

Basic Parent Coaching Instructions: Ria Severance, LMFT 626-354-4334

Leave this by your bedside, and just practice, learn, relearn ONE item below at a time. Building new parenting habits comes with practice and rehearsal. Even taking one item on per day, and making it a habit, helps. If you live/work with another adult that interacts with your child, help each other by saying things like “Hmm. Did you mean X?” – a respectful way to remind each other rather than criticizing or correcting each other in front of your child. While this is geared to pre-school children, the same principles apply to teenagers, employees, etc.

1. **Require Eye Contact** (“Eyes here” and point to your eyes) whenever you speak to your child, or child speaks to you. This is how child, in part, learns to look at the teacher and learn from her/him. Your child connects with his/her eyes. No eyes, no connection, no real listening. Practice what you preach. Stop and look at your child when you speak.
2. **Practice “Assertiveness Phrases”** from handout. Role-play and practice one phrase/day at least 10 times. Switch roles during the role-play (e.g. the child being grabbed from, and the child grabbing). Rehearse and help child prep before school in the morning to practice that one phrase. Tell teacher, in front of child, the specific phrase child is practicing for that day. Children need quick, rehearsed access to respectful language that gets their needs met.
3. **Model, offer and require language** whenever child wants something or you notice the child is experiencing something. This is called “tracking and narrating.” You are teaching your child to track and narrate their desires and their own experiences.
 - a) Child points to milk without speaking. You say (**model, offer and require**), “I want some milk please Mom” in a slightly *higher (or at least different) tone* of voice that your child learns to interpret as meaning s/he’s expected to *repeat* it. Once child repeats, you answer: “Sure, honey. I’ll get you some milk,” so your child is fairly consistently reinforced for using language that “works with you,” as the parent,
 - b) Make sure you use language **whenever you’re going to invade child’s space or do something “to” the child** (*also applies to infants – this even works with dogs!*) so s/he knows what’s going to happen next. E.g. “I’m going to pick you up now.” “I’m going to pull your sweater over your head.” “I’m going to help you pull your shoes off.” (Teaches language, lowers anxiety, and models respect for child’s physical space/body, so child is less anxious, and more likely to be respectful of others physical space/bodies.);
 - c) **Practice Assertiveness phrases (see handout)** or simpler versions of those phrases (depending on child’s language ability) to help child defend her/him self *respectfully*; and
 - d) **Notice and decide whether child’s language and tone would be effective** with his/her friends, other adults, teachers, their future boy/girl friends, employers and employees. Do NOT accept language/tones/behaviors that won’t “work” or be effective **away from home**, e.g. ask: “Can you use a kinder tone?” Think of and model/offer language the child *could have said instead* that both i) accurately reflects child’s concerns/needs, and ii) is something both you and others could easily receive/hear as respectful. e.g. the child interrupts a conversation with adults, whines and demands attention, so you offer *in a calm tone*: “Excuse me, Mom, when you have a minute I need to say something.” The above, increase your child’s social skills,

makes your child easy for others to be with, lowers your own and child's anxiety, enhances child's conflict resolution skills, and increase his/her overall competence in the world.

4. **Instead of "Bossing," Ask Questions** that direct the child's attention to social/environmental cues that help the child learn to notice what's important for him/her. This decreases power struggles/impulsivity and engages the child's forebrain – the part of the brain that plans, reasons, learns, thinks and can help him/her to take responsibility for noticing important cues for him/herself. Instead of "Juan, sit down. Juan sit down. Juan, SIT DOWN!!" (if Juan was ever listening, he stopped after the second time), ask: "Juan, where does your bottom go?" The latter question engages the forebrain and *makes him think for himself*. Usually the child will just sit down.

Kids, like us, naturally resist constant bossing. Further, when a child fails to comply with your "bossing," you naturally get angry. Instead of "Pick up the toy!" try: "I see your toy on the floor, Juan. Where does it go?" Asking questions to direct your child's attention to what s/he already knows, keeps *you* less frustrated and *avoids a power struggle*; You don't interpret the child's *not* following your instructions as willful disobedience. You're more inclined to keep helping the child to "*remember*" and "*notice*," e.g. child stands up again, and you say: "Juan, I see you're standing up. What did you forget?" Again, the child will typically just sit down again.

5. **Help child learn to follow directives.** Your child needs to follow directions, because if s/he can't at home, s/he won't listen to adults elsewhere and it interferes with school learning.

5 Steps:

(1) Don't ask your child to do something unless you're **100% able and willing** to ensure s/he follows through. If you ask and don't follow through, you've taught your child that s/he only has to listen *sometimes* – maybe *only* when you're really frustrated and mad. *Be careful not to train your child to only listen to you if you're amped up and upset* – you'll spend a lot of time upset and will have to get more and more upset to get your child to listen, and eventually, your child won't care if you're upset. If you change your mind after asking your child to do something, no problem, but change your mind verbally, out loud. Otherwise s/he again thinks you don't mean what you say. (e.g. "Sorry. I realize it's too late to go now, so we don't need to get ourselves ready to go. We'll try again tomorrow." Don't just fail to tell them you've changed your mind, or they will not respect or trust that what you say merits their attention.)

