you are asked to come in for a meeting with the principal, when you find crayon scribbles all over your wall: these are survival moments, no question about it. But at the same time, they are opportunities—even gifts—because a survival moment is *also* a thrive moment, where the important, meaningful work of parenting takes place.

Parenting and the Brain

Parents are often experts about their children's bodies. They know that a temperature above 98.6 degrees is a fever. They know to clean out a cut so it doesn't get infected. They know which foods are most likely to leave their child wired before bedtime.

But even the best-educated, most caring parents often lack even basic information about their child's brain. Isn't this surprising? Especially when you consider the central role the brain plays in virtually every aspect of a child's life that parents care about: discipline, decision making, self-awareness, school, relationships, and so on. In fact, the brain pretty much determines who we are and what we do. And since the brain itself is significantly shaped by the experiences we offer as parents, knowing about the way the brain changes in response to our parenting can help us to nurture a stronger, more resilient brain.

So we want to introduce you to the whole-brain perspective. We'd like to explain some fundamental concepts about the brain and help you apply your new knowledge in ways that will make parenting easier and more meaningful. We're not saying that the whole-brain approach will get rid of all of the frustrations that come with raising kids. *But by understanding a few simple and easy-to-master basics about how the brain works, you'll be able to better*

understand your child, respond more effectively to difficult situations, and build a foundation for social, emotional, and mental health. What you do as a parent matters, and we'll provide you with straightforward, scientifically based ideas that will help you build a strong relationship with your child that can help shape his brain well and give him the best foundation for a healthy and happy life.

What Is Integration and Why Does It Matter?

Most of us don't think about the fact that our brain has many different parts with different jobs. For example, you have a left side of the brain that helps you think logically and organize thoughts into sentences, and a right side that helps you experience emotions and read nonverbal cues. You also have a "reptile brain" that allows you to act instinctually and make split-second survival decisions, and a "mammal brain" that leads you toward connection and relationships. One part of your brain is devoted to dealing with memory; another to making moral and ethical decisions. It's almost as if your brain has multiple personalities—some rational, some irrational; some reflective, some reactive. No wonder we can seem like different people at different times!

The key to thriving is to help these parts work well together—to integrate them. Integration takes the distinct parts of your brain and helps them work together as a whole. It's similar to what happens in the body, which has different organs to perform different jobs: the lungs breathe air, the heart pumps blood, the stomach digests food. For the body to be healthy, these organs all need to be integrated. In other words, they each need to do their individual job while also working together as a whole. Integration is simply that: linking different elements together to make a well-functioning whole. Just as with the healthy functioning of the body, your brain can't perform at its best unless its different parts

work together in a coordinated and balanced way. That's what integration does—it coordinates and balances the separate regions of the brain that it links together. It's easy to see when our kids aren't integrated—they become overwhelmed by their emotions, confused and chaotic. They can't respond calmly and capably to the situation at hand. Tantrums, meltdowns, aggression, and most of the other challenging experiences of parenting—and life—are a result of a loss of integration, also known as “disintegration.”

We want to help our children become better integrated so they can use their whole brain in a coordinated way. For example, we want them to be *horizontally integrated*, so that their left-brain logic can work well with their right-brain emotion. We also want them to be *vertically integrated*, so that the physically higher parts of their brain, which let them thoughtfully consider their actions, work well with the lower parts, which are more concerned with instinct, gut reactions, and survival.

The way integration actually takes place is fascinating, and it's something that most people aren't aware of. In recent years, scientists have developed brain-scanning technology that allows researchers to study the brain in ways that were never before possible. This new technology has confirmed much of what we previously believed about the brain. However, one of the surprises that has shaken the very foundations of neuroscience is the discovery that the brain is actually “plastic,” or moldable. This means that the brain physically changes throughout the course of our lives, not just in childhood, as we had previously assumed.

