

Better Behavior Without Stress

Karen DeBolt, MA

Illustrations by Andrew Nguyen

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Illustrations by: Andrew Nguyen

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*For my children, Talla, Molly
and Sam, who taught me more
than I could have dreamed.*

*For my husband, Dan, who
helped me dream what is
possible.*

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Introduction

I've been writing on parenting topics for several years now, and I realize that most of what I write about comes down to just a few tools that I use over and over again. When I say use, I do mean use, with my own children as well as my clients. Parenting is not simple—it's not like I have the magic wand that is going to make your children turn into perfect angels. Truthfully, I wouldn't even want to do that. For all of my worries and stresses with my son, I would not change a hair on his head. After a long process of learning and growing, I laugh way more than I cry these days and that is what I wish for you ... not perfection, but progress.

This book is a compilation of all the tools that I have learned up until now. I will pass along my reference materials as well, and the counseling that I have gotten has been invaluable to this process. My hope is that this book will get you started on a path to discovering the best ways to work with your own children and with yourself.

Pat yourself on the back for all the hard work that you have done so far. Thank you for joining me on this adventure to calm the chaos in your home.

“THAT’S IT!” The moment of truth

When your car starts smoking and making that bad clunking noise or your water heater explodes, leaving water all over the floor, you probably don’t have any problem with calling a friend for advice or calling in the appropriate professional to help you solve the problem. No one usually feels shame if they can’t do their own plumbing without help or fix their own car.

Yet, when an emotional crisis hits in a family or, even worse, an ongoing never-ending list of challenges leaves us feeling exhausted, many feel too ashamed to ask for help. They feel embarrassed when the problem becomes apparent to friends or family or even that lady in the grocery store. Somehow they feel that they should be able to handle it themselves, without any help from anyone. They feel embarrassed that they don’t “have it all together like everybody else.”

When my son was 4 years old, I was deeply in denial about our problems. He was getting more and more aggressive and his preschool teacher, a lovely woman who had worked

with all my children for six years, finally threw up her hands and gave up. She said, “I just don’t know what else to try. I’m very worried about him.”

It was one of those “That’s it!” moments for me.

I knew that I had to swallow my embarrassment and get help for my family now. My shame had me in denial, and I couldn’t afford to stay in that place anymore. So I went to see a professional and I learned a lot about what is often called “Behavior Modification.” This was just the first step in a long journey, but it was important for me to stop feeling ashamed of being a “bad mother” and instead concentrate on learning new skills to parent a child who needed something different than I was able to provide up until then.

If there is one message that I hope my experience relates, it is “Don’t wait!” The sooner you get the help that you need, the sooner things will begin to be better for your children as well as yourself.

Are you having a “That’s it!” moment?

Below are some signs and symptoms that it may be time to make a change. How many of these are true for your family? More than three “yes” answers may indicate that you have reached a “That’s it!” moment too.

1. You find yourself avoiding certain social situations with your child because you are worried about your child's behavior.
2. You have friends or family members constantly giving you unsolicited advice about your child.
3. You are getting calls from school or day care about your child's problem behavior.
4. You find yourself losing your cool more than once a week.
5. You feel embarrassed by your child's behavior in public.
6. You feel hopeless about being able to make any changes because nothing seems to be working so far.
7. Your child seems to be either angry or sad much of the time each day.
8. You find yourself arguing with your partner about the best way to handle parenting your child.
9. You often find comfort in food or other unhealthy habits to relieve stress.
10. You are worried that your relationship with your child is beginning to suffer.

A challenge to face

You wouldn't be reading this book if you didn't have a very challenging child who is hard to parent. You have already been doing everything that you know how to do, but even what works for your other children doesn't work with this child. You may have taken your child to the doctor, a psychologist or counselor, or even a psychiatrist. Yet, placing letters of diagnosis still don't necessarily help you with the very unique parenting skill set that you need to help your child be successful. Having your child attend a weekly – or more commonly, monthly – session with a professional can be extremely helpful, but the bottom line is that you are there each and every day on the front lines. You are your child's best therapist.