(2) **Ask questions to direct your child's attention** to what s/he already knows – try to enlist her/him to be responsible for responding independently. Instead of "Put your toy away," try "Hmm. Your toy is on the floor. Where does it go?" If child ignores you, use the following formula.

(3) **"Can you do X by yourself, or do you need me to help you?"** (e.g. "Can you put the toy away by yourself, or do you need me to help you?"). You are not actually "helping" by doing *for* the child. Your "help" is slightly less pleasant than if the child were to follow through on his/her own. If child ignores you, within about 5-10 seconds, you say:

(4) **"I see you're ignoring me, so I think you need my help."** Then "help" in a way that is "heavy" and *in no way reinforcing* the child (e.g. don't offer attention, sweetness, extra care,

do things *for* the child), and yet help *calmly, without ANY anger*. Often I stand behind the child and hold both hands in mine, walking us both forward like robots, bending over the child and “helping” the child to pick up the toy. If the child makes a fist to avoid picking up the toy, I hold his fist in my hand and extend two of my fingers to pick up the toy. Then we robot-walk over to where the toy belongs. If the child resists, aims to elbow me or tries to push me away, I say “Oh! You want to try it by yourself? Ok!” If the child then does not follow through on his/her own, then I say: “Oh, looks like you’re not ready to do it by yourself, so you still need some help.” And I resume the robot walk. *Do not distract the child from learning by being angry, upset, irritated or frustrated with your tone or body language*. If you *are*, the child will primarily focus on your anger, feel threatened and focus on reacting to *that*, instead of learning to “listen to your words.”

(5) Reinforce child, and predict more positive future outcomes, e.g. Reinforcement: “You did it!! You put away the toy” (it’s a neutral description of what worked for the child, with a positive tone and facial expression), followed by a Positive Prediction: “This time you needed some help, but I bet next time you’ll be able to do it by yourself!”

6. **Reinforcement.** If you ever want a **child’s behavior to repeat or happen again**, you **must** reinforce it. Yes. Forever. Until it’s reinforcing for the child to do the behavior on his/her own. If you want the behavior to persist over time, reinforce it often, at first, and then at less predictable intervals later. If you want a behavior to stop, stop reinforcing it. If your child has an annoying behavior that s/he keeps doing despite your best efforts, consider that the *behavior MUST be being reinforced to persist*. The behavior is somehow “working for” the child or it wouldn’t continue – either the behavior is getting the child something s/he wants and can’t get more effectively in another way (i.e. a skill is missing), OR the behavior is helping the child avoid something s/he wants to avoid. In general, avoid using “good job” or other evaluations of your child’s behavior, work, experience.

Judgments or evaluations make the child focus/be *dependent on your judgments* (e.g. this can translate to caring excessively about what peers think in adolescence, or doing badly in school to punish parents who are more invested in the child’s doing well in school, than the child is). Responsibility (and control) get located in YOU, instead of the child. Furthermore, judgments and evaluations give the child NO useful information about **the specific behavior(s) that is working for him/her**. In addition, negative judgments cause a disconnect in relationships for adults as well as kids.

For adults, 99% of the time, you had judgmental thoughts before you got angry at someone, including your child. If you call me names, accuse or judge me negatively, I will naturally distance myself emotionally. If you observe and describe just the “facts” (neutrally, without interpretation, as a video camera would), state how you feel (*before* you got angry) and ask for clarification, we are still connected and I have a chance to connect to you (e.g. “Ria, you said my kid needs my help. I notice I’m scared. Are you saying you think my kid’s not normal?” Then

I can respond: “Oh! I just mean it would make a powerful difference for your child if we support him. Thanks for checking it out! I’m sorry you were scared.)

The most effective way to reinforce a child’s behavior: describe the specific behavior that was *effective for the child (not just YOU, and will be effective for the child in the long run)*, using a positive voice tone and facial expression. E.g. “You waited your turn!” “You used your words instead of your body!” “You listened to your friend’s words!” “You remembered what was next in our routine!” **Basically for something to really be “effective” for the child, it must also “work” for the people in his/her environment.** A child may grab a toy, and it’s “effective” in the moment – she got the toy. But tomorrow are kids going to want to play near her? Share their toys with her? or invite her to play with them? In general, avoid “good” or “bad” evaluations of the child. **Focus on what “works” or “doesn’t work” in the long run.** (Actually, you probably want to avoid judgments in every area of your life, as they are inherently alienating.)

