



PARENT HANDBOOK

Direction Behavioral Health Associates

ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

Welcome to Direction!

This handbook is provided to give you a sense of our program's philosophy and approach to treatment. It also covers a few important practical details about your child's participation in our program.

The approach Direction takes is based on some very basic principles – the same principles we believe are essential for good parenting. There is very little difference between being a good parent and a good therapist, other than the fact that one pays marginally better and allows you to go home at the end of the day.

We have organized what we believe to be the most important principles in this handbook and refer to them simply as “Good Parenting Principles.” They form the foundation of our program, our parenting groups, and our overall philosophy in our effort to help kids along in their journey to become healthy adults.

The principles we describe aren't new and they aren't rocket science. However, we do believe that while society has increasingly embraced some of these principles in recent times, it is leaving other important ones by the wayside. We believe this does kids a disservice, and we advocate for a more balanced approach.

We do recommend you take some time to look through the handbook. The reading isn't particularly dense. Our program is designed around these principles, as will be any advice or suggestions we give to you about your own child.

Even if you choose not to read the entire handbook, please read the first two pages which describes the agreement your child needs to make with Direction in order to be in the program. It is important in understanding how participation at Direction works.

As for the “Good Parenting Principles” that follow, the first section goes over what we consider to be age-old good parenting wisdom. This section may read as more “theoretical.” The second section gives some concrete examples of how we apply these principles to real-life, thorny parenting problems. You can learn more about

how we would recommend applying these principles to your own child's particular circumstances in our weekly Parenting Group.

Finally, we explain how Direction's IOP and PHP have been designed around these same principles. This may make for useful reading for anyone wondering why we do things the way we do, particularly because our program operates so differently from others.

DIRECTION'S BASIC AGREEMENT

Direction's Intensive Outpatient Program (IOP) and Partial Hospitalization Program (PHP) provide mental health services to struggling adolescents and their families.

The program consists of three services:

1. Group Therapy
2. Psychiatric Oversight and Medication Management
3. A Weekly On-site Parenting Group

It is the first of these three we would like to address in greater detail here.

Group therapy can be a very powerful experience. A positive group can provide an individual with new perspectives, support, energy, and a "call to action" to tackle problems they believed they could not do so themselves.

Kids present to Direction with specific problems, whether they be depression, anxiety, trouble going to school, whatever. We want to help them come up with plans to approach this problem.

Just as importantly, however, we want kids to learn how healthy relationships with others can help them navigate *all* of the challenges in their lives. In order to reap the benefits of positive relationships, they need to learn to form and maintain positive relationships with others. A great place to learn and practice these skills is in our own group at Direction. In fact, practicing these fundamental skills is a requirement for kids to participate in the program.

WHAT IS DIRECTION'S BASIC AGREEMENT?

The Basic Agreement between your child and our program is our commitment to providing a positive group in which your child can grow, and your child's commitment to helping us maintain our positive group culture.

If your child wants to be here (or even if they feel mixed about the prospect), their end of the bargain isn't particularly hard. We just ask that they help us maintain

our group culture so it is a positive and healthy place for everyone to be. There are plenty of unhealthy places in the world that won't help your child (or anyone else in their development). We don't want to be one of those places.

To maintain that healthy culture, we require that all kids attending the program be committed to being positive members of the group. Being a "positive member of the group" doesn't mean being perfect – nobody is. It simply means making the effort to conform to decent basic social norms and expectations. It means refraining from engaging in behavior that gets in the way of the rest of the group and the work other members are trying to do.

To make things more explicit, we have put together a list of our basic social expectations in the form of the "Behavioral Guidelines," which you can find at the end of the handbook. They represent a great set of habits for anyone to develop, and "practicing the Guidelines" is an important part of your child's experience here. Struggling with the habits detailed in the Guidelines may in fact be part of the reason your child is here to begin with.

In addition to being a positive group member, Direction has a couple of hard-and-fast rules, including:

1. Refraining from drug / alcohol use at program.
2. Refraining from cell phone / personal electronics use at program.

Being a positive group member isn't always easy, particularly when things get stressful. We all make mistakes from time to time. It's a practice. We would emphasize that we aren't looking for unerring *compliance* but rather *commitment* to our agreement and being a positive group member.

We want to emphasize that Direction is a voluntary program, and in addition to having a desire to be here, your child needs to be committed to being a positive group member in order to participate. It is important to recognize that the decision to do so is up to your child, not up to you or to us.

WHAT "RESTRICTION" MEANS

The term "Restriction" relates directly to this agreement. It represents our recognition that all our clients' consent to the agreement is voluntary and ultimately their decision.

When a group member has demonstrated a lack of commitment to being a positive group member despite reminders of this agreement, they may be “Restricted” from the group. In their words or actions, they have essentially informed us they do not wish to (or are not willing to) participate in our group and be positive group members. We place a high value on each client’s autonomy, so we respond by respecting and honoring their request to separate themselves.

Clients may be Restricted either for not following specific policies at Direction (no cell phone usage and no substance abuse), or other demonstration of lack of commitment to being a positive group member.

If Restricted during group, a client is asked to move to our waiting room. We contact their parents and inform them of their child’s Restriction, and ask them to pick their child up. The child remains in the waiting room until this time. They are not permitted to participate further in the program while Restricted.

If a client wishes to return to the program (“Reintegrate”), all that is required is for them is to call us and request a Reintegration Meeting with us. It must be the child who calls, not the parent. During their Reintegration meeting, if they express both a desire to be part of our program and a genuine re-commitment to being a positive group member, they are welcome to return.

The requirement of your child’s commitment to being a positive group member and the process Restriction aren’t just administrative policies to make Direction’s job easier. Our trying to “force” a child to be here is completely counter to the philosophy of our program and approach. Not only is it not good for the rest of the group, it’s not good for your child either. If you are wondering why, in the last section of this handbook we go into detail why this approach is the best one for everyone involved.



GOOD PARENTING PRINCIPLES

Direction Behavioral Health Associates
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OVERVIEW

“The first half of our lives is ruined by our parents and the second half by our children.”

- Clarence Day

THREE PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PARENTING

1. Show up.
2. Practice what you preach.
3. Provide maximum support with minimum interference.

FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR INTERVENING

1. Give your child a chance to fix their own behavior.
2. Avoid adversarial dynamics.
3. Recognize that punishment doesn't work.
4. Embrace all feelings, guide all behavior.
5. Save “because-I’m-the-parent!” for when you really need it.

