



## **PARENT HANDBOOK**

Direction Behavioral Health Associates

# DIRECTION PROGRAM INFORMATION

## CLINICAL SERVICES PROVIDED

Direction offers three services in our Intensive Outpatient and Partial Hospitalization Programs to help kids and their families.

### 1. Psychiatric Evaluation and Treatment

Your child's intake helps us understand where their challenges are coming from, and how we can be most helpful to your family. The sources of these problems usually include a combination of factors: environmental (e.g., family conflict, school stress, social issues), developmental (e.g., immature ways of coping with the world), and biological (e.g., chemical imbalances like depression). As our understanding of these challenges grow, we can come up with a plan as to how to address them.

Because we see kids over time (usually a period of weeks), we can continually modify our assessment over the course of the program.

Clients meet regularly with the psychiatrist, who works with Direction's therapists to manage treatment and address any new issues that arise. In addition, the psychiatrist provides medication management for kids in the program with biological factors that are part of the picture.

### 2. Group Therapy

The Direction Community-Based Education Model teaches kids how to build and maintain healthy relationships to improve their ability to function in the world.

Our Community is the heart and soul of our program. From a treatment perspective, it can be considered to be how we "do group therapy" at Direction. From a broader perspective, it is an educational model designed to help all community members function better in the world and move toward a state of optimal wellness.

At Direction, we employ our Leadership Principles and Behavioral Guidelines to build community. These principles and guidelines ensure that all members develop healthier habits and better relationship skills through community support and authentic feedback. We commit to practicing proactive habits to grow into more functional, compassionate, and resilient adults.

The key to the Direction Community is positive culture. To maintain this culture, our day consists of a blend of:

- Sit-down groups (typically one at 1:30 and another at 4:00).
- Activities (e.g., walks, sports, yoga, music, art).

- Freeform, loosely-structured time.

We work to help individual community members:

- Develop healthy habits.
- Build healthy relationships.
- Navigate conflict.
- Make plans for overcoming obstacles and pursuing individual goals.

Our clinical staff does not make clients “better”. They create a community, environment, and culture that supports clients in their pursuit of wellness.

### 3. Parenting Groups

You can create a similarly positive group culture in your family.

In our weekly Parenting Groups, we teach parents *Direction’s Leadership Principles* and how to apply them at home. As previously stated, these are the same principles we require our clinical staff to employ in our groups. Our goal is to help parents become more effective leaders in their own group (i.e., their families) and create a healthy, positive group culture at home.

Our approach to parenting is simply a reflection of our approach to leadership, and gaining an understanding of how we do things will help you understand the experience your child will have at Direction. For this reason, we recommend you attend our Parenting Groups, and that you reach out to staff with other parenting-related questions.

### **PROGRAM SCHEDULE**

Office Hours:	Monday through Friday, 10 AM to 6 PM
Partial Hospitalization Program:	Monday through Friday, 1 PM to 6 PM
Intensive Outpatient Program:	Monday through Friday, 3 PM to 6 PM

Direction is closed the following holidays:

New Year’s Day  
 Martin Luther King Day  
 President’s Day  
 Memorial Day  
 Fourth of July  
 Labor Day  
 Columbus Day  
 Veteran’s Day  
 Thanksgiving Day and the day after Thanksgiving Day  
 Christmas Eve and Christmas Day

DBHA on occasion closes for inclement weather (e.g., snow days). If so, we will call or email you.

### **AFTER-HOUR ISSUES**

Normally, care outside of office hours must be made by appointment. Clinical emergencies (including threatened or actual harm to self or others, a child's running away, serious medication reactions like significant allergy) should be dealt with immediately by bringing your child to the Emergency Room or by calling 911. For other urgent matters which are not an emergency, we have an on-call service that can be accessed by calling our main number at 880-8188.

### **IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT DISCHARGE PLANNING**

Although we believe our program would be beneficial for clients for longer-term periods of time in many cases, private insurance companies view our services as a short-term intervention and frequently authorize a shorter length of stay than we would recommend in an "ideal world" in which costs of treatment were not an issue.

We do our best to advocate for the care and length of stay that we believe is in your child's best interest. Nonetheless, obtaining authorizations for days from insurance companies is usually done in "batches" of a few days at a time, and it can be an unpredictable process dependent upon both the insurance company and particular reviewer with whom we are dealing. We do our best to give as much advance notice about potential discharge as possible, but unfortunately at times can give no more than 2 or 3 days. Please note you likely will be receiving letters from the insurance company stating how many days are currently authorized. This does NOT necessarily mean your child will be discharged after these days are used. It means we will need to review with the insurance company the potential need for further authorization of days. In other words, unless you hear from us your child is still considered to be in the program.

