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PARENTING CHILDREN WITH ADD, ADHD, OPPOSITIONAL/DEFIANT PATTERNS, AND EXCESSIVE RIGIDITY

I would like to end this book with an epilogue, a chapter devoted to a group of parents who are particularly challenged to apply the Rational Discipline Structure in their homes. It is for these parents that I started a Center in Teaneck, NJ. Who are these parents?

Parents of children who suffer from ADD, ADHD, Oppositional/Defiant Patterns or Excessive Rigidity experience far more struggle and strife in their parenting than parents of children without these issues. Why? Because they all share a most vexing problem which each of these childhood issues creates.

The common problem is that children with these issues find it really difficult to do what they're told consistently, compliantly and cheerfully.

Challenges presented by the ADD child: the child with ADD is told to go to their room, wash up, get dressed, collect their backpack and homework papers, and then come down for breakfast. The problem is that their child often gets so distracted as they are trying to follow orders, that they come down for breakfast 30 minutes later, dressed, with teeth and hair unbrushed, and without their backpack. As for their homework, they have no idea where it is. Parents become exasperated after dozens and hundreds of such days. They come to see me using descriptions of their child as "lazy," "passive," "lost in his or her own world," and utterly frustrating. This child suffers from

massive distractibility, lack of focus, and poor “working memory,” that executive function which helps us remember where we put our car keys or homework or cell phone and what we have to do next to get out of the house on time.

Challenges presented by the ADHD child: the child with ADHD is a whirlwind of action, often acting impulsively. He or she often goes beyond the bounds of the aggression levels mom and dad are comfortable with. These kids get worked up, often excitedly and happily, and then go “too far,” unable to rein themselves in when asked by mom or dad. The shouting begins at that moment. Parents yell “Stop, you’re hurting your brother,” and the ADHD child is on the defensive immediately, once again feeling like the “bad kid,” even though he is just a kid whose self-control has not filled in yet because of neurodevelopmental immaturities. Does yelling by the parents’ help? Not really. In the short run it may bring an end to the hyperactive or hyperaggressive outburst, but in the long run their child feels hurt, becomes a bit less cooperative, and a bit more angry. This fuels more aggressive action and less cooperation.

Challenges presented by the Oppositional/Defiant child: Oppositional/Defiant patterns are another tremendous challenge for parents. Many things can contribute to the development of a habit of opposing and not cooperating, but I have found that most cases which have made their way to my office are caused by a more primary issue, like ADHD, or a mood issue or a rigidity issue or a learning disability. When a child is not able to comply like they are expected to because of an underlying neurobiological issue or learning disability, they often throw in the towel in their efforts to please their parent or their teacher. They come to think of themselves in demoralized ways and think of their parents and teachers as trying to “boss them around.” They have jumped off the success train where kids are willing

to be guided, coached, instructed and given orders and rules as the price for learning new skills and developing new capacities. Parents often fluctuate between confusion, heartbreak and anger. “I just asked him to put on his shoes and jacket so we could go the park, which he loves, and he is having an angry meltdown, refusing the wear a jacket and refusing to wear the weather-proof shoes I just bought!”

Challenges presented by the excessively rigid child: I often see children with significant, usually undiagnosed, rigidities, often associated with sensory problems. They cannot shift gears when asked to or when they need to. They melt down. They refuse to do as instructed. They refuse to end a project when their parent asks them to. Frustrated parents will, in desperation, take the project and put it somewhere away from the child. Does this work? Not really. The child will often create an emotional Armageddon, wailing about their lost project or item or plan, refusing to be comforted and refusing to flexibly adapt to the change being asked of them.

Three Basic Ideas for Helping the ADD, ADHD, Oppositional/Defiant and Excessively Rigid Child

What can beleaguered parents do if they have a child described above? There are dozens of useful books written just for parents on each of these topics. This very brief article will present only three basic, core ideas. I do so because I think it is by far the single most important idea and this idea is not focused on enough by parent/child educators and guides.