7. **Punishment.** The **only punishment that’s effective long-term** is teaching/practicing the behavior that was missing when the child behaved ineffectively. So if a 2-year old hits the cat, quickly grab the child’s hand and show her how to gently stroke the cat, saying “gentle” as you do. If a 3 or 4-year old hits a peer, have the child **acknowledge and attend** to the peers pain/bodily damage (e.g. bring ice, Kleenex for tears, etc.) and then have the child learn and rehearse what s/he could have done instead. (see #14 below). **“Time Out”** doesn’t work long term because it **doesn’t teach** the child how to be more skillful for the future, in specific situations. “Time out” so *you* can calm down, is just fine, as long as your kids are safe, and you give a return time (they know exactly when they can rely on you to re-connect). Let them know what you’ll be doing with your “time out” to calm your body (see # 11 below) . . . Taking things away, as the only punishment, for example, doesn’t work long term because you end up having to escalate your threats and punishments to try to impact the kid negatively, and these options don’t teach your child to be effective. On the other hand, if you withhold the toy (calmly, with matter-of-fact tone) and let the child know reasonable practice and mastery of a skill are necessary before it’s returned, and you help that skills rehearsal happen -- *that’s* more effective because at least the child is learning to be more skillful for the next time. If you, the parent, are miserable, angry and upset all the time, something is NOT working and punishment alone is *not* the answer.
8. **Saying “NO!”** is best reserved for **emergencies/safety challenges**. “No!” literally stresses the brain into a fight/flight/freeze/fawn mode. But it *doesn’t teach anything*. If an adult constantly tells a child what NOT to do, the child may **learn not to do that behavior in front of that specific adult**. But the child hasn’t learned **WHAT TO** do.

Furthermore, the brain doesn’t receive images of “No” or “Don’t.” When people study hypnotherapy they are asked to hold a pendulum as still as possible between the thumb and forefinger, and simply to say to themselves (not out loud) “Don’t turn right, don’t turn right . . . “ The pendulum invariably turns right because the brain doesn’t get a clear image for “no,” or

“don’t.” So if you tell your child “Don’t run!” what’s the image you’re sending to your child’s brain? “Run!” If you say “Don’t yell!” What’s the image you send? Yell! It’s **most effective to ask for the specific behavior you DO want. Avoid describing what you DON’T want.** (e.g. “Use your walking feet!” “Let’s practice our soft, ‘inside voice’.”)

“No!” is often a way young children disagree. Adults often have an ineffective habit of saying “**I disagree with that!**” which polarizes them from the other person. Instead model and offer “**I have a different idea about that,**” or “**Oh! You have a different idea about that. Tell me more?**” Having a “different idea” allows you to come up next to the other person with a different opinion or thought, without pitting yourself “against” the other person.

9. **Avoid asking the teacher whether your child was “good” or “bad” today in school.** It’s just not helpful and risks the child’s feeling constantly judged and evaluated in big generic, heavy ways – as if any of us is really “all good” or “all bad.” “Were you good?” and “Were you bad?” or “. . . only if you’re good” gives the child NO information about the behaviors that work in life. “Good” and “Bad” end up meaning that which makes *YOU* happy/upset. Even then, the child isn’t clear about which behaviors actually do make you happy/upset. Children are disempowered by focusing on what pleases you. Furthermore, they’re likely to rebel against this when they’re older, when that’s your focus. They are empowered by what is effective for *them* in their interactions with the world, at home and beyond. Think through three behaviors your child is learning/practicing that will be more effective for him/you, and **ask the teacher if your child “remembered” to (whatever the specific behaviors your child is working on):** use his words, instead of his body; take turns; keep her body calm; remembered to look at the teacher’s eyes when teacher spoke or when speaking to the teacher, etc. Work with your child’s teacher to decide on 3 key behaviors that you’ll work together on to help your child. If your child “remembered” the effective behavior even once, you’re still focused on the positive and promoting your child mastering *that* behavior, without criticism or discouragement. Reinforcement might look like (with warm, positive voice tone and facial expression): “Ms. T said you remembered to take turns when you were playing with Sally. You played with the toy and then you remembered she wanted a turn and gave it to her.” Similarly, be clear about **the specific behaviors you expect.** Instead of “You can go in your sister’s room if you’re good,” you might say: “So, if you go in your sister’s room, what do you need to remember?” (make child think for him/herself), and then “Right. You’re going to listen to her words, and what else?” “Right. You’ll ask before you touch her stuff or her body,” and ideally, “Ok, so how are you going to ask your sister?” so child has a chance to practice and be skilled at asking, before going in to her sister’s room, including knocking and asking to enter.
10. **Limit video games/TV to 30 minutes a day, MAX,** during the week to avoid your children learning that they *don’t have to do anything to have fun in life* – i.e. fun = being a couch potato and having something/someone else entertain us. Happy kids know how to find ways to entertain *themselves*, as long as you provide enough interesting options for them. Make a picture list of things your child can do to entertain him/herself and “make her/himself happy” – ultimately, it’s the child’s job to make him/herself happy. If the child MUST watch TV (??), get

educational, age-appropriate DVD's from your local library. Watch it *with* your child the first few times, and pause it and participate fully, so your child learns the songs and knows how to sing and participate on his/her own. THEN, let the child watch, as long as s/he's participating. (See last half of #13 regarding Impulsivity below.) With longer movies, also watch these WITH your child, and pause the film to discuss it. **You are your child's cultural interpreter.** When 9-10 year old girls were asked what the message was from Disney's "Beauty and the Beast" (which I confess to love), they said "If you're really nice to someone who's mean, eventually they'll be nice." This is the perfect abuse fantasy!! So when Gaston enters Belle's house, puts his feet on the table and announces "Belle, I've decided YOU are the one I'm going to marry," you pause the DVD and might ask (again, rather than preaching, use questions to help the child think for him/herself): "So, is Gaston thinking about what SHE wants or needs, or just about what HE wants? Does he even care? How do you know?" You get the idea.