OTHER WORDS OF WISDOM

- *“Parents (and therapists) are not in The Feel-Better Business, but the Function-Better Business.”*
- *“Give up control to gain authority.”*
- *“Encourage your child to be older, not younger.”*
- *“Just because you expect your child to screw up doesn't mean you shouldn't give them the chance to screw up.”*
- *“Get out of the way of your child's education.”*
- *“You cannot legislate feelings.”*
- *“Beware of the Good Behavior Trap: Better behavior does not equal better psychology.”*

THE ASSIGNMENT

“Therapists and parents are not in The Feel-Better Business, but the Function-Better Business.”
- Dave Gill, MD

Parenting has been rightly referred to as being the hardest job in the world.

Before diving into a discussion as to how to make the whole parenting thing work for you and for your child, it may be useful to take a step back and ask what this job is all about.

What is your job as a parent? What is your ultimate goal?

Here's a good answer to that question:

Your job as a parent is to make yourself obsolete, to raise your child to not need you anymore.

The goal of parenting may be viewed to be successfully helping your child grow into an adult, become self-sufficient, and not need you anymore to survive. Your child must be maximally capable of handling all the challenges that will be thrown their way during life, be they physical, emotional, relational, or spiritual. This is a good definition of being “mentally healthy.”

The process of your child's becoming an independent, autonomous adult – an “individual” in their own right – is appropriately called *individuation*. Helping your child individuate is your job. Once your child has fully individuated, your job as a parent is done.

Put another way, your job is to put yourself out of business.

Like any other member of the animal kingdom, your child needs to learn to survive on their own. If your child becomes an adult capable of taking care of their basic needs, having fulfilling relationships, and being able to adapt and respond to life's unforeseen challenges, then congratulations – you've won! It doesn't really matter how you got there. Maybe you were an ultra-strict parent, or maybe an ultra-permissive parent. In terms of species propagation, you – and your child – did your jobs.

Good parenting is anything that promotes your child's individuation and their becoming an independent, mentally healthy adult. Bad parenting is anything that hinders your child's individuation and their becoming an independent, mentally healthy adult.

An important point to recognize is that parents, like therapists, are in the “function-better” business, not the “feel-better” business. While we all want our children to be happy, our primary responsibility is to help them become independent, to be able to function in the world. If you do your job right as a parent, functioning and feeling-better usually go hand and hand – though not always. From a long-term perspective, it is your child's ability to function better that carries

over into adulthood, and it is the ability to function better rather than feel better that maximizes their chances (though there are no guarantees) of having a more fulfilling, content life.

The bad news is, however, that there are times you'll have to make decisions that put your child's functioning over your child's feelings. Your main duties as a parent are to promote individuation (which relies on good functioning) and to protect the interests of your family. There are times as a parent you'll have to make some decisions that will be unpopular with your child.

Kids want to do as they please, which is only natural. If we were in the "feel-better" business, we'd let them in fact do anything they wanted. It doesn't feel good to your child when you tell them they can't do something, even if that something is likely to get them injured or it goes against your family's interests. Kids want to experiment, and having their experiments terminated by their parents is a disappointment to them. It cramps their style.

Unpopular decisions will disappoint your child, and maybe make them frustrated, angry, or sad. That's all fine -- you've got a more important job to do than keeping ahead in the polls.

THE PRINCIPLES

*“There is always a well-known solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.”
- H. Mencken*

Your job as a parent will be hard.

The good news is that is doable. Parents have been successfully raising kids for hundreds of thousands of years, without the help of self-proclaimed experts or parenting books (like this one). There are a few principles, however, that may make your job easier.

Sure, you'll need to make exceptions. Every child is different, and every child responds differently to different parental interventions. Moreover, you have limited energy, time, and resources. It isn't realistic to tackle every single parental challenge the “correct” way (whatever that means). Parenting, done right, is exhausting work. If, as a parent, you feel like you are walking a tightrope in the dark after running a marathon, you are probably on the right track.

As a parent, there is no “system” that can adequately replace dogged determination, human judgment, gut-feeling, and dumb luck. There are principles that are likely to help, that's all.

Here are the three most important principles of good parenting:

1. Show up.
2. Practice what you preach.
3. Provide maximum support with minimum interference.

Showing up means loving, supporting, and being physically and emotionally available to your child. Practice what you preach means being a good role model. It means being the adult you want your child to become. Providing maximum support with minimum interference means providing encouragement to your child but also staying out of the way as they explore the world and takes risks.

Each principle will get its own section.

A WORD OF WARNING

If you haven't been following these principals and are struggling with your child's behavior, giving them a try makes a lot of sense. However, it is not uncommon for things to get worse before they get better.

One source of frustration for parents is that making these changes sometimes is met with great resistance from their child. Many parents see their child's behavior as “getting worse.” Sometimes it *does* get worse. At this point, too many parents abandon the project too early and consider it to have been a failure. This is a mistake.

The problem is you are trying to change established relationship patterns with your child that have going on for a long time – maybe even years. Your child may naturally try to resist any change at first, even if it is for the good. It can be as confusing for them as for you. If you've been "enabling" your child for a long time (as we will discuss later), things may be even harder when you try to "right the ship."

There are no quick fixes here. Any changes that are durable are going to require effort and time on your part. It all very likely will be worth it in the long run.

PRINCIPLE ONE: SHOW UP

“90% of being a dad is just showing up.”

- Jay Pritchett, Modern Family

The most important thing you can do to help your child grow into a healthy adult is to love them and be present in their lives. There's not a whole lot to say about that. Either you love your child and are present, or you don't and aren't. If your child can't find a loving parental stand-in or surrogate, your child may not make it at all.

The most important way you demonstrate your love for your child is by showing up. Being present. Trying to be a good parent, sometimes failing, but then trying again, over and over. Never giving up. You can't parent if you aren't there.

What happens if you don't show up at all?