**It is critical to setting in place an appropriate plan for when discharge does occur. Although we can be helpful in the process, it is generally required that parents themselves call outpatient agencies and providers to set up outpatient intakes and appointments. Providers capable of prescribing medication (i.e., either psychiatrists or nurse practitioners) are in particularly short supply in the Nashua area. Most primary care physicians are not comfortable continuing to prescribe psychiatric medication, although there are some exceptions.**

**If your child is to be started on medication in the PHP/IOP and does not currently have a medication provider, we recommend you immediately begin the process of obtaining one, because there can often be a waiting period of weeks or even months before the first appointment can be scheduled.**

Your insurance carrier maintains a list of in-network providers. In addition, please see Outpatient Provider Document included in this packet.

Once an intake is scheduled, we would be happy to provide your new provider with information from your child's stay at Direction.

## **DIRECTION'S PARENTING GROUPS**

Being a parent is hard. In Direction's Parenting Groups, we do our best to help.

Our philosophy may be very different from others you have encountered, but we believe it to be the best way to approach the challenges of parenting and our ultimate goal of raising our kids to become healthy, independent adults. In the Parenting Groups we teach *Direction's Principles of Leadership* and how you can apply them in your own home. These principles are universally applicable to the challenges kids and their families face. In fact, what we teach is the exact same approach we use in our groups every day, and it is a major factor we have been successful in helping thousands of kids over the years.

Parenting Groups are open to the public and take place at our facility on Wednesday's from 5 – 6PM. To get the most out of your child's time at Direction, we recommend all parents attend. Not only will the groups provide you a window into the experience your child is having in the program, but it also may give you a whole new way to think about parenting and help you in your own journey to raise your child to become a healthy, independent adult.

## **DIRECTION'S AFTERCARE GROUPS**

For many adolescents, the end of their time in the Direction Intensive Outpatient Program is both a source of pride but also of anxiety (sometimes for their families, too!). Transitioning from the structure and support of Direction experience to their normal lives can be quite a challenge. To help ensure a successful transition, Direction offers Aftercare Groups.

These Aftercare Groups take place between 4:30 and 6:00 PM, as an integrated part of our Intensive Outpatient Program (IOP). In other words, Aftercare clients will be incorporated directly into the IOP Groups. This integrated design allows kids completing the IOP to continue to participate in the Direction experience. The only differences will be that Aftercare clients will participate for 90 minutes, and psychiatric oversight / medication management will need to be provided by outside providers.

Aftercare Groups are available Monday through Friday, from 4:30 PM to 6:00 PM, and are covered by major insurances. They operate with a fluid, open membership, allowing clients to choose their level of participation from week to week. If your child would like to attend, please call Catie (603.880.8188 Ext 1) a few days prior to attending this group.

## WHAT “RESTRICTION” MEANS AT DIRECTION

Creating and maintaining a positive group culture at Direction is critical to what we do. The culture we create is essential for the progress kids make here. It’s what makes the magic happen.

It is crucial for us to protect our group culture. We expect all group members (staff and clients alike) to commit to social standards that keep our group a supportive environment in which all group members can thrive. Our social standards are described in *Direction’s Behavior Guidelines*. The Guidelines are nothing more than a collection of good social habits. They describe basic decent social behavior.

Being perfect isn’t necessary, or possible. As long as a group member is showing *commitment* to the Guidelines -- they are welcome in our group. One of the key tasks of our group leaders is to see to it that we maintain a positive culture and ensure that everyone in the group is committed to practicing our social standards. Direction’s Leadership Principles require our group leaders to “protect the culture of the larger group.”

The Behavioral Guidelines are non-negotiable at Direction. If we believe a client is not committed to the Guidelines, they may be “Restricted,” which means they are asked to leave the group. Direction is a voluntary program. We respect each group member’s right to accept or reject our social standards. The process of Restriction acknowledges that a group member has chosen to leave the group.

If Restricted during group, a client is asked to move out of the group space and into our waiting room. Parents are called, informed of their child’s Restriction, and will need to pick their child up. The child is not permitted to participate in the program while Restricted.

If a client wishes to return to the program (“Reintegrate”), they should call us and request a Reintegration Meeting. It is important that the child calls, not the parent. During their Reintegration Meeting, staff and the child discuss their commitment to the Guidelines and potential return to the program, keeping in mind that our maintaining a positive group culture is paramount.

# **DIRECTION'S BEHAVIORAL GUIDELINES**

## **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. Keep body properly groomed.
- c. 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.



# **FAMILY LEADERSHIP AND GOOD PARENTING**

Direction Behavioral Health Associates

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



# **DIRECTION'S LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES**

## **1. SHOW UP.**

- a. Extend love to all group members.
- b. Never give up on any group member.

## **2. PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH.**

- a. Lead by example, not by decree.
- b. Be a positive role model.
- c. Give up control to gain authority.

## **3. ENCOURAGE GROUP MEMBERS TO GROW.**

- a. Provide maximum support with minimum interference.
- b. Allow space for failure.
- c. Recognize reward and punishment are not durable.
- d. Encourage group members to take responsibility for all their actions and decisions.