- 11. Tantrums.** Whenever children or adults are upset, excited, etc., they disengage from their forebrains (the part of their brains behind their foreheads) that reason, plan, learn, etc., and engage their lower brain stem ("lizard brain") at the base of the skull which limits their responses to essentially fight, flight, freeze or fawn (going belly up). When kids are impulsive, easily frustrated, highly emotional, sensitive to overstimulation, etc. they are reacting at those times from their lower brainstems – they're just reacting, not thinking or reasoning. So would you try to reason with a tantruming child? No, because the child's disengaged from the forebrain and it's pointless to keep talking. At that point you're just overwhelming the child.

Ideally, if a child is upset or tantruming, everything stops until the child is once again emotionally regulated. For this to work, the child must be *taught how to calm his/her body ahead of time*. You can't teach a child anything in the middle of a tantrum. You must plan ahead, so they're prepared to know what to do when they are emotionally dysregulated. We talk about "*Calming your body*" versus "*Calm down*" because even as adults if we're upset and someone tells us to "*Calm down!*" this typically makes us even more upset/angry.

Prepare your child for what will happen, exactly, when s/he has a tantrum. Warn her ahead of time, that everything will stop in the event of a tantrum/emotional outburst (e.g. child won't get what s/he wants, you'll both go outside of the store) **NOT AS A PUNISHMENT!!** – but just because the child can't think when s/he's upset, and to really be able to talk things through, *the child must be calm*. Warn the child also, that just because s/he manages to calm her body, doesn't necessarily mean the child will get what s/he wants (e.g. the toy in the store).

Have child practice 4-step "Calm Your Body" protocol 2 times/day for 3 minutes each time, at times when the child is **guaranteed to be successful** (e.g. at the end of a warm, pleasant bath, or just before bed if your child falls asleep easily). Learning this may take longer at the beginning – make it fun, and keep your voice tone encouraging. The exercise actually is evidence-based to be effective with adults having panic attacks as well.

Step 1: Responsibility It's natural for young children to come to parents for help with soothing. However they often get the **idea that it's the parent's ongoing "job" (responsibility) to soothe,**

not their own job. At ages 3 and 4 they are just beginning to learn to self-soothe. **Two sets of questions** you ask children help teach responsibility for regulating their own emotions:

- A.** **Can you calm my body**, if *I* don't want to calm down? (Answer is NO! – this is super clear to them.)
Can I calm your body, if *you* don't want to calm down? (Answer is NO! – may not be clear but easy to grasp)
- C.** **So whose job is it to calm my body?** (Mine – they'll say "Yours!" and they're clear THEY don't want that job!)
Whose job is it to calm your body? (They'll say "Mine." – this is usually very new to them.)

Step 2: Why do we need to calm our bodies? Basically so we *can learn*. With children:

"We need to know how to calm our bodies . . . So we can **THINK** (touch *forehead* at same time), **FOCUS** (cup hands on both sides of *eyes*), **LISTEN** (cup hands behind ears), and **USE OUR WORDS** (pinch thumb, index and middle fingers together on one hand and place on lips, then move hand away from mouth)." (**Think, Focus, Listen & Use Our Words**)

Step 3: The Exercise (*Only* practice when guaranteed to be successful – that is, child is able to relax – not hungry, too tired, already upset, being rushed, etc.). All at the same time: Put both hands on top of each other and press on breast bone. Tighten shoulders as tight as you can while raising them up to your ears, inhaling and counting to 3 *out loud*, then dropping and relaxing shoulders slowly, as you exhale counting to 3 *out loud*. It's critical to **count out loud** to keep the mind distracted from what a monster your parent is for turning the TV off.

Thoughts dictate emotions, so it's important to distract our thoughts by counting out loud. (For adults, it may also be necessary to engage the mind further than just counting out loud – e.g. focus the eyes on the visual details of one's shoes and prepare to describe the minutest details, as if you were preparing to paint them from memory.)

Start with inhaling for 3, exhaling for 3, then inhale for 4, exhale for 4, then 5-5, 6-6, 7-7 . . . 10-10. Model and exaggerate how relaxed and "calm" your shoulders and body feel at the end (reinforcement), and invite your child to notice the difference as well (e.g. "Wow. My body feels so relaxed. What about you?"). I tend to say "IN 2-3" while tightening shoulders up and pressing breast plate with both hands, and then "OUT 2-3." Then "IN 2-3-4" and "OUT 2-3-4."

Step 4: Reinforce "You did it! You calmed your body by yourself!" This not only reinforces and encourages the child to do it again, but it also eliminates the idea that the child "can't" do it by him/herself, especially with repeated practice. Remember, your child is learning to calm his/her body and that it's *his/her job* so they are less impulsive and emotionally reactive, and better able to think and learn.

12. Teaching your child "What's Next" by asking questions, thereby avoiding spending your life pushing him/her up hill! Children, and adults for that matter, typically become anxious when

they can't anticipate "what's next." Teachers and therapists often encourage families to develop routines for their children. Often, families actually have routines that they don't fully make known. How many of us, as parents, spend the morning freaked out or freaking out our kids, trying to get everyone dressed, groomed, fed and out of the house on time for school and work? With your preschoolers, snuggle the night before a school day and take 10 minutes to review the following, AND snuggle with them in the morning (get up a little earlier) to review again "what is next." The payoff is kids who know what they need to do without nagging and screaming, and peaceful mornings.