If your child is lucky enough to find a loving parental surrogate – a stand-in – they may do okay, depending how physically and emotionally available that surrogate is. If not, your child may not survive at all, or will survive with long-lasting scars. Many of the kids with parents who didn't show up end up as adults with attachment issues and are unable to form healthy relationships. Many end up victimized and then their neglect is compounded by physical and/or sexual abuse. Later on in life, many develop drug addiction, or are diagnosed with “borderline personality disorder,” “antisocial personality disorder,” or any of a number of other psychological and psychiatric maladies. Most of these kids don't get any treatment, or treatment efforts will be too late. The ones who do receive treatment often do so from residential programs or foster homes.

The good news for your child is that if you are reading this book, you are likely one of the parents who showed up.

PRINCIPLE TWO: PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

“Every father should remember one day his son will follow his example, not his advice.”
- Charles Kettering

Other than showing up, the best way to help your child grow into a healthy adult is to practice what you preach and be a good role model.

One of the main ways children learn -- and the first way they learn when they come into this world -- is through watching others. Namely you.

Children watch *everything* you do as a parent, and they learn much more by what you show them (intentionally or unintentionally) than by what you tell them. They learn from your habits both good and bad, whether they be physical habits (such as what they eat), relationship habits (such as how to handle conflict), or any other kind of habit for that matter. If you are a warm, loving parent who is available to them for support, they learn from that. If you are an absent parent, they learn from that. You are their primary role model, whether you like it or not. And whether they like it or not.

It's unrealistic to expect a child to stop yelling when angry if you yourself yell when you are angry. It's unrealistic to expect a child to not use drugs if you yourself use drugs. It's unrealistic to expect a child to have healthy relationships with others if you yourself have unhealthy ones.

Except for loving your child, role-modeling the person you want your child to become is the single most important thing you can do as a parent. If there are ways you want your child to be different from you, it's a losing battle to focus on your child and their behavior. Rather, spend your energy fixing things you don't like about yourself. You are likely wasting your time *telling* your child how act differently. How about *showing* your child how to act differently?

Your child is learning by watching you, even if they don't say it or show it, and even if they act exactly the opposite way to what you are demonstrating. For some kids, the process of individuation results in the child's making a big show to you, and themselves, how much *not* like you they are going to be. It's a smokescreen.

Practice what you preach. Why? Because when all is said and done, your child will probably turn out to be like you.

You should role model any and all habits you believe are healthy.

Some basic healthy habits are more obvious:

- Eating well.
- Exercising.

- Not using drugs.
- Showering.

Examples of habits that may be less obvious but are healthy too:

- Dressing for the weather.
- Counting your change.
- Being on time.
- Measuring twice, cutting once.

Other habits are more abstract or psychological:

- Looking on the bright side of things.
- Forgiving yourself.
- Getting back up when you are knocked down.

Some habits have to do with relationships:

- Forgiving others.
- Apologizing.
- Being assertive and standing up for yourself.

What makes role modeling healthy relationship skills a special case is that you can (and should) role model healthy relationships within the context of your own relationship with your child. The way you handle conflict with your child should be the way you want your child to handle conflict with everyone else in the world.

GIVING UP CONTROL TO GAIN AUTHORITY

Role modeling will help you with another problem that comes up during child development: your declining power as a parent.

Parents start out with a full control over their children, and thus absolute power in their relationship with them. This is a good thing because children are born completely defenseless and have terrible judgment. At young ages, children are driven solely by impulse and haven't conducted enough experiments in the world yet to know what is and what is not a truly bad idea. If your toddler begins to run across a busy street, you can scoop them up and take them inside. When your child is young, you literally have full control over their behavior.

That doesn't last long, however. You have influence over a small child because you are bigger, stronger, and more experienced about the world. Your influence comes from your ability to control, and your ability to control wanes over time.

The power differential shifts rapidly as kids grow and become bigger, stronger, and smarter. Your power as a parent is no longer absolute, and you may find that you are no longer able to rely on that power to make your child do what you want. You may end up resorting to other

methods to get your child to do certain things and to stop doing others. A common approach is to adopt a system of carrots and sticks (reward and punishment). There are other options as well. Most end up being efforts to *control* your child. In any event, gone are the days of picking up your child and whisking them away from danger.

At some point, your child will (hopefully) be bigger, stronger, and smarter about the world than you, and they may well become the one with power in the relationship. You'll know that time has come when you are pleading with your child not to put you into the old-age home.

Until your child individuates, however, you need to be able to continue to influence them to keep them safe and help them grow. The problem is that as your ability to control your child in the relationship wanes, your child is going to have less and less interest in your direct intervention (and interference) and more and more interest in asserting their independence.

What is a parent to do?

They say the first step to recovery is admitting you have a problem, and you do: your child's power in the relationship is going up, and yours is going down.

Over the course of your child's development, here is some good advice:

Give up control to gain authority.

What is the difference? "Control" is all about forcing. "Authority" is all about leading. Authority is power your child *grants* you based on their respect for you and for the fact that you know more about the world than they do.

Note that authority is power earned, not taken. How do you earn authority from your child? By following the three good principles of parenting: by being a loving, maximally-supportive, minimally-interfering good role model. If you don't love and support your child, interfere too much, or are a lousy role model, then your child won't respect you. If they don't respect you, they won't grant you authority.

Authority that you earn is like gold. If you have it, your child will much more likely to listen to you. Authority will reduce your sense of a "need" to exert control, resort to carrots and sticks, or simply let them do what they want. Authority will make everything easier, give you more leeway. It even will allow you to get away with "No, because I'm the parent!" from time to time.

Earning authority takes work, patience, and above all the faith that your child will learn from their experiments. Early on, it's a harder road in some ways than exerting control. It pays off as your child get older.

The alternative strategy is to try to cling to power through means of control. This means resorting to increasingly futile, counterproductive methods (such as reward and punishment) to continue to control your child's behavior.

PRINCIPLE THREE: MAXIMUM SUPPORT / MINIMUM INTERFERENCE

“Get out of the way of your child’s education.”
- Joe Walsh

As soon as children learn to crawl, they begin to explore the world and learn in a different way: through personal experiment, by trial and error. There is no better way to learn than through personal experiment. Consider learning about what happens when you touch a hot stove. People can *tell* you it burns, and even *show* you it burns by touching the stove themselves. The lesson will be clearest and most lasting if you touch the stove yourself.

Your job as a parent is to encourage your child’s own experimentation and exploration in the world. The best way to do this is by providing *maximum support* with *minimum interference*.