Being your child's therapist

I remember when a psychologist first stated this concept to me. I was dismayed at the idea that I could be my child's therapist when I already thought that I was a horrible mother. The psychologist patiently explained that what works for an intense child like mine is different than what works for the typical kid. I knew this at a deep level because my daughters, who are older than my son, were so much easier to parent. The psychologist suggested some books to read and gave me some ideas to try. None of this was completely effective at first, but it began my journey to find

effective parenting techniques that worked for me and for my child.

In order to be effective, you need a tool kit to help you cope with the day-to-day situations that arise. You already have some tools, so looking at the things that you are doing now that really work and getting rid of the things that you do that don't work would be a really good idea. Hopefully, there will be some new ideas here to help you decide what is not working and to tune up what is already working as well as add new tools to your arsenal.

Your armor

You may think that because things at home are not going so well that you are not a good parent. The fact that you are here reading this book tells me that is not the case. You may keenly feel the judgments of family members, neighbors, teachers, church members, and even that old cranky woman at the grocery store. That shame and embarrassment is almost worse than struggling with your challenging child.

The fact is that these judgmental people do not have a clue how hard it is, and I want to support you to know that, yes, this is hard, exhausting work. I also want you to remember that this is not your fault. You did not sign up for this and nothing you did caused it. That said, there are things that you can do that will help to make things better. Often the solution to a problem has nothing to do with the cause of

the problem, and this is one of those cases. So, if someone handed you this book, I hope you will not see that as a criticism, but as a helping hand as it is intended.

Parenting a very intense, challenging child is not the same as parenting a typical child. Those skills simply will not be very effective. However, what works for the intense child also works well for the typical child, so don't despair that you have to use two sets of rules and skills. Your typical child and your intense child will shine using the techniques that I explain in this book.

Specific praise

“Not again!”

You just told your child for the 10,000th time not to jump on the couch, pull the cat’s tail or pester his sister. Why does he keep doing these things?! Is he trying to drive you crazy? It can sure feel that way, but in fact your child is not invested in how large your therapy bill is, and he has no idea how many times counting to 10 has saved his life.

There is a better way to calm the chaos and have more happiness. I will describe how negative patterns begin and how they get out of control. Then I’ll explain a technique, which I have found to be key in reversing the negative behavior spiral. First, let’s explore how those negative patterns got set in the first place.

A demand for more energy

Some people would say, “That child is just seeking attention.” While attention does fulfill a need, there is more to the story. All humans require a certain amount of

energy. This energy can come from many sources, including other people, nature, and spiritual practice, to name a few.

You have probably had the experience of feeling very drained after talking to a difficult person. This person may have been draining energy from you. Children also need energy, and while some children are able to intuitively get energy themselves, others struggle to get their needs met without resorting to challenging behavior.

He doesn't care if the energy is positive or negative, he just knows subconsciously that he needs it and needs a lot of it.

So how does pulling the cat's tail fulfill this need?

When your daughter pulls the cat's tail, she receives an instant boost of energy from the cat's yowl. She then gets a second dose when you lecture her about how to treat the cat gently. With one fell swoop, she can get a double dose of energy. If she goes back and does it again five minutes later, you are probably going to lose your temper, which feeds this negative energy spiral even more.

When was the last time you got as animated about something good she did as you got when she did something that frustrated you?

It is human nature to take everyday good behavior for granted. Isn't this the way it's supposed to be? You might remember to thank your child for a chore well done with a generic "good job," but in order to get a big energetic payoff, your child has to do something pretty darn good. So, if you think about it, it is much, much easier to pester a sister or jump on the couch.

To get the better behavior you want, you need to shift that energetic emphasis.

How to shift the emphasis

Simply put, the balance needs to shift so that negative behaviors receive a very matter-of-fact treatment – and good behavior receives animated, specific praise.

Specific Praise = energy

This is not just “catching your child being good.” This is actually creating situations where your child can receive praise.