- **Parent: "Honey, what's the first thing you do in the morning?"** (Again, asking the question, even if they don't know the answer, engages the forebrain and has the child think. Just pause long enough to *make sure they're thinking* before you provide the answer.) **Child: "We get dressed?"** (If this isn't correct, avoid saying "NO!" – this actually shuts the child's brain down. Either ask a question that serves as a hint, e.g. "Before you get dressed . . ." or say something like "Close! See if you can think of what we do FIRST!")
- **Parent: Before we get dressed, we do something else . . .** (If the child is stumped don't elevate the frustration TOO long, but you want him/her to keep trying without reaching a "giving up" or tantrum level of frustration.)
- **Child: We pee?**
- **Parent: Yes, we pee! Then what do we do?**
- **Child: Get dressed?**
- **Parent: Yes, we . . . pee, and then we . . . get dressed. Then what do we do?** (You pause long enough to encourage the child to fill in the blanks, and you're also repeating the list of tasks, so the child is memorizing it with you.)
- **Child: We eat breakfast?**
- **Parent: Yes, we . . . pee, and then we . . . get dressed, Yes! and then, we . . . eat breakfast. Then what do we do?**
- **Child: We brush out teeth.**
- **Parent: Yes! We . . . pee (the pause is to try to get child to say it before you do), then we . . . get dressed, then we . . . eat breakfast, and we . . . brush our teeth. THEN, what do we do?** (there may be 3 or 4 other things in here to add.)
- **When child has recited the list with you, parent says: "YOU KNOW EXACTLY WHAT TO DO!! AND IF YOU 'FORGET' IN THE MORNING I'LL REMIND YOU!"** So when in the morning after peeing and getting dressed, your child turns the TV on (Do NOT expect your morning to go well if your kids are zoned out in front of the TV, and aren't learning to master preparing themselves!), you can say something like: **"Hmm. It looks like you forgot what comes after getting dressed. You remembered to pee, and you remembered to get dressed, what's next? TV? Nah. You know that's not part of our morning. What's next?"**

As a parent you're now in the role of reminding them regarding what the children already know, instead of getting increasingly frustrated that they can't read your mind or aren't doing

what you ask immediately as you bark orders. This can be adapted for school-age, and older children as well. E.g. They need to learn to get all their schoolwork and supplies ready to go by the front door, so they are not expecting themselves to remember everything at the last minute.

Your children rely on you to teach them how to prepare themselves. For school-aged children parents can do something similar on the way home from school. Help your child know how the afternoon is going to go. Have them review and learn to make realistic guesstimates regarding how long each homework assignment will take (if they stay focused, and if not), when they think they'll need breaks, and how they'll spend that break time. My preference is to invite kids do their chores FIRST – or, they can do them in breaks . . . Make it clear that duty to family and carrying their own weight in age-appropriate ways is first, and that school *is for them* – *I get nothing as a parent from their school success* (You see the lack of this training results in adult parents/partners who are high achievers, but lousy at sustaining and nurturing family relationships and sharing the grunt work).

Both my kids were straight A students, I think largely because they learned that it was a privilege, not a right, and education was *for them*. They couldn't punish or frustrate me by being slugs. I let them know clearly I'd support them and care for most of their needs as long as they were living into *their* potential and preparing themselves for their own dreams about what a great life looks like – if not, in high school they can get a job and start helping to pay the bills. Parents who spend their lives pushing their kids up academic hills often end up more invested in school success, than their children. Self-motivation doesn't happen. The trick is to find ways to make it clear that school is a privilege, and success is *theirs*, not yours. Call me if you need more clarification.

As kids are “planning” their chores, homework, etc. make sure to include your own responsibilities so they learn to coordinate WITH YOU, e.g. “So Mom, while you're cooking can you test me on my spelling words?” “Yes, but I'm going to be on a conference call from 7-8 so we have to be sure to do it before then, because I won't be able to talk. What do you want to do while I'm on the call?” You are teaching to coordinate their time with the needs/time restrictions of others.

Even preschoolers benefit from learning to use a timer. When you say 5-minutes, mean 5-minutes. A timer helps. If it's not a long enough break from a task, help your child figure out whether they need it to be longer, and what the criteria are for that, e.g. “So, what if you want a longer break? What will you do to get yourself back?” Plan and strategize with them, when they'll need snacks and meals. *You are teaching your child to manage his/her own time*, so you are *not* the perpetual cop. Often, kids take a shower when they get home from school to help them wake up for the afternoon “sluggish” period. “What's hardest for you? . . . When do you think it would be wisest to take that on?” (i.e. most awake and able to focus). They learn to

plan and think their days through for themselves. As they are able to read, help them add their schedules to a family (google?) calendar.