The first part of the equation is providing *maximum support*. What are you supporting? You are supporting your child’s steps toward individuation. You are encouraging your child to take age-appropriate risks (i.e., engaging in experiments) and become more independent. If a child’s taking a risk or engaging in an experiment has a good outcome (e.g., successfully riding a bike) you are there to celebrate, increasing your child’s willingness to continue exploring. If it has a bad outcome (e.g., falling and scraping a knee) you are there to pick them up, and to encourage them to get back out there and try again.

The second part of the equation is *minimum interference*. As much as possible, you should stay out of your child’s way as they learn through trial and error. It is the best teacher.

While it is tempting to try to shield the child from all possible harm and discomfort due to “bad” decisions, it isn’t possible. Nor is it desirable. Children, like anyone else, learn more from failures than successes. Every time you interfere with a child’s decision-making, you effectively are stopping one of their experiments. The lesson is lost.

Your job as a parent is to be a guide, not a manager.

Of course, there will be times that you need to step in as a parent and effectively “interfere” with (or put an end to) a child’s experiment. The experiment might carry too much risk for the child, or it maybe it is going to cause problems for the larger family. Perhaps your son is preparing to jump off a 12-foot slide, or your daughter is tearing up the house during a tantrum. These are both reasonable times to step in and interfere with their experiments.

Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between your child’s experiencing some *pain* (which will help your child learn) and *injury* (which may impair your child’s chance of surviving and thriving). The trick of parenting is deciding when you must step in to protect your child or your

family, and when to stand back. On one hand, you want your child to survive into adulthood with all their fingers and toes intact, and you want to keep your family from descending into chaos. On the other, you don't want to become a manager for your child and take away all their experiments. That stunts their development. It often leads to trouble in terms of your child's behavior, usually in the form of active rebellion against or prolonged dependence upon you.

Your child's fall from 12 feet or your family's being held hostage to a child's tantrums aren't okay. Scraped knees and bruised feelings, however, *are* okay – they are a great way to learn.

What happens if you don't support enough or interfere too much?

If you don't support your child's experiments and their taking age-appropriate risks, or don't console them when the outcomes are painful, your child may stop conducting these experiments and taking these risks. The process of individuation slows, and your child will remain dependent upon you longer.

If you interfere too much, your child will typically respond one of two ways:

1. By becoming increasingly anxious that they are not capable of handling the challenges inherent in growing up.
2. By becoming increasingly rebellious against your attempts to interfere with their experiments.

Anxiety about facing life's challenges and rebellion against excessive interference can take many, many different forms. The end result is the same as when there is insufficient support: delayed individuation.

ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO BE OLDER, NOT YOUNGER

Maximum support means always conveying confidence to your child that they can – and should – move to the next stage in their development. You have faith in and support their individuation.

To this end, you should always encourage your child to act older, not younger. Encouraging your child to act older means continually reinforcing the message that they are capable of progress. They are capable of growth. It also reinforces the message that they are responsible for the actions in their lives, not you.

This will be both liberating and scary for your child. This probably will be both liberating and scary for you as well.

You want your child to move toward becoming an adult, a peer. The more chances you can give your child to act older rather than younger, the better. If they screw up the opportunity, they will be as aware of it as you. Consider it a lesson.

This is maximum support, minimum interference at its core.

The actual opportunity to act older rather than younger is more important than the outcome of that opportunity itself. It is the pattern of repeated opportunities to 'rise to the occasion' that allows kids to grow up.

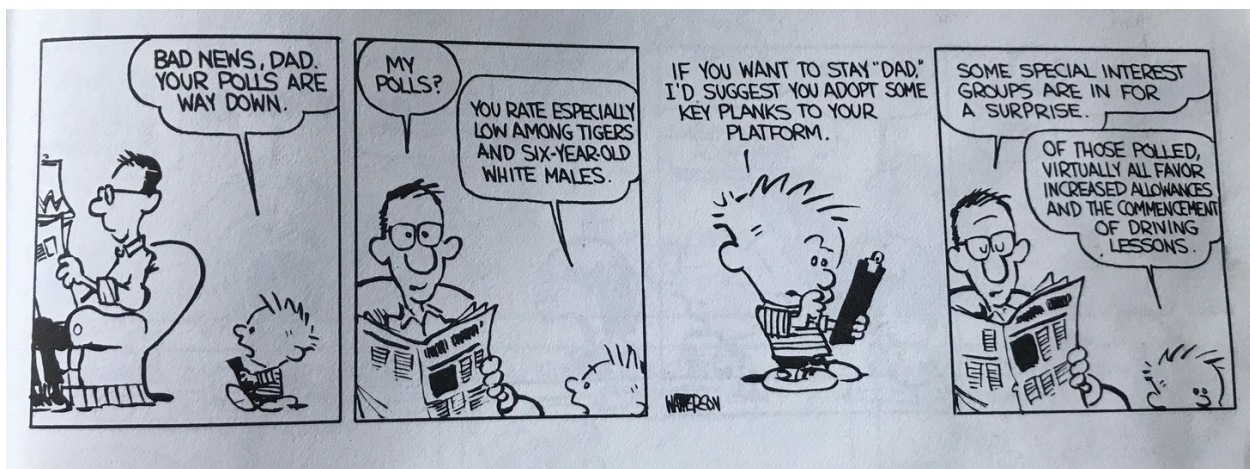
Put more simply:

Just because you expect your child to screw up doesn't mean you shouldn't give them the chance to screw up.

Of course, there are times you need to interfere because of level of risk to the child or to your family. Interfering should be the exception, however, not the rule. The most important point here is that you realize taking decisions and responsibility away from your child has liabilities.

Whenever possible, allow your child to make decisions and assume responsibility. When you aren't sure if your child is ready for a decision or responsibility, ask them. Allow them to make a case. If it is compelling, go with it. If it isn't, you always have the parental prerogative to overrule them. But allowing them to at least participate in the discussion is much better than nothing.

WHEN AND HOW TO INTERVENE (INTERFERE) WHEN YOU NEED TO



Sometimes as a parent, you need to interfere with a child's behavior. The consequences of the behavior to the child or someone else is too great to ignore. To avoid confusion, we can differentiate between needless, "unhealthy interfering" with necessary, "positive interfering," by referring to the latter as "intervening" rather than "interfering".

