

Something's  
Wrong  
with My Child

A Parents' Book  
about Children  
with Learning Disabilities

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Private schools have been established to fill the vacuum, and there now are a number of good ones across the country. They can take over the child's schooling when nothing suitable exists in the local public schools. The Association for Children with Learning Disabilities (see appendix B) will provide parents with information about private schools; these might be nearby day schools or, if there is nothing within commuting distance, boarding schools. The federally sponsored program called Closer Look (appendix C) also will send lists of schools in specified areas. Knowledgeable professionals—psychologists, pediatric neurologists—sometimes are able to direct parents to sound private schools.

These schools are expensive. They provide small classes, well-trained teachers, and the necessary supporting services, such as speech therapy and perceptual-motor training. Tuition usually starts at \$3,000 per school year for a full-time day school. Boarding schools are about \$6,500 per year—more for children who need additional aid such as psychiatric treatment.

More and more local school boards and state departments of education are contributing toward the cost of sending a learning-disabled child to a private school (day or boarding) or to another public-school district when the child cannot be provided for locally. According to the Council for Exceptional Children, a private organization concerned with both handicapped and gifted children (see appendix C), this financial aid might range from \$720 to \$4,200 per year, depending on the state.

If no adequate program for learning-disabled children exists within a local system and a child is eligible for admission to a good private school or to a nearby public-school system that has classes for the learning-disabled, his parents should find out whether their community or state provides this kind of financial help. They can ask their local school superintendent, the state superintendent of schools, (by phoning the statehouse in the state capital and asking to be connected to his office), or the ACLD.

## 8 / The Child at Home

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Brown:

We left too many things unsaid when you were in the office the other day. Let's discuss them.

We've examined Billy and believe he will do well in the new program his school has designed for him. Unfortunately, it's impossible to be explicit concerning the why and how of his learning disability. None of us know enough yet about children like Billy to tell you exactly what's happening and what to do about it. We wish we could say, "Oh, yes, it's blankitis, and a few shots of blankillin ought to clear it up."

We'd like to ease your anxiety. You are loving, caring parents. You have done a fine job raising your two older children. Then along came Billy, and all hell broke loose.

You know that Billy, like all other children, has certain basic needs. You are doing your best to satisfy them. You provide comfort within a close, tightly knit home. You see that Billy is kept safe from danger, well nourished, healthy. Because you want to provide the best care you can, you've had expert professionals analyze his behavior and his learning characteristics. They helped you make decisions concerning his education and medical treatment. But they told you little about handling the painful, upsetting problems that haunt you daily. Just where you need help the most—in your home life—you feel lost.

The methods you used with your other children don't work with Billy. Maybe your first two children had nap schedules that gave you, Mrs. Brown, time to yourself while they re-

covered a bit from their fussiness. But Billy was always wound up and jumpy when he should have been sleepy. You couldn't get him down to rest, and you couldn't get away from him to find a moment's peace. Your other two children quickly learned to hang up their clothes neatly. Billy scatters his pell-mell around his room. You have the devil's own time getting him to breakfast, while his brother and sister appear promptly and clean. You wonder if you are to blame. It occurs to you that if somehow you were only a little bit smarter you could handle Billy better. Your distress increases when grandparents or family friends, who mean well, suggest you are spoiling the boy, that you don't know how to handle him properly. Society's judgment in these matters is usually criticism of the parents—what could be easier? This is galling, because you know that Billy was different from birth.

Both of you will have to tread a fine line with Billy. He will absorb more than his share of your energy. Yet try as much as possible to give time and love to the rest of the family. Your other children can take an amazing amount of "benign neglect" if they understand *why* you have to devote so much of yourself to Billy and if they are offered assurance that their time will come as well. Plan activities with them alone. Handled right, Billy's brother and sister could be of great help. But not if they resent the child who seems to get most of the love and attention. Most youngsters behave with remarkable awareness and compassion if the emotional climate within their family is good and if their parents have a wholesome attitude toward themselves and their children, including the child with the problem.

Don't get so caught up in Billy's care that you lose outside interests. Keep up an active social life. Involve yourselves in recreation and community affairs. Try to relinquish his care periodically to a competent babysitter. It might be extremely hard to find a sitter who can handle and be trusted with a learning-disabled child. But attempt to find one who will learn, with encouragement and help, to stay with your child. You might trade time with the parents of other learning-disabled children. Both of you need the independence and

the morale boost that will come from taking some time off, especially if you can go on vacation—even a long weekend—without any of your children. In sharing Billy's care, you'll free yourselves from the feeling of confinement and the ill effects of the tension and resentment that will inevitably build up if you alone are responsible for him.