What molds our brain? Experience. Even into old age, our experiences actually change the physical structure of the brain. When we undergo an experience, our brain cells—called neurons—become active, or “fire.” The brain has one hundred billion neurons, each with an average of ten thousand connections to other neurons. The ways in which particular circuits in the brain are

activated determines the nature of our mental activity, ranging from perceiving sights or sounds to more abstract thought and reasoning. When neurons fire together, they grow new connections between them. Over time, the connections that result from firing lead to “rewiring” in the brain. This is incredibly exciting news. It means that we aren’t held captive for the rest of our lives by the way our brain works at this moment—we can actually rewire it so that we can be healthier and happier. This is true not only for children and adolescents, but also for each of us across the life span.

Right now, your child’s brain is constantly being wired and rewired, and the experiences you provide will go a long way toward determining the structure of her brain. No pressure, right? Don’t worry, though. Nature has provided that the basic architecture of the brain will develop well given proper food, sleep, and stimulation. Genetics, of course, play a large role in how people turn out, especially in terms of temperament. But findings from various areas in developmental psychology suggest that everything that happens to us—the music we hear, the people we love, the books we read, the kind of discipline we receive, the emotions we feel—profoundly affects the way our brain develops. In other words, on top of our basic brain architecture and our inborn temperament, parents have much they can do to provide the kinds of experiences that will help develop a resilient, well-integrated brain. This book will show you how to use everyday experiences to help your child’s brain become more and more integrated.

For example, children whose parents talk with them about their experiences tend to have better access to the memories of those experiences. Parents who speak with their children about their feelings have children who develop emotional intelligence and can understand their own and other people’s feelings more fully. Shy

children whose parents nurture a sense of courage by offering supportive explorations of the world tend to lose their behavioral inhibition, while those who are excessively protected or insensitively thrust into anxiety-provoking experiences without support tend to maintain their shyness.

There is a whole field of the science of child development and attachment backing up this view—and the new findings in the field of neuroplasticity support the perspective that parents can directly shape the unfolding growth of their child’s brain according to what experiences they offer. For example, hours of screen time—playing video games, watching television, texting—will wire the brain in certain ways. Educational activities, sports, and music will wire it in other ways. Spending time with family and friends and learning about relationships, especially with face-to-face interactions, will wire it in yet other ways. Everything that happens to us affects the way the brain develops.

This wire-and-rewire process is what integration is all about: giving our children experiences to create connections between different parts of the brain. When these parts collaborate, they create and reinforce the integrative fibers that link different parts of the brain. As a result, they are connected in more powerful ways and can work together even more harmoniously. Just as individual singers in a choir can weave their distinct voices into a harmony that would be impossible for any one person to create, an integrated brain is capable of doing much more than its individual parts could accomplish alone.

That’s what we want to do for each of our kids: help their brain become more integrated so that they can use their mental resources to full capacity. With an understanding of the brain, you can be more intentional about what you teach your kids, how you respond to them, and why. You can then do much more than merely survive. By giving your children repeated experiences that develop

integration, you will face fewer everyday parenting crises. But more than that, understanding integration will let you know your child more deeply, respond more effectively to difficult situations, and intentionally build a foundation for a lifetime of love and happiness. As a result, not only will your child thrive, both now and into adulthood, but you and your whole family will as well.

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Learning in life is cultivated best in our collaborative relationships with others. Our primary teachers when it comes to our own parenting have been our children—Dan's now in their twenties, Tina's in their teen and pre-teen years—who have taught us the vital importance of connection and understanding, patience and persistence. Throughout the opportunities and the challenges of being their parents, we have been reminded through their actions and reactions, their words and their emotions, that discipline is about teaching, about learning, about finding lessons in our everyday experiences no matter how mundane or maddening. That learning is for both child and parent alike. And trying to create the

necessary structure in their developing lives while parenting in a calm, even-keel, “low-drama” way has not always been easy—in fact, it is most likely one of the most challenging jobs any of us will ever have. And for these reasons, we thank both our children and our partners throughout this whole journey, for the powerful ways they each have taught us about discipline as a way of learning, of teaching, and of making life an educational adventure and a celebration of discovery. We hope this book will offer an invitation to reimagine discipline as such a learning opportunity so that you and your children will thrive and enjoy each other throughout your lives!

Dan and Tina

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BY DANIEL J. SIEGEL, M.D., AND TINA PAYNE BRYSON, PH.D.

The Whole-Brain Child

No-Drama Discipline