There are two main reasons you'll need to intervene with a child's behavior:

1. The child's behavior is going to cause real harm to their own person.

This behavior is usually a case of bad judgment. It may be a case of immediate harm (e.g., jumping off a 12-foot slide and getting hurt). Or it may be the case of harm over time (e.g., not brushing their teeth and winding up with cavities later on). It is the latter case that is more difficult, because it forces you as a parent to make a judgment call as to how harmful the behavior is going to be in the medium- to long-term. This is much harder than evaluating immediate consequences of an action. Children are particularly bad at evaluating risk over time – they want to live in the day.

2. The child's behavior is going to cause harm to or otherwise interfere with the functioning of someone else (often other family members).

This type of behavior is usually a case a child's being self-centered and not taking into account the well-being of others. Children are self-centered by nature -- is there anyone more narcissistic or self-involved than a baby? Part of growing up is learning to take other's feelings into account. Deciding when to intervene in this type of behavior is difficult because you need to balance the wants and needs of a child versus the wants and needs of the rest of the family (including you). Examples of this type of behavior would be a child's taking his sister's cookie, or having a tantrum and ruining dinner for the rest of the family.

In either case, as a parent you may make the judgment call that you need to intervene to stop or otherwise influence a child's behavior.

How and when to go about intervening with a child's behavior is one of the great challenges of parenting. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, and there is no "system" that will do the work for you. What works for your son may not work for your daughter. What works for your son when he is 11 may not work when he is 13. What works under normal circumstances for your daughter might not work immediately after her break-up with her boyfriend.

What's the risk of not intervening when you should?

The risk of not intervening in your child's behavior when you should is *enabling* your child. Essentially, your child takes your silence as implicit support for whatever behavior they are engaging in. This may not be much of a problem when it happens once, but when you look the other way repeatedly while your child does the same thing, their behavior may become a habit. Worse, *your* behavior of enabling your child becomes a habit. Both habits will be hard to break. Your son continues to take his sister's cookies as you feel increasingly unable to stop him.

The real problem arises when you finally do put your foot down, because your child has already gotten the message that whatever they have been doing is okay by you. They become indignant as well as unhappy. Their unhappiness may be doubly intense than how it would have been had you intervened earlier, or better yet the first time. They may even think that they will be able to bully you into submission on the issue.

FIVE GOOD PRINCIPLES FOR INTERVENING

Here are good rules of thumb for making unpopular decisions that can make your and your child's jobs easier. They all harken back to the basic good parenting principles outlined earlier.

1. Give your child a chance to fix their behavior themselves.

Don't intervene if you don't have to. Hold up a mirror to your child -- point out the potential consequences of their actions. They honestly might not have considered them. Or maybe their having the consequences pointed out by a respected parental figure will be enough to tip the balance in favor of their rethinking things. This is where your having given up control to gain authority can really pay dividends.

Intervening / interfering is often treating a child younger rather than older. Give them the opportunity to be the opposite. It works more often than many parents think.

2. Avoid adversarial dynamics.

The more you and your child can be on the same team, the better things will go. This is true even if you and your child disagree on how to get to a common goal. Focus on the relationship as much as (or more than) the problem. Team up when you can with your child.

This is easier said than done, because a natural inclination of kids (teens in particular) is to fight. Why? Because they are wired that way.

Teenagers are working hard on individuating. They need to be able to have their own personalities, their own values, their own ideas. They need to be able to have a favorite color that is different from their parents. If they can't separate themselves from their parents, they won't be able to survive on their own. This is what individuation is.

It's a long march for them. At times they may feel a need to show off their progress, and to prove to their parents, their friends, and most of all themselves, that they are indeed becoming separate human beings. What better way than to be contrary towards their parents? What better way than to say or do exactly the opposite of what their parent wants?

This push-back has several names: "oppositonality," "defiance," and "rebellion," to name a few. No matter what you call it, the good news is that it means that your child is working toward individuation. The bad news is that it may make your job more difficult, at least for now.

What's the solution to a child's being adversarial and looking for a fight?

Simply don't participate, don't be baited. There can't be war when only one army shows up to the battlefield. View each conflict with your child as a new opportunity to team up, regardless of how the last conflict went. At some point your child may surprise you and join your team, or let you join theirs. Maybe your continued refusal to engage in battle has worn them down. Maybe -- surprise! -- they actually want to work together with you toward a common goal.

Not participating in the fight doesn't mean giving in to a child's demands, which would be enabling them. It means not being baited into a verbal (or even physical) battle with a teenager that really can't be won. You can still do what you need to do as a parent (whether it is support, intervene, or ignore) without it into a blow-out the next-door neighbors can hear, even if your child is trying to escalate the confrontation into something more than it needs to be.

3. Recognize that punishment doesn't work (at least for what really matters).

Natural consequences are your friend. They are simply your child's experiment not yielding the expected results (the results *they* expected, at least!).

A common alternative to natural consequences is punishment.

Punishing is a parenting shortcut. It's an *un-natural* consequence. Your child sneaks a cookie from the jar, and gets smacked, or gets their iPad taken away, or gets grounded, or gets guilt-tripped (which is different from their feeling natural guilt). It is a consequence that has nothing to do with the cookie. It is a random, arbitrary result to your child's experiment.

There is no doubt that punishing can be an effective way to change a child's behavior, particularly when the child is young. Back in the days that parents had to spend all their time and energy just to survive, perhaps they needed to take more shortcuts simply because there was no better alternative available to them.

However, there are at least three problems with punishment:

1. It's a "solution" without a future.

The only reason you are able to inflict punishment on your child is that you are more powerful. As your child gets bigger, stronger, and smarter, punishment will become less and less effective and more and more counterproductive.

2. It makes it easy to fall into the "Good Behavior Trap".

The Good Behavior Trap: better behavior does not equal better psychology.

Better behavior does not mean your child has matured at all or has made progress in individuating. Your child may be easier to manage, sure. But does that help your child? Your child is changing their behavior based on fear of what you'll do, not because they've grown at all. Incidentally, "modifying" behavior through the use of "rewards" runs the same risk as that of using punishment. Both may produce change but change in behavior but it is likely to be superficial.

3. It gets in the way of a critical, healthy natural consequence: remorse.

One natural consequence to bad behavior that is easy to forget about is one of the most important: remorse. Despite the way it may seem sometimes, kids are perfectly capable

of distinguishing right from wrong, and of experiencing remorse and guilt. This is true whether or not they show it. Allowing a child some space and time to experience remorse or guilt is a good thing. If you've gained your child's respect for your authority, they will also experience the feeling of having disappointed you. By blowing up immediately you rob your child of those unpleasant, healthy feelings and important results of their experiment.