Praise does four things for your child:

- It feels great!
- It reinforces behaviors you want to see
- It encourages even more good efforts
- It strengthens your relationship

Mikey gets ready

Mikey was driving his mom, Arlene, and dad, James, bonkers with his constant arguing and

back talk. His mom could say, "Mikey, let's go to the park." And he would have an argument every step of the way from putting on shoes and jacket to buckling his seat belt. Once he got to the park, he loved it, but it was so exhausting getting him there that Arlene didn't take him very often.

Someone suggested to Arlene that Mikey may be having trouble transitioning from one activity to another, so Arlene began letting Mikey know ahead of time what would happen that day as well as letting him know well in advance of a transition.

But Mikey still struggled.

When Arlene heard about specific praise, she figured it was worth a try. She began to use specific praise with Mikey during every step of the getting ready process. "Mikey, you put your sock on your foot!" "Mikey you put your shoes on all by yourself!" "Mikey, I'm so proud of the way you buckled your seat belt without me reminding you!" All of this praise was delivered in a genuinely animated voice punctuated with clapping

hands or an amazed, "Wow, look at you!" Now, **that got Mikey's attention and filled him up with energy as well as self-confidence.**

Over time, Mikey began to get ready for the day double quick, and Arlene noticed he was really feeling good about himself. Woo-hoo!

Okay, so how do I do it?

The trick is to be as descriptive and as animated as you can. This may feel very weird at first, but as with anything new, the more you do it, the more natural it will become for you. Being in a negative pattern for such a long time, it may be very difficult to notice anything positive at first.

It is important to be positive and genuine. Remember even acknowledging a fairly neutral behavior will reap benefits. It is critical to be genuine in your specific praise. Any hint in your voice that you don't feel truly happy about your child finishing that one math problem is going to be noted by your child and heard as criticism.

Describe exactly what your child is doing in the moment in clear detail. If he is using a red crayon, then

mention it. If she is going through those multiplication flash cards really fast, then tell her what you see. The more details, the better! This is what transfers the energy in a positive way.

Notice the process and effort, not just the finished results. If your child is having particular trouble with certain tasks, then it is very helpful to energize each step along the way. Don't wait until the task is completely done or it may never get done! Remember that even small steps towards the goal are worthy of being acknowledged.

Be animated—GO BIG in how you say praise statements and punctuate them with high fives, hugs, or even joyful laughter to make them even more powerful. Give it a lot of "oomph!"

Do it A LOT, as often as you remember, when you first get started. The more intensely your child seeks energy through negative behaviors, the more specific praise will be needed to shift the balance. Yes, it will be hard at first, but over time it will become easier as your child's behavior becomes more positive.

Avoid the "But" Syndrome. The "But" Syndrome is adding the word "But" and then making some type of criticism. "I love that you picked up your shirt, but I wish you would keep your room clean all the time." That "But" is like putting a teaspoon of dirt in a clean, refreshing glass

of water. Your child will hear “Your room is a mess.” Or worse, “You are messy.” You would never give a thirsty child dirty water. Don’t dirty up your praise with criticism.

Using these tips will help you to praise your child in the most effective way. Remember that the more specific praising you do, the less yelling and disciplining you will have to do. Yes, really! Your home can be peaceful.

An example

Here is an example that illustrates a typical situation that my clients report all the time, then the same situation with some specific praise.

Just another day at Sally’s house - No specific praise

Sally is playing with blocks on the floor building a tower. Mom sees her and says, “Don’t forget to put the blocks away when you are done.” Sally frowns and continues to build. She finishes her tower and asks her mom to admire it. Mom says,

"Oh that's nice. Let's put the blocks in the bucket now if you're done."

Sally puts a couple blocks in the bucket. Mom has turned around to do something else and doesn't notice. Sally wanders off to watch TV. Mom finds the blocks later and yells at Sally for not picking them up. Sally refuses to pick them up, which results in her getting a lecture on why it's important to pick up toys when you are finished.

Mom and Sally are both feeling annoyed. Sally got her energy fix from her mom, but with a negative pattern. Mom is feeling exhausted and frustrated.

Mom's got a brand new bag - With specific praise

Sally is playing with blocks on the floor making a tower. Mom says, "Wow! Sally is making a tall tower out of the blocks!" Sally's behavior is fairly neutral, but her mother is praising her good

behavior and feeding her positive energy. Sally feels happy and proud of her tower.