Interpret his needs not only to people like babysitters or friends who come in briefly to pinch-hit for you, but also to your neighbors and relatives. Take the time and patience to try to help them understand Billy's problems. Most will gradually lose their apprehension about him and treat him as they do any child his age.

Keep channels of communication open within the family. Fathers sometimes play down problems and think their wives are unduly nervous. They come home from the office and are incredulous to be faced by an exhausted and now angelic child who, they are told, was raising hell earlier. A man may turn against his wife and berate her, because he believes he can control the child and his wife can't. Arguments can rise to bitter proportions.

**SHE:** You're not alone with him all day. It's fine for you in your air-conditioned office. I have to struggle with the laundry and the cleaning with this nagging brat hanging on me.

**HE:** If you think I'm going to put up with this after a busy day, you're crazy. What is this nonsense you're giving me about the kid's yelling and screaming in the supermarket? You let him get away with it. If you give in to him, he'll get a lot of satisfaction out of screaming his head off.

**SHE:** Just once I'd like to see you try to stop him when he takes it into his mind to go amok. He'd soon have you running back to your office.

So it goes. Parents must talk with each other, try to see each other's point of view, and respect each other's efforts to help the child. Instead of pulling in different directions, you must try to work together in your joint responsibility.

Our tests show us that Billy is bright and healthy, but his physical co-ordination makes him clumsier and his rate of language development has been slower than those of most

children his age. He couldn't handle play tools in kindergarten and was lost with written symbols in first grade. But there were many other things Billy could do—until he decided to quit trying anything, because he had become convinced he was dumb.

Both of you are crushed by his school problems. You appear to take his difficulties personally, as affronts against you and your family. You believe that whatever he does reflects on you. You consider Billy—probably all your children—to be an extension of yourselves; by this reasoning, Billy's failures are your failures. So many parents feel this way. What a mistake and what a waste this is.

Our children are not extensions of ourselves. Unfortunately, in our society the achieving child is the ultimate status symbol. Perhaps it's because he is the only thing left we can't buy on time. When we think of our child as an extension—reflection—of ourselves, we put him in relentless competition for *our* rewards, the achievement of *our* victories, and we call the plays, whether or not he's ready or able.

Why did you both reject the kindergarten teacher's advice to hold Billy out of first grade for one year? For his sake, or because it might have reflected poorly on you or been awkward to explain to your family and friends? Mr. Brown, how could this possibly have been such a blow to your pride? You're a success in your business; you weren't going to be held back. Mrs. Brown, were you worried about Billy's feelings or your own? Children are innately honest little realists. Billy knew he couldn't do the work. He didn't need or want sympathy or excuses. All he wanted was someone to help him in a way that was right for him.

So often we try to rush nature, to push our children into activities for which they're not ready. We try to make them fit into a mold of our design, not theirs. This leaves them with little recourse. They can try halfheartedly to please us, really to get us off their backs; they can rebel, actively or by passive resistance; or they can just quit—withdraw into a world of daydreams. Children can develop many deviant behavior patterns as a reaction to pressures at home or in school, but

in so doing their valuable constructive energies are dissipated. Learning becomes no longer a source of joyful discovery and mastery, but a painful striving to meet arbitrary, often inappropriate standards imposed by the adult world. Many children under stress begin to hate school, and they dawdle—sometimes actually get sick—in the morning so they can avoid it. At home, their inability to cope leads to excessive dependency, fearfulness, disobedience, and painful feelings of inferiority. Billy has tried many of these reactions.

They are the wrong reactions, but the best he can do under the circumstances. School and home are inseparable. Problems in one spill over into the other. If a child can't handle his classroom work, he's likely to be nasty and irritable when he is with his family. Unless he feels secure and believed in at home, he's likely to blow up when he gets to the classroom. All children are learning something every waking minute. Billy has learned, with conviction, "I can't." His life (school and home) has taught him: You don't just *feel* inferior; you *are* inferior. You're a failure, a disappointment to everyone around you.

All children have abilities. These must be found; each youngster must be made aware of them. "Every child," says psychologist Gardner Murphy, in his book *Personality*, "is in some ways like all other children. In some ways he is like some other children. And in some ways, he is like no other child." Parents must look objectively at their children, see them as they truly are. In what ways is Billy like all children—with the same qualities and needs? What characteristics does he share with other learning-disabled children? And what are his unique personal strengths and weaknesses, the things you need to understand and work with?

The two of you must approach these questions together. You share the responsibility for helping Billy to solve his special learning and behavior problems. Your son will be far better off if he can't exploit rifts between his parents. You must create a favorable atmosphere within your home for seeking and finding ways to handle the tantrums and sulking that will occur. You will have to find ways to weave Billy into your

family life; his management cannot be farmed out to a school or doctor.