There are times when natural consequences are either slow in coming or not coming at all unless you bring them about. When that's the case, it's best to make the consequences as "natural" as possible. For example, if your 7-year-old steals a cookie from the cookie jar, maybe it's no cookie after dinner, rather than losing his iPad. At least this consequence involves a cookie. If your 16-year-old sneaks out with the car, maybe it's loss of car privileges until she earns your trust back, rather than loss of her phone. At least this consequence has to do with trust rather than a phone. If your 4-year-old throws a tantrum at dinner, maybe its enforced separation in his room until he can get himself under control rather than a 5-minute time out in a chair. At least this consequence has to do with regaining self-control in private rather than an arbitrary time limit and an arbitrary place.

4. Save the "because-I'm-your-parent!" card for when you really need it.

There are times as a parent you just have to make decisions for a child. It might be an emergency or "train-track moment" -- a situation in which your child is metaphorically laying on the tracks and a train is bearing down. You don't hesitate, ask, or consult a parenting brook -- you drag them off the tracks.

Or it might be something less dire -- it's simply a "because-I'm-your-parent!" moment. Maybe it is the most expedient way to get things done. Maybe you just need a breather.

Making a decision for a child, however, is really the ultimate in interference, and to the degree these unilateral decisions can be avoided, they should be.

Compromise, meeting a child half-way, and giving "benefit-of-the-doubt" can sometimes feel like accepting defeat as a parent, but it need not. Sure, as the parent you have the legal prerogative to make decisions for your child, but making decisions for your child comes with real liabilities:

1. It's interference in your child's experiments.
2. It fosters an adversarial dynamic with your child.
3. You may be making a decision that is "un-enforceable," or from a practical viewpoint not worth enforcing.

One strategy that can head off the need for unilateral decisions is the creation of proactive agreements with your child. These are best made when things have settled down, not in the heat of the moment during conflict. That's why they are called "proactive": they are made to head off or mitigate future conflict.

Maybe it's an agreement that you wait until the morning to discuss things more calmly. Maybe it's an agreement that your child will make their lunch the night before school to make the morning less frenetic. Maybe it's agreeing on a goal: you and your child both want your child to graduate high school, even though you have very different thoughts about how to get there. Anything is better than nothing, anywhere is a place to start. Team up whenever you can with your child.

Agreements are great because they signify a cooperative relationship and that you are willing to work together to get something done. They also are useful because they get your child "on record" as committed to whatever their end of the bargain is. Just remember that you yourself go on-the-record too, and as a role-model, it's in your best interest to uphold your own end of the bargain.

5. Embrace all feelings, guide all behavior.

Intervention, unpopular decisions, will make your child unhappy. Whether or not you think their unhappiness is "reasonable" or not.

It's a common misconception that we as humans are able to control our feelings. We simply aren't. Feelings are part of the human condition. Sometimes we are happy, sometimes sad, sometimes angry. Sometimes these feelings can be directly attributable to things going on around us or things that happen to us. Sometimes then seem to just come from within for no particular reason. Sometimes you just wake up on the wrong side of the bed. Especially teenagers.

People tend to fall into the trap of thinking they "shouldn't" feel one way or the other, or that others "shouldn't" feel one way or the other. This is nonsense. Feelings just are.

In the words of one psychiatrist:

"You cannot legislate feelings." (J. Gill)

Your child will feel sadness, anger, anxiety, and a host of other negative emotions when you intervene. Empathize, support, and embrace your child's feelings.

However, regardless of your child's feelings, you still have the job of guiding your child's behavior (i.e., intervening when necessary).

While it is not possible to control emotions, it *is* possible to control behavior 99.9% of the time. Sure, it may be really hard. It may take practice. But it's doable. The "thirty-million-dollar question" can demonstrate this truism pretty well. If someone offered you thirty million dollars to behave or not behave a certain way could you do it? If the answer is yes, there's your answer: it's a controllable behavior.

It's a common mistake to accept your child's feelings as inescapable causes for bad behavior. It's can be tempting to give your child an excuse because it is easier for you as a parent. It may save you from the need to hold your child accountable, which often requires your intervening.

After all, you, being in the function-better business, are responsible for guiding your child away from maladaptive, unhealthy behavior so they can become an independent, fully-functional adult.

You can embrace Jimmy's anger about not getting that ice cream, while also guiding Jimmy away from throwing tantrums when he doesn't get what he wants.

SOME EXAMPLES OF APPLYING THE GOOD PARENTING PRINCIPLES

THREE REASONS FOR A CHILD'S "BAD" BEHAVIOR

Ranked from most common to least.

1. Normal childhood individuation.
2. Confusing "bad" behavior with behavior you don't like.
3. Mental health issues (a distant third).

FOUR REASONS PARENTS INTERFERE TOO MUCH

Ranked from most common to least.

1. Normal anxiety about your child's individuation.
2. Bad advice from family, friends, and professionals.
3. Excessive need to control.
4. Not wanting your child to grow up.
 - * Fear that if you become obsolete as a parent, you've lost your meaning in life.

ON HANDLING EMERGENCIES: TRAIN TRACK MOMENTS

"Train-track moments" are times your child or family's well-being are in serious jeopardy. Your child is sitting on the railroad tracks and a train is bearing down. The only thing to do is grab your child and pull them off the tracks. It's "interference" that has happen.

One type of emergency is your child's issuing a credible threat to seriously harm themselves or others. The best response is to call 911 or bring your child to the emergency department.

What is a "credible" threat? If you aren't sure, then it's a credible threat. Leave it to people whose job it is to deal with emergencies (i.e., doctors and police), and who aren't your child's primary caregivers. The stakes are too high.

What is does "seriously harm" mean? Is superficial cutting or pushing a sibling serious harm? Maybe not. But if your child is threatening escalation, then probably so. Sometimes kids feel they aren't being properly heard and "up the ante".

You need your response to your child's threats to be simple and "algorithmic". In other words, if your child does "A" (i.e., threatens themselves or others) you simply do "B" (i.e., call 911). Your quick, decisive, and, if it is a repeated behavior, *consistent* response is critical. As much as possible, you also want to be *dispassionate* to avoid emotions negatively impacting your

judgment or giving your child any message other than you are in charge and making a decision in their best interests.