- 13. IMPULSIVITY is an indication that your child is not engaging his/her forebrain, and is just reacting from the lower brain stem (“lizard brain” located at the back, base of the skull that just “reacts” with fight, flight or freeze, rather than planning and reasoning).** These children typically have difficulty **paying attention, learning** (processing information), **persisting on tasks** (staying with something long enough to struggle through and learn – this is actually more important for the child’s success than IQ), **using language to navigate their needs with peers/adults** (instead of pushing, hitting, grabbing – language use requires the forebrain), and interacting effectively with peers. **If a child is “impulsive,” s/he also often exhibits:** low frustration tolerance, tantrums, high levels of physical agitation/anxiety, difficulty focusing and engaging learning activities for prolonged periods, difficulty following adults’ directives or routines independently, physical aggression (e.g. hitting, pushing, grabbing, etc.). In addition to **all the above parenting suggestions (ANYTHING that engages the forebrain helps these children)**, here are some more:

(1) LIMIT Video games and TV watching to the weekends or 30 minutes, and **ONLY** when YOU need relief, and not more than 2 hours total on weekends. Playing video games and watching TV without adult supervision/participation: a) keeps your child from learning to actively engage his/her life and learn the skills needed to tolerate frustration, regulate his/her own emotions, develop interpersonal effectiveness, remain mindful, etc. b) teaches your child that s/he doesn’t have to do anything to enjoy him/herself, c) teaches your child that “zoning” is rewarding. If your child is anxious or very active, TV/video games just postpone your child learning to “calm his/her body” (see exercises for this above). If your child is going to watch TV, you can get educational DVD’s from your local library. Sit with your child, pause the DVD, and participate with the DVD – e.g. learn and practice the educational song, sing along with the DVD, pause to answer the questions out loud, etc. **98% of the time, when I see an impulsive child and check his/her medical file, I find the child is watching TV or playing video games, unsupervised for extended periods of time.** If your child is impulsive, s/he needs to learn skills that TV/video games help you and your child to avoid teaching and learning. The longer your child succeeds in avoiding learning needed skills, the longer s/he will struggle with impulsivity and the related learning/social difficulties.

(2) Instead of simply cutting your child loose, when you’re home, **practice STOP-PLAN-VERBALIZE**, then feedback the verbalized plan. In the classroom, I ask teachers to do this during free in/outdoor play. Free play times are best because you’re not needing to *require* the child to do anything in particular, so there is less resistance to planning. You can focus just on engaging the child’s forebrain (planning and reasoning functions) in a positive way.

a) Bend to eye level, and **establish eye contact. Simply ask: What do you want to do now?** (You are STOPPING the child from just wandering around impulsively, without thinking, while requiring the child to think about what s/he wants, and asking the child to verbalize this.)

b) Repeat or give language to child's expressed "plan." If a less verbal child simply points to the puzzles, simply model/offer: "I want to play with puzzles, Ria." Always offer language at the highest level your child is capable of repeating, even if s/he has to stretch a little to do it. For a child with speech delays, you might offer: "Puzzles, Ria!" Obviously, use a fun cheerful voice when modeling language or you'll just annoy your child with your intrusions.

c) Ask your child to repeat the modeled phrase. e.g. "Just tell me: 'I want to play with puzzles please!'" **d) Feed back the request, and grant permission!** e.g. "You want to play with puzzles! Go for it!" This sounds simple but actually it accomplishes SEVERAL things:

i) You're teaching your child to acknowledge what is said by others, *before* moving on to a new topic of your own (here the "new topic" is permission, e.g. "Go for it!"),

ii) You're reminding the child of his/her plan,

iii) You're teaching the child under positive circumstances that his/her behavior is under YOUR control as well – You are the one granting permission.

e) Notice if the child actually follows through with his/her plan. Observe and describe the follow through. It's okay for your child to change his/her mind during free play, but you want this to be literally a "change of mind" (using the forebrain), rather than your child just impulsively switching interests based on a random visual cue (e.g. Susie is playing with blocks, and on the way to the planned puzzles Jane switches to play with blocks instead.).

f) Repeat STOP-PLAN-VERBALIZE steps if child changes his/her mind, and give language to the change of mind. e.g. "What do you want to do now?" Child points. "Oh, so you *don't want to play with puzzles* (You're reminding the child of the previous "plan"). You want to play with blocks: Tell me: 'I want to play with blocks now Ria.'" When child repeats, you repeat "You want to play with blocks, now! Go for it!"

g) If your child changes his/her mind a *third* time, without having actually engaged *any* activity in any meaningful way, repeat the above steps (e.g. "So you didn't want to play with puzzles *or* blocks. You want to play with the big Lego's, tell me." Child repeats), **and get on the floor and play with the child, helping the child to engage the activity by verbalizing/showing your interest with a positive encouraging tone and engaging his/her own interest.** e.g. "Hmm . . . I wonder what we can build here . . . Which ones do you want to put together? Oh! You grabbed the yellow and the red ones . . . I'll do that too . . ."