## **4. INTERVENE WHEN YOU NEED TO.**

- a. Lead decisively during train-track moments.
- b. Protect the culture of the larger group.
- c. Avoid adversarial dynamics.
- d. Avoid enabling unhealthy behavior.
- e. Remember you are not in the feel-better business, but the function-better business.

## 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!

## HOW THE LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES CAN HELP

*“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.

We believe that the four most important principles of parenting are the same as those described in *Direction’s Leadership Principles*. They are:

1. Show up.
2. Practice what you preach.
3. Encourage all group members to grow.
4. Intervene when you need to.

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. Encouraging your child to grow means providing support to your child but also staying out of the way as they explore the world and take risks. Intervening when you need to, means stepping in as a parent to protect your child’s interests or the interests of the rest of the family when you need to.

Each principle will get its own section.

### **A WORD OF WARNING**

If you haven’t been following these principles 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 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.

Showing up means also never giving up on your child. There are instances when you may be very unpopular indeed with your child, and even instances when you need to insist your adult child leave your home to keep from enabling their maladaptive behavior and protect your family. There may be times that such “tough love” makes sense – but what you do should always be done out of love, and not because you have given 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 to eat and what not to 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 that 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 four good principles of parenting: by being a loving, maximally supportive, minimally-interfering positive role model who intervenes when needed. 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: ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO GROW

*“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 on 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. Put bluntly, it is important that you give your child the space to fail.

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.

### **RECOGNIZE THAT REWARD AND PUNISHMENT AREN'T DURABLE**

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 not durable*: it is 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 in behavior, but it will 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.

## **ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ALL THEY DO**

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 encourage your child take more and more responsibility -- 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:

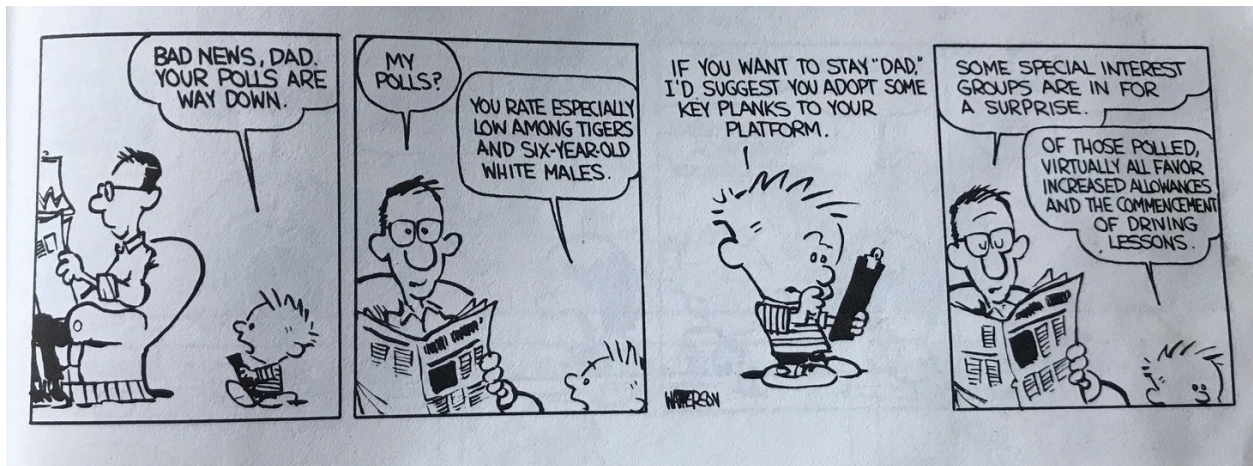
*Just because you expect your child to screw up doesn't mean you shouldn't give them the chance to screw up.*

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.

## PRINCIPLE FOUR: INTERVENE 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".

### LEAD DECISIVELY DURING 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 someone else. 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 and the family's 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.

## **PROTECT THE CULTURE OF THE LARGER GROUP / AVOID ENABLING**

Other than during train-track moments, there are two situations in which 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.

*It is important to remember that you have not only a duty to your child, but a duty of the rest of the family as well. In other words, you need to protect the culture of the larger group.*

Whether a child is causing problems for themselves or the larger family, 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 daughter runs up the dental bills due to cavities. Your son continues to take his sister's cookies as you feel increasingly unable to stop him.

Remember that you have a duty to avoid enabling your child not only for their own best interests, but for the best interests of the rest of the family.

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.

## **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 turning 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.

## **REMEMBER YOU ARE NOT IN THE FEEL-BETTER BUSINESS, BUT THE FUNCTION-BETTER BUSINESS**

As stated earlier, 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 they seem to just come from within for no particular reason. Sometimes you just wake up on the wrong side of the bed. Especially if you are teenager.

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).

In the words of one therapist:

*“Embrace all feelings, guide all behaviors.” (J. Walsh)*

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 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.