In addition to its being the safest possible course to protect your child and family, calling 911 or bringing your child to the ER gives your child some very important messages:

1. You love and care about them enough to **show up**.
2. You are **role modeling** being an adult and taking charge even when it isn't the easy thing to do.
3. If your child is issuing a threat in an attempt to manipulate you, you aren't going to **enable** (ignore or be held hostage to) their behavior. This is part of the reason why it is so important you are consistent and dispassionate in your response.
4. You are **avoiding adversarial dynamics** by making any protests that your child "didn't mean what they said" to be between the child and police or medical professionals, not you.

If your child is upset with you for taking action, that's okay: **you are not in the feel better business, but the function better business.**

In fact, your child's experience with you (i.e., your *relationship* with your child) during the crisis may be more important than the result of the intervention itself. An eight-hour wait in the emergency room only to be discharged home may seem like a waste of time, energy, and money, but the message your child receives about your taking responsibility and asserting yourself as a parent can be very powerful, whether you see it or not.

Calling 911 or going to the ER may seem to have a lot of downsides. In addition to the time, expense, and energy required, emergency rooms are overwhelmed and understaffed. You never know who the clinician will be talking to your child. While the whole process may seem disheartening (particularly if you've been through it before), it is almost always the "best" alternative during an emergency.

ON TRYING TO "FORCE" THERAPY OR MEDICATION

This virtually never works. If it isn't an emergency, offering the opportunity and encouraging a child to give therapy or medication a try is the best you can do.

1. It's **maximum support, minimum interference**.
2. It **treats your child as older rather than younger**.
3. It **avoids getting into an adversarial dynamic with your child**.
4. If a child is protesting they can change their behavior without professional treatment, **it gives your child a chance to fix their behavior themselves**.

It may well be your child could really use therapy or medication, but they have to be the ones to arrive at this conclusion themselves. If they really need it, they usually do, sooner or later.

ON "PATHOLOGIZING" YOUR CHILD

“Pathologizing” means looking for a mental health problem in your child where none exists, or inflating the seriousness of a mental health problem to include behavior it doesn't have anything to do with. Often it is caused or reinforced by bad professional advice.

Pathologizing happens for a number of reasons. A common one is that it provides an explanation for “bad behavior” (see the Three Reasons for Bad Behavior above) that excuses both the child *and* the parent from responsibility.

Pathologizing is bad because for several reasons:

1. It gives an inaccurate assessment of your child's issues.
2. It gives the child the message that something is wrong with them.
3. It provides both you and your child distraction from the real business at hand: their growing up. It usually ends up being unintentional **interference** in their growth.

Pathologizing your child also creates an all-to-easy excuse for them to **act younger rather than older**, and for you to **treat them as younger rather than older**. If your child figures it out and realizes you are pathologizing them, they will become angry with you (rightfully so). You want to **avoid this adversarial dynamic**.

ON SUPERFICIAL CUTTING

Superficial cutting is a form of self-harm involving a child's intentionally cutting themselves with a sharp object. The cuts are not deep and not intended to cause serious harm or death.

Superficial cutting is an especially thorny issue to deal with, because kids cut themselves for many different reasons. Most cutting is done as a way to communicate suffering or displeasure to others, or to distract from emotional pain, but there are a lot of other psychological and social reasons kids develop this bad habit. Most cutting is distressing to parents but not overtly “dangerous” to the child. There are some instances where cutting becomes deep, either due to accident or more likely a more serious mental health issue, such as a major mood disorder or PTSD.

If cutting escalates or otherwise becomes a “train track moment,” the right response is to call 911 or go to the emergency department.

Otherwise, the best approach is to view cutting as a symptom of a larger issue rather than the “main event.”

It becomes very easy with cutting to develop an **adversarial dynamic** with your child about it. One common way parents do this is by “locking up the sharps.”

“Locking up sharps” means literally trying to prevent your child's access to anything they might use to intentionally cut themselves with. Theoretically, this should protect your child. In the vast majority of cases, however, it is counterproductive, for the following reasons:

1. It gives your child the message that they cannot control their behavior.
2. **It is interference, and it treats your child as younger rather than older.**
3. It often becomes a tug-of-war with a child and **fosters adversarial dynamics.**
4. In focusing on the *behavior* rather than the *cause*, both you and your child can easily become distracted whatever the problem at hand really is.
5. It is impractical: your child will find a way to cut themselves if they really want to.
6. If your child truly is at that much risk of causing serious or lethal injury through cutting, they shouldn't be home anyway – they should be in the emergency room. If you aren't sure if they should be in the emergency room, then they should be in the emergency room.

Important Note:

Superficial cutting is different from overdosing on medication and wildly different from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Access to bottles of pills and firearms should be tightly restricted. These means of self-harm and suicide are simply too lethal too quickly, and both are qualitatively different from superficial cutting.

ON COURT INVOLVEMENT

Some kids ultimately have court involvement either because they have been arrested or because their family has sought help with their behavior from the judicial system. A court may become involved because a child is using drugs, running away from home, being destructive of property, stealing, or is otherwise out-of-control at home.

Usually, court involvement for the purposes of intervening in this kind of behavior is a good thing. Trying to protect a child who is engaging in this kind of behavior is usually a mistake. It is **unnecessary interference** in their development, and often **enabling** to them. It is **treating them younger rather than older**. You want your child to clean up their act before they turn 18 and consequences of their actions become graver.

Having the court involved is also a great way to **reduce the adversarial dynamic** with your child. Your child can bring any grievances (or carry on their conflict) with their Probation Officer rather than you, leaving you free to be your child's parent.

If your child is out-of-control at home (e.g., using drugs, breaking things, running away, etc.), it may be useful to proactively contact the court and seek their involvement before the situation get worse. States have different mechanisms for this (in New Hampshire, it is called a CHINS Petition), and it can be extremely helpful when other measures have failed.

HOW THE PRINCIPLES WORK AT DIRECTION

As previously stated, the only differences between a good therapist and a good parent is that therapists are marginally better-paid and get to go home at the end of the day.

Direction's programming is designed around the Principles of Good Parenting. Here's how we use them:

1. **Show Up.**

As Showing Up is the most important principle in good parenting, Direction is extremely selective in hiring only people who truly love working with kids and want to help those who struggle, above all else.