*When a child's engagement in a task or activity is minimal, avoid "being better" at the task than the child is, or your child may become discouraged. Avoid saying "no!" when child is doing something that won't work. Ask questions, or "wonder out loud" to engage the child in a way that encourages the child to notice cues for him/herself that will help. e.g. "Hmm. I wonder if all the straight edges on puzzle pieces go on the frame." Or "I noticed that it's easier *for me if I* look for all the straight edge pieces first – I 'wonder' if that would work for you?" Or "I 'wonder' what would happen if you push harder to get the two Lego's to fit together?"*

You want to encourage your child's slowly increasing the time s/he's able to stay engaged, and **persist with a task** – pushing them gently, just slightly beyond the amount of time that's

comfortable, but not so much s/he melts down into a tantrum. e.g. When reading a book, and the child starts to close it after 2 pages, suggest “Well, just 2 more pages so we can finish,” and skip to the end, make up the ending of the story from looking at the pages, and YOU let the child know when s/he can close the book because *you* finished. This is how they learn to focus and finish schoolwork without quitting half-way through. If you let them quit, they learn that quitting is okay. Just push a little beyond what’s comfortable and remind them with “let’s finish, and then we can stop.”

14. AGGRESSION – e.g. hitting, pushing, grabbing, biting. What to do?

(1) In neutral, matter of fact tone, help child learn empathy by noticing the results of the aggression. Help child **observe and describe the “facts”** Avoid inducing guilt or trying to make child feel bad. E.g. “Look at your friend. Is s/he crying? Hmm. His knee is bleeding. When you pushed, he fell and scraped the skin off his knee. Why do you think he’s crying? He’s crying because it hurts.

(2) Repair. Help child repair the relationship by attending to the results of the aggression. E.g. “Do you think he might need some ice? Some Bactine? A Band-Aid? Yes. Let him know you’re going to go get some and come back.” After hurt child or person is attended to, then . . .

(3) Figure out which skill the child was missing – what did the child NOT know how to do that had him/her resort to aggression instead? Often, with impulsive behavior, including aggression, the skill that’s missing is a *verbal* one. E.g. “I have this now! You can have it when I’m done!” may have prevented your child from pushing, when another child tried to grab the toy away. In order to use language, the child must have practiced, role-played and over-learned this language (see Assertiveness Handout), so the phrase would be available in the midst of being startled by another grabbing child.

(4) Teach, practice and rehearse the missing skill until you’re sure the child would be able to use it on his/her own. Actually, the learning of the missing skill is the only “punishment” that’s effective in the long run (kids typically don’t like to have to learn a new skill, even though you’ll make it as easy as possible). If you’re a parent, practice ALL the verbal phrases on the Assertiveness handout, one phrase per day, role-playing and preparing your child each day to for situations in which to use that phrase at school. Help your child know the situations where s/he can use that particular phrase. Let the teacher know the phrase your child is practicing that day so s/he can look for opportunities for your child to practice. If you’re the child’s teacher, offer the Assertiveness Handout to the parents and request their help role-playing and practicing. For older kids, model and *require* effective, respectful language before responding, rather than accepting and tolerating the disrespectful use of language, the absence of verbal requests, etc.

(5) Reinforce! E.g. “You used your words, instead of your body!” “You protected your stuff without losing friends!” “You’re learning to take turns!” (Go back and review phrase several times as opportunities arise.) Typically, it’s really useless at this age to demand that a child say “I’m sorry.” They usually aren’t, so you end up teaching the child to be insincere in order to please you. They have to notice and understand the impact of what they’ve done and

empathize, BEFORE it will really matter to *them*. The child's feeling guilty or "bad" won't help the child care about others, or behave differently in the future.

- 15. PREPARE, PREPARE, PREPARE!! your child with the skills needed to learn to behave in effective ways in *specific situations* that are new or might be difficult for them.** For children that are impulsive or anxious in *any* way, helping them think through and plan for the specific behaviors that are expected or may be needed in the upcoming situation. *Preparation and skills rehearsal* is a critical means for their feeling confident and being competent. If you just avoid the grocery store, restaurants, family gatherings, etc., your child will *never* learn the skills needed to adapt and function.

At the same time, DON'T ask your child to function in situations that no child can tolerate (e.g. a 1-hour adult lecture, a long church service geared to adults, adult movies, hikes or physical activities that aren't geared for kids your child's age). If you're going to the doctor's, prepare your child for what will happen, and bring activities (NOT VIDEO GAMES) to keep your child engaged and entertained (e.g. travel-size games, UNO, matching games, beads to string on an elastic string, letter games, books, etc.). I'm NOT suggesting you drag your *infant* to the grocery store so "she'll learn" to behave!

Also, if your child is hungry, tired, sick or has been sitting too long and needs to burn off some energy, handle these issues FIRST – don't expect your child to function effectively unless basic needs are met first. Adults can't even behave effectively under these conditions, how can we expect a hungry, tired child to behave? We're talking about kids 2.5-5 years of age. So, for example, if you know your child throws a fit in the grocery store, *prepare her ahead of time*. Let her know you'll only be buying healthy food and things for the refrigerator and that if she asks for something unhealthy today, Daddy *may* say "no." If she cries or has "big feelings," *it's not a problem*, AND, you'll leave your basket in the store and take her outside until she calms her body down. When she calms her body down, you'll go back in and give it another shot. If she "forgets" to keep her body calm, no worries, you'll just go back out til she calms her body down and "remembers."