The first and most important idea is this: AT ALL TIMES, SETTLE YOURSELF EMOTIONALLY BEFORE YOU SAY OR DO A SINGLE THING. That’s it. This is extraordinarily simple but extraordinarily difficult. That is your challenge. Your child cannot change to spare you this challenge. Life has handed you this child and life has handed you this challenge.

If you can do this, it will become unnecessary for your child to become lastingly hurt, angry, oppositional or depressed. If you can do this, you can become a benign “teacher” who simply understands your child’s limitations and who gives your child choices to make with reasonable consequences for each choice that is delivered as a teaching tool rather than as a tool for punishment or revenge.

The second idea is do everything in your power to give the child a “do-over” in which you avoid focusing on the negative but instead focus on the positive you want.

You WANT to help your child succeed. You transcend your anger at their bad behavior and you actively and creatively look for ways to give them a chance to succeed in pleasing you.

Here are a few examples of what I mean:

For the ADD child, rather than exasperatedly saying “I can’t believe you can’t find where you put your homework,” say instead something like: “I know you get distracted with lots and lots of interesting ideas. Let’s go up to your room together and look for your homework. Later tonight I will help you figure out a better way to remember to put your homework in your backpack right away.”

For the ADHD child, rather than screaming “Stop.” “I said stop. Don’t you ever listen?” instead say something like: “I see you had a really hard time controlling your body and your feelings and got worked up twirling around and got mad at your brother for getting in the way. Let’s see if you can ask your brother if his body and his feelings are ok. Let’s see if he needs you to do or say something now.”

For the oppositional child, rather than threatening to ground them for the weekend when they refuse to get their coat for school for the umpteenth time, try saying something like “I know you hate being told what to do and I

know you are sure it's not that cold. How about bringing a sweatshirt in your backpack in case you change your mind once you're at school in the playground? I would feel more comfortable if you had your sweatshirt in case you change your mind later."

For the rigid child, rather than grabbing his game or project in a huff because you are now late for your appointment, perhaps you can approach the child ten minutes earlier and say "I would like to help you put that game aside. Would it help you to cooperate with me if I help you mark the spot you are on and let you finish your game after dinner?"

In each and every case, your child may still refuse to go along with your offer of a positive option. They may even tantrum more intensely. Does that mean these parenting approaches do not work? Does that mean you are out of positive options? Absolutely not. The entire idea of the Rational Discipline Approach which I developed is to help your child feel accepted as they are, with the difficulties they bring to the table, to communicate acceptance kindly and lovingly, to set expectations, and to help the child meet those expectations. When they are unable to do so, you do NOT turn on them. Nor do you define either them or yourself as a failure. Instead, you simply move to the third idea for these children.

The third idea is this: you do not punish your child out of anger nor get caught up in making sure they "do" what you have ordered them to do, even if it is good for them to do so. You simply get down to parenting basics: every moment brings a choice for your child. He or she chooses. You offer help to assist them in choosing better on the "do-over." And then, if they do not choose well, they experience the natural and logical consequence of that choice, without any drama or hysterics from you.

Your ADD child turns down your offer of help in organizing a homework plan. You simply say: “If you change your mind, let me know. It’s got to be frustrating to do the work and have your teacher get mad because he thinks you didn’t do it.”

Your ADHD child refuses to make amends with his brother after knocking him down. You simply say “When you whack someone without showing that you are sorry, they usually don’t want to play with you later in the day.”

When your oppositional child refuses to take their coat or sweatshirt to school, you let them experience the discomfort of being pretty cold that day, perhaps discretely putting the sweatshirt by the door the next morning.

When your rigid child cannot put his game away, you reorganize your approach for the next day, only allowing that game or project after you have returned home from whatever outing is required.

In short, you settle yourself emotionally, you offer the child a do-over with your help, hoping they will succeed in being compliant and pleasing you. If they fail to do so, you allow natural and logical consequences to arise, without trying to protect them, and without lecturing them about how they were wrong and you were right.

It is my hope that this short book will help you move forward on your journey towards becoming the kind of parent I have just described and recommended, both for your own sake and for the sake of your children.

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