2. **Practice What You Preach.**

The counselors understand that their primary responsibility is not to tell kids how to get better, but to role model healthy behavior for them. A big part of that is role-modeling how to manage relationships, conflicts, and being a positive members of a group. A good description of the skills they practice and model for the group is contained in the Behavioral Guidelines appended at the end of this section.

3. **Maximum Support, Minimum Interference**

This is where Direction's philosophy really differs from many other programs.

We strive to maintain a very basic structure that ensures maximum support but a minimum of unnecessary interference.

How do we provide maximum support? We maintain a healthy group culture.

Maintaining a healthy group culture is essential. It's the reason kids want to come and often are unhappy when their time in the program ends. It's the reason they listen to the other kids.

We are in the function-better business, not the feel-better business. When kids show us their unhealthy habits, we draw attention to them, and challenge them to replace them with better ones so they become more healthy and functional. We challenge them to become better group members by encouraging them to practice skills described in the Behavioral Guidelines. Because **we seek to gain authority rather than control**, kids are much more receptive to taking feedback as being constructive rather than critical. This is important because getting this feedback often doesn't *feel* like support to the child, even though it is.

When they screw up, which kids invariably do, we continue to support them. We never give up on kids. No kid is ever “kicked out” of the program. There are times that kids may be Restricted because their behavior has a negative impact on the group culture, but they are welcomed back should they show genuine re-commitment to the group during their Reintegration meeting.

How are we committed to minimum interference? We avoid “over-structuring” things.

Participation in Direction's Program has only two requirements for your child: a desire to attend and a commitment to being a positive group member.

What “being a positive group member” means is further detailed in our Behavioral Guidelines. The Behavioral Guidelines simply outline a series of good, healthy habits that allow one to benefit from and be a benefit to any group or family.

In keeping requirements for participation simple and to a minimum, **we avoid the potential for adversarial dynamics**. The more “rules” and “regulations” that are in place in any organization, the more potential there is for conflict.

We keep Direction's structure as simple and unobtrusive as possible. Kids who are committed to being positive group members are welcome in the program and given as much freedom during the day as we can give. They can participate in some activities and not others. They are never “forced” to talk if they don't want to. We don't prevent them from making friends, and we leave monitoring and evaluation of these relationships outside the program to parents.

There are two sit-down groups during the day in which kids sit in a circle and share experiences, thoughts, questions, and feedback with each other. Staff offer their own counsel and help kids negotiate conflict with others in the group. They understand, however, that their role is to be *guides* not *managers*.

We avoid lectures, homework, schedules, and anything else that would be extraneous to what we are trying to do. As much as possible, we avoid separating kids into different “categories” based on diagnosis, gender, age, or reason for attending. We want our group to be a single, cohesive unit.

Like parents, there are times we need to intervene to protect the child or our “family” (the group) from unhealthy behavior. We intervene in these instances for two reasons:

1. We do not want to *enable* and reinforce kids' unhealthy behavior, which would be bad for them.
2. We do not want kids' unhealthy behavior to negatively impact the group culture, which would be bad for everyone else.

Intervention may reach the level of **Restriction**, in which we ask the child to separate themselves from the group. While Restricted, the child is not permitted to attend or participate in the program. This gives them an opportunity to **fix their own behavior** should they choose to do so.

During Restriction, kids have an opportunity to re-evaluate their desire to be in the program. Most kids want to be part of a positive culture.

Should they desire to return, we **treat them older rather than younger** and require them (not their parent) to call themselves to request a Reintegration Meeting. They may call at any point – the next day, the next week, the next year. In refraining from having an arbitrary time limit for Restriction, or requiring anything else besides their personal recommitment to being positive group members, **we avoid Restriction's being a punishment**, which would be counterproductive.

Everything at Direction's program is done with one goal in mind: to help kids individuate, grow up, and not need us anymore.

Our goal, like that of any good parent, is to become obsolete. Our goal is to do our work and then get out of your child's way. There are plenty of more kids for us to help!

WHAT ARE THE BEHAVIORAL GUIDELINES?

The Behavioral Guidelines were put together by Joe Walsh, a co-founder of Direction, as part of a larger approach to healthy living he called “Wholeistic Education.”

They represent a collection of healthy relationship skills that everyone can – and should -- develop. Joe’s stance was that the ability to have healthy relationships was the single most important factor in living one’s most healthy, content life.

He viewed the Guidelines as a collection of skills that could be incorporated into one’s life and practiced so they became habit. Much of his life was dedicated, in fact, to “practicing the Guidelines.”

Direction continues to use the Guidelines as a way of describing the skills we should all strive to attain in our efforts to be positive members of the group. We ask all clients and staff to commit to practicing these habits, because maintaining a positive group culture is critical to the work we do.

THE BEHAVIORAL GUIDELINES

(HOW TO BE A POSITIVE GROUP MEMBER)

1. MAINTAIN ATTITUDE OF RESPECT AND DIGNITY.

- a. Politely greet, welcome, and acknowledge efforts of all.
- b. Calmly request space if emotionally overwhelmed.
- c. Apologize for any possible offense, including accidents.

2. USE LANGUAGE AND BODY RESPONSIBLY.

- a. Avoid offensive words, including those of a racial, ethnic, religious, or sexual nature.
- b. Refrain from using language or body to intimidate or injure.
- c. Calmly ask for explanation of any confusion, disagreement, conflict or concern.

3. PROACTIVELY COOPERATE.

- a. Seek opportunities to assist others, and resist urges to embarrass or undermine.
- b. Gratefully acknowledge authority of leaders.
- c. Treat all members as teammates, regardless of personal feelings.

4. CAREFULLY ATTEND TO HEALTH AND SAFETY.

- a. Alert an adult to any physical pain or danger.
- b. Control body movement such that self or others are not injured.
- c. Wear activity-appropriate clothing.
- d. Keep body properly groomed (e.g., daily bathing, teeth brushing, etc.).
- e. Take good care of all furniture, equipment, facilities, and environment.

5. HONESTLY GIVE BEST EFFORT.

- a. Calmly communicate all perceived offenses.
- b. Earnestly participate in just resolution of dispute.
- c. Put education, wellness of self and others, and responsibility to community ahead of personal image and interests.