If your child learns that s/he can count on you to *do what you'll say you'll do, in a non-punitive, matter-of-fact way*, I promise your child will stop acting out. As long as the ineffective behavior "works" for your child – either gets the child what s/he wants (the candy at the cashier stand), or helps the child avoid what s/he doesn't want (being stuck in the grocery basket, instead of walking around) – your child will continue the ineffective behavior. Period. You can rehearse your child's asking for the particular candy she always asks for, and your saying "no," and reinforcing that she's keeping her body calm and accepting it during the rehearsal. Warn her that crying and screaming will not "work" with you --- *she'll* suffer, not you – "it's hard for me to watch you suffer, but I *know* [am confident] you'll figure it out and stop when you're ready. In the meantime, I'll just take you outside, again, til you're ready to calm your body, and come back in."

If your child is going into a situation where you know some of the kids are aggressive, role-play and prepare her to defend/protect herself with some of the phrases from the Assertiveness handout. Do NOT take your child to a situation that has historically been difficult and expect a miraculous change in behavior, *without having fully prepared and rehearsed*. If you don't prepare your children and let them know what you expect from them *ahead of time*, and *what will happen if they "forget,"* they will not be more skilled than they were before, and so they cannot be more effective!

- 16. You are your child's primary teacher.** The earlier you take on being an effective teacher, the less you and your child will struggle later. Every hour you invest now, will save your 4-5 hours when you're trying to help your child with an ineffective behavior later, as a middle-schooler or teen. If your child is in therapy for behavioral issues, *make sure that you are learning as much as your young child is*. One hour a week with a therapist is better than nothing, but if you are not learning the skills you need in order to ensure that your child's effective behaviors happen with you and others, outside of that hour, the long-term effect of the individual therapy for your child may be limited.
- 17. Parental Decisions & Problem-Solving: SAFETY? SKILLS? & DOES "IT" WORKS FOR ALL FAMILY MEMBERS?** When you have a decision to make as a parent, there are usually many factors to consider. You have to think about whether your children will be **SAFE** (What are the possible risks to safety in this situation?), whether they have the **SKILLS** needed to handle the situation (What skills do I need to teach my child to prepare and be effective in this situation?), and whether the decision will **"work" for ALL FAMILY MEMBERS** (How might this decision impact the rest of our family? How do I teach my child to consider his/her impact on others?).

As you think about these factors, your job is to make sure your children learn to consider these factors **for themselves** – i.e. their own SAFETY RISKS, WHETHER THEY HAVE THE SKILLS, and if not, to develop those before going into a situation, and to consider the IMPACT of their decisions on themselves, as well as on ALL FAMILY MEMBERS. Empathy must be learned. It does not occur without that learning. Adolescents who know how to think these things through, and have learned from the time they are very young have an easier time making WISE decisions during adolescence. They have a foundation for being "trusted." (e.g. When I ask to go to a party, do I know whether my parents will be available if it goes "south?" What situations suggest I need to call my parents to come get me out of here? Are there any kids that are particularly difficult to deal with? How will I cope with peer pressure effectively?)

If you simply "boss" your child through the early years, s/he will not develop the skills needed to manage difficult situations in the future. For example, if your child wants to sleep over at a relative's house, what are some **SAFETY FACTORS**? Can you be available to pick up your child if anything should happen? Do the parent-relatives have a medical release in case of an emergency? How well do they supervise their *own* children? How skilled are they at keeping

their own children safe? Do they let their kids watch PG and R-rated horror movies? Do they yell as a way of parenting?

Then, what **SKILLS** does your *child* need to navigate this situation? Does your child know how to let parents know s/he's only allowed to watch G-rated movies? Does your child know how to ask for what s/he needs in respectful ways (e.g. "No thank you" versus "I don't like that!!" when served food)? Does your child know how to "pitch in" in age-appropriate ways (e.g. pick up dish from the dinner table and take to counter, ask hosts "how can I help?")? Can s/he set limits if a peer wants to do something unsafe (e.g. if peer is playing with matches: "I don't feel safe doing this. Can you listen to my words or do we need parents to help us stay safe?")

Then consider, **does this decision work for all members of your family?** – Does an older sibling have a recital he'll be late for if your child goes to this sleep-over? etc. Include children (without overwhelming them) in *how* you navigate your decision-making process re **Safety, Skills, Impact on Others**, so they learn to do this for themselves – make it clear the final decision is *yours* as the parent, AND, over time, the more effective they become at thinking these things through on their own, the more trustworthy they become, and the more likely they are to get a decision from you that aligns with what they want. The more responsible they are, the more freedom you can easily allow.

When my son was 16, I asked "So, where are you headed?" He was sincere in his tone and trying to be respectful when he replied: "Mom, I think that question is a bit intrusive." I laughed. He was a straight "A" student at a very competitive high school, with countless extracurricular activities. He kept his commitments, was typically the designated driver, and was as honest as they come. "Honey, you only have 1.5 years before you're at college making all your decisions on your own. If you don't know how to make wise decisions by now, we're both in trouble. I completely trust you. When you get there, get in the habit of telling a roommate where you're going. I just need to know where to look for the body, if there's a problem." "Oh!" He laughed and grabbed my cell phone to install a Facebook app that allowed me to locate him at any time, in case of emergency.