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education of intense children simply requires a slightly different spin. As for Matthew, Brandon and Monique, they are all doing great, living out new scripts of success. And as for their parents, they are savoring both their own accomplishments and that of each of their children.

### A NEW PRIMER

#### *Understanding the Difficult Child*

**I**n order to best teach you the techniques, we'd like to introduce you to a few of our basic premises that explain the thinking behind the techniques. It will greatly increase your therapeutic impact and help you understand what you are doing and why you are doing it.

These first chapters will keep you briefly on hold while we explain the pieces of the puzzle that we think are crucial. This chapter is not about techniques, so even if you can't stand the suspense and want to jump ahead, hang in there for the next 35 pages. The techniques will follow.

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

#### *Playthings 'R Us*

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

Simply translated: we are *by far* our child's favorite "toy."

We not only have many more features than any other “toy,” but we are much more animated, reactive and interactive, as well as having the best remote control ever made.

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

It isn't even close to a level playing field. *The other “toys” can't compete.* We are the closest things to a personal entertainment center imaginable.

We can also combine our actions and feelings into seemingly limitless interactive pairings. We can wash the dishes in a flourishing blend of glory, song and dance on one day, and the very next day we can be doing the dishes in an utterly foul mood.

The volume buttons on these “toys” are readily and handsomely displayed, as are all the other buttons that, when pushed, really get the show going.

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

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

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

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

*The conclusion is that we are by far their most fascinating “toy” and that this “toy” operates in much more interesting ways when things are going wrong.*

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

## *The Flatliners*

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

Get out your Geiger counters.

Our cultural ways of saying “Thank you” and “Good job” pale in comparison to the sharper tones we display even in simple redirections such as “Leave your brother alone” or stronger reminders such as “Get your shoes on, the bus will be here in two minutes.”

As a culture, we seem to amp up the “nos” in contrast to the “yesses.”

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

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

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

As an illustration, if a child perceives that mom or dad gives a bigger reaction to poor grades or annoying behavior, the child absorbs and measures this experience, and other like experiences, as part of her impression of the world and of how we operate.

Similarly, if a child sees that doing the chores, or doing homework, or having a good attitude or not breaking the rules nets less response, that child begins forming an operational view of reality.

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

*It's much more about reaction than attention.*

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

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

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

Fortunately, there are some great choices that make a world of difference.

## *Video Game Therapy*

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

For the time they are playing, they are captivated, content, focused and alive. *The reason is that their lives make total sense while they are engaged in the game.*

While they are avoiding dangers or attaining the goals, they are forever being acknowledged and recognized with landmarks of success. When they break a rule of the game, they get a clear and immediate consequence. The timing is always perfect.

Children figure out in no time flat that the game is totally consistent and predictable. There's no getting around the program.

It's unflappable. It can't be bullied or manipulated. No amount of tantrums or pleading or nagging can change the format.

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

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

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

The secret is amazingly simple. Video games have the structure that more and more children need and demand. **Acknowledgment and consequences** are reflected in completely straightforward ways. Frequent audible "bells and whistles" and discernible continuous scoring reward the child's positive accomplishments as well as steps in the right direction.

Conversely, clear and immediate consequences mark actions that are unacceptable. When the consequence is over, it's right back to scoring.

Much like athletic events, the lines defining a consequence are perfectly clear alongside the clearly delineated ways that the goals are achieved. The cheering, encouragement and scoring always happen in bounds, *while simultaneously the knowledge exists that there is always a result of a transgression, no matter how slight*. The referee doesn't yell or scream at a player, but simply states the consequence neutrally while still holding the player fully accountable. There is no excitement or energy given to the broken rule, just a result.

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

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

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

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

*We are not enamored by the subject matter of most video games that we've seen on the market. The gratuitous violence and frequently inane content are unwelcome guests in our homes. However, the crucial question is: can we*

*observe, learn and apply these principals to parenting our challenging children away from failures and toward new patterns of success?*

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

## *The Big Bang Theory*

Children are attracted to energy. They feel energy and they quickly perceive what it is that produces fireworks.

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

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

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

Unfortunately, when a child perceives that there is far more energy and animation available for negative behavior, it becomes fascinating to attempt to light up all the lights. Many very intense and intelligent children have fixated the greater part of their wits and intelligence on figuring out just how to make "Us" have the very strongest reactions. If it's the bigger fireworks that capture their interest, then the child might just discover a few circumstances under which the "toy" tends to have some pretty interesting reactions.

Of course, this represents a horrible waste for the child and hell for the parent. However, the child may well feel at some level as if he had hit the jackpot.

The risk of this phenomenon increases when the child has a high level of energy and sensitivity, along with a heightened need for attention, and *when the child perceives negativity as the best or only way to get the bells, lights and whistles really going*. Under these conditions, the child quickly figures out the “video game” and realizes that **not doing what the parent wants** essentially gets far more reaction and emotion.

Many parents aptly describe this experience in terms of the child’s “pushing their buttons.” *“He really knows how to push my buttons.”* Of course, we all have buttons. We all have particular behaviors that are especially frustrating or especially annoying to us. Some of us simply advertise where those buttons are and exactly what it takes to push them. Most of us do this to one extent or another without realizing what hit us and without realizing that there are indeed ways to create better buttons!

When our children are feeling especially needy or sensitive or energized, they can often dial into our reactions by manifesting particular behaviors that will draw us into the trap. We are particularly vulnerable when we are stressed or distracted and our child takes note that we are otherwise unavailable. We might as well wear neon signs declaring that the only way our attention is available is to push a button and extract a reaction, albeit negative in nature. To a child who is feeling needy, certainly no crime in itself, any response is better than no response at all.

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

**We must create a new perception—that we as “Toys” or as the “Entertainment Center” indeed radiate greater responses when the challenging behaviors are *not* happening and when successful behaviors *are* happening.**

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

***Our challenging children are not out to get us. They are out to get our energy.***

## PATTERNS

### *Moving Mountains*

**P**atterns of negative response can form in incredibly subtle ways and can become significant factors of family life before parents have a chance to figure out just what hit them.

The parents who seek help because of a difficult child are truly caught between a rock and a hard place. ***They are almost always doing something truly amazing.***

**They are invariably doing the very best job they can with the tools they have.** It may not appear that way to an outsider and it certainly may not feel that way to them. However, without a doubt, when examined closely, *most parents of difficult children are actually using very conventional and acceptable methods of parenting that would have an excellent chance of working well with a child with an easier temperament.*

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

**Despite the best of intentions, attempts to apply conventional parenting or teaching techniques to the difficult child are doomed to**