When Sally is done building with the blocks, she puts a few in the bucket. Mom says, "Thank you so much for starting to put away your blocks!" Sally smiles as she finishes putting all the blocks in the bucket. Mom says, "All right Sally!" She gives Sally a 'high five.' "You put ALL the blocks away! Yeah!"

Sally is clapping for herself, and Mom is smiling happily.

See how different these two scenarios are? It sounds simple, yet these patterns can be very hard to break. It takes a concerted effort by parents to stop the negative spiral and begin setting new positive patterns. The more intense the child has become in seeking negative energy the more energy, the more intense effort the mom or dad will need to put into positive behaviors.

I have seen some truly miraculous turnarounds in both child behavior, and also in moms' and dads' feelings of well-being. It is exhausting to be constantly saying, "Stop!" "No!" "Don't do that!" "I've told you a hundred times . . ."

Being a parent is not for the faint of heart, but with a little change, everyone will benefit tremendously.

It works everywhere!

I was a preschool teacher working with 2.5- to 3-year-olds in a community center. I had 10 kids in the classroom and some days it seemed impossible to get their attention and distract them from the trouble they were about to get into. I found that praising them for their good behavior even a split second before they reached for that forbidden item would stop them in their tracks. They would look up and smile at me. It was a joy to see. I began training all my parent helpers in the technique too. The number of timeouts that I gave decreased to none most days. I know many children benefited at home as well!

Examples of ways to phrase specific praise

You picked up two action figures and put them in the bin.

I love the way that you followed my directions the first time!

You shared the Legos® with Nick!

I really love the way that you came right away when I called your name.

You did a nice job hanging up your coat and backpack when you came home today.

I like that you used so many colors in your picture! (List the colors.)

You are so creative with watercolors.

You are playing so nicely with your sister right now!

You tied your shoes by yourself so fast!

Exclamations add extra energy

Wow!

Fantastic!

That's amazing!

Woo-hoo!

Yeah!

Yes!

That's so cool!

Gestures

Hugs

High fives

Smiles

Thumbs up

Winks

Nodding approval

Patting shoulder, arm, or back Clapping

Silly shocked expression

Specific Praise Plan Ahead Worksheet

Praise takes a bit of practice, especially if you've been in the negative energy spiral for a while. Thinking now will make it easier to come up with great ideas quickly and easily. Take some time now to think about how you will construct your praise, then write your answers below:

Starting the praise sentence is often the harder part since the last part of the sentence is more descriptive of what your child is actually doing in that moment. Below write some sentence starters: (I love the way you. . . I am so proud of how you. . . Look how great you are. . . , etc.)

What are some exclamations that you like to use? (“Wow!” “Cool!” “Way to go!” etc.)

What are some gestures that you enjoy using? (Clapping, high fives, etc.)

Get creative with these. The more genuine and heartfelt, the more benefits you will enjoy for your child as well as yourself. I'd love to hear what you come up with. Email me and I will post your ideas on my website so that others can be inspired too!

<http://www.counselingformoms.com/contact.htm>

Once you get really good at using specific praise with your child, you may even enjoy trying it out on your husband, your boss, or even yourself!

Go ahead! It's fun!

I have found that specific praise is a simple and highly effective way to improve any child's behavior. As an added bonus, it strengthens your relationship, and also raises your child's self-esteem. It does take some practice and, as with all new ideas, it takes a while to make it a habit. Doing the Specific Praise Challenge described below will help you to

start putting the rubber to the road and make specific praise a positive new habit!

Specific Praise Challenge

I have found this technique to be one of the most powerful that I have used at home with my own kids, in the classroom, and with my client's families. Give it a try for one week.

Go to

<http://www.counselingformoms.com/specificpraise.htm>

and fill out the form. A welcome email will be sent to you, click on the link and you will receive helpful tips and reminders each day as well as a worksheet to help you track your progress.

Give your child at least 10 specific praises each day for one week. Then email me at

<http://counselingformoms.com/contact.htm> and tell me

how it worked out.