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Parent Coaching for Children with AD/HD and Learning Disabilities

Parents of children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) and/or learning disabilities (LD) daily contend with some very challenging parenting tasks. Whether you're facilitating home-school communication, providing support with schoolwork, or responding to your child's social and emotional issues, parent advocacy is critical to your child's happiness and success. Yet, you may spend so much energy trying to help make the outside world more manageable for your child that you find yourself on "low fuel light" when behavior problems arise at home. I've developed a parent coaching system that involves proactive intervention, with parents acting as guides for their children's behavior both at home and in the "real world."

The Self-Control and Social Skills Challenge

If your child has AD/HD and/or LD, you're probably well aware of any problems she has with self-control and social skills. Typical problems include:

- low tolerance for frustration and disappointment
- difficulty making sound decisions
- a limited repertoire of social skills

These problems may cause frequent conflict between you and your child at home. In an effort to curtail problems, many parents turn to the traditional behavior management technique of reward and punishment. While that approach has certain benefits, it doesn't promote self-control and good decision making in children. The reward-and-punishment approach may also place the parent in an adversarial role with the child.

As a child psychologist who specializes in the treatment of AD/HD and LD, I devote much of my time to training parents and children to use a coaching program that promotes self-control and social skills. The parent coaching approach stresses the importance of viewing a child's behavior as a "window" through which to assess her skills. Coaching teams up parent and child to practice strategies for coping with the hurdles of AD/HD and LD.

A Child's "Thinking Side" vs. "Reacting Side"

Coaching is ideally suited to the needs of children with AD/HD and LD. Problems with impulsivity, persistence, and judgment are addressed by the parent coaching principles of preparation, practice, and review. You approach your coaching role with a practical framework for helping your child understand what goes wrong. Underlying this framework are the concepts of your child's "thinking side" and her "reacting side."

- The **thinking side** is the part of your child's mind that makes good decisions and watches over her behavior.
- The **reacting side** is the part of your child's mind that reacts emotionally, and without thinking, to certain events in her life.

This common sense framework paves the way for you to introduce your child to related concepts, such as triggers, helpful self-talk, power talk, and figuring out the clues and self-instructions in life.

The Verbal Playbook

I recommend that as a parent coach, you establish and maintain a safe and trusting dialogue with your child. The goal is to help your child with AD/HD or LD break new ground by understanding her own struggles. Ideally, you will possess a calm voice, nurturing demeanor, and open mind. It's also helpful to acknowledge your own triggers. Perhaps most important is a readiness to listen to your child's point of view, paying careful attention to the words that reflect her perceptions and beliefs. This provides a glimpse into the self-talk landscape that fuels your child's reacting side behaviors and makes it so difficult for her to learn from her mistakes. As the parent-child dialogue proceeds, you'll want to refer back to your child's words to illustrate how negative self-talk impedes positive change.

You can bolster your child's willingness to discuss her troubles by your choice of words. Saying, "Now that I've heard your side, maybe there's a lesson for both of us to learn," can help soothe her raw emotions. Rather than sounding like a judging adversary, you are perceived as an ally.

Touching on Triggers

Triggers are situations, or "hot buttons," that tend to set us off. You might start by telling your child about your own triggers (which she may already be well aware of!). You might say something like this: "We all have triggers that set off our reacting side, like when I get really angry with myself for misplacing things." Next explain that if we are willing to calmly discuss what has taken place, not only can we learn to watch out for triggers but we can use strategies to keep our thinking side in charge. This gesture opens up a pathway for you to offer knowledge and tools to reveal your child's triggers and develop a game plan for correction.

Typical triggers that heat up the reacting side in children with AD/HD and LD fall into three broad categories:

- self esteem (or "pride injuries")
- frustration of desires (or "not getting what I want")
- social encounters (or "dealing with people")

Provide details of what you observe and how your child's reacting side gets her into trouble. For example, you might tell your child, "When your brother calls you a name (social encounter), your reacting side is quickly triggered and you throw a tantrum."

Don't Take the Bait!

Next, present a proactive solution to your child. "We can prepare your thinking side to stay in control by planning what you'll say to yourself (helpful self-talk) and what you'll say to your brother (power talk). That way you don't take his bait." Explain that being "baited" by people, or even situations, is both common and controllable.

You can reinforce the self-control goal of "not taking the bait" by explaining the importance of helpful self-talk and power talk when facing triggers. "If you are prepared for baiting, and you tell yourself, 'I'm not going to take his bait,' and simply say to him, 'I see what you're doing, and I'm not going there,' you'll keep your cool." Such a dialogue epitomizes the kid-friendly "verbal playbook" that parents and kids build as they review triggers. During role play, you might play the role of the "baiter," while your child rehearses her self-talk and power talk strategies.

Coaching to Win

Parent coaching is a way to help your child develop the self-control and social skills required in today's complicated, fast-paced world. It also provides you with a pathway to make the most of "teachable moments" when gaps appear between your child's skills and outside expectations. When engaged in the safety of a coaching dialogue, your child will welcome these concepts with interest and openness, realizing in the long run she will reap the benefits of empowerment.

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About the Contributors

Steven Richfield, Psy.D. is a child psychologist and author in Plymouth Meeting, PA. He has developed a child-friendly self-control/social skills building program called *Parent Coaching Cards*, now in use all over the world.

Other Resources

Books

The Parent Coach: A New Approach to Parenting in Today's Society

<http://store.cambiumlearning.com/ProductPage.aspx?parentId=019000622!&functionID=009000008!&site=sw>

By Steven Richfield, Psy.D. with Carol Borchert

[Other]

Parent Coaching Cards: Social and Emotional Tools for Children

By Steven Richfield, Psy.D. with Carol Borchert