His problems and behavior can't be viewed apart from your reactions—and those of relatives and friends—to him. He can't bear alone the burden of "causing all the trouble" in the household. For every action of his, there is a reaction. The reaction can aggravate the problem. Or it can reduce and correct it. "A barometer of human emotion, [this] child is unusually sensitive to parental feelings," a mother writes, in the newsletter of the California Association for Neurologically Handicapped Children. "If you cannot remain calm when he is disrupting the household, he will sense your feelings immediately and his own disruptive behavior will get worse. Strive for some objectivity, for [this child] needs your stability when he can't control himself. A good question to ask yourself is when does his behavior stop and your reaction begin?"

If you're truly objective, you won't let yourselves be beguiled by the notion that Billy's behavior is merely a phase he's going through. If you think—as some people will assure you—that it's merely a stage he'll grow out of, you will be inclined to procrastinate. You will not think of taking action to resolve his problems. Uncorrected, Billy could continue to pile bad behavior on bad behavior; this poor behavior might then harden into habits that will become more and more difficult to uproot.

Being objective means being realistic. Both of you must examine carefully the areas in which Billy does need help. Like many learning-disabled children, Billy in effect has to be taught how to live. You can't assume that he will pick up the basic rules of life by himself. You might have to spell things out for him. For example, you should see to it that he gets off to school well fed and appropriately dressed—comfortable with himself. You might have to ask him daily quite specifically—and as kindly as possible—whether he has brushed his teeth, washed his face and hands. You might have to remind him that the seasons have changed and it's now a wintry rather than an autumn day, so he ought to wear warmer clothing.

If you get to know his uniqueness as an individual, you'll

also be aware of many tasks in which he is competent. Insist that Billy do the things you know he can do. You have seen him cut his meat at dinner, so don't do it for him. He can sweep with a push broom; assign him the job of keeping the garage and sidewalks clean. Gradually withdraw help as his need for it decreases, so he can assume greater initiative and self-reliance. Parents become so emotionally lopsided in the way they think about their learning-disabled children that they forget they must continually re-evaluate and try to take a fresh look at their youngsters. Parents frequently remain pessimistic, because all they think about is what's wrong with their child—never what's right. Billy is not helpless. Don't anticipate helpless behavior. Expecting his continued ineptness or difficult behavior will not make it more pleasant to tolerate—and he will act the way you expect him to act. Your other children will be quick to point out that you're applying different standards to Billy than you are to them. This can lead to resentment and quarreling.

Be alert to any hint that Billy is good at *something*, even at this early age. The discovery of areas of unimpaired ability, often of considerable native talent, allows the parents of learning-disabled children to give their youngsters new and venturesome chances for success. They need these opportunities. Don't impose your value standards. Don't be too quick to label genuine talents trivial or foolish. If Billy begins to show a talent for fly casting, for example, encourage it. Be enthusiastic if he decides he likes to cook. Whatever it is, be proud and support it. If you expose him to a wide variety of experiences, something *will* capture his interest.

Listen to what he says. Have an open mind. Don't step in and help him unless you're sure he can't do something alone. If he is always helped, if your impatient, quick, more able hands deny him the chance to try, he won't ever learn to master things for himself. This seems obvious, yet parents of learning-disabled children often are stunned when they are told they have overlooked abilities their youngsters have.

Don't worry about immediate usefulness. One learning-disabled twelve-year-old who had such poor co-ordination that

he couldn't write very well started practicing magic. Inexplicably, he became a master at sleight of hand. His parents frowned on the pursuit, considering it an intrusion on his "more important" schoolwork. But magic was what this boy wanted to do. He also needed it to gain a feeling of importance and to fulfill a latent talent for showmanship. When he performed tricks that mystified his classmates, he gained a sense of satisfaction he could get no other way. His parents were persuaded by an understanding psychologist to buy him equipment and to take him to magicians' conventions. He began to earn money giving magic shows at parties and school assemblies. In time his co-ordination, which hadn't developed even after years of training in a special school, began to sharpen to an incredible degree, and the improvement carried over into writing, typing, and woodworking. Magic had become a worth-while pursuit in its own right, as an ego-building outlet; and ultimately it brought the boy an important return in the academic area.

Encouraged to do things in which he can succeed, no matter what they are, the learning-disabled child will discover self-respect. Find every conceivable way to help Billy learn that he can be successful. "The real remedial work for a child with a learning disability goes on at home," writes Mrs. Margaret Golick, a psychologist at Montreal Children's Hospital, in *A Parents' Guide to Learning Problems*. Parents are the most important guide this or any child can have. Not in academic instruction. But you can work side by side with Billy in areas that intrigue him: the care of animals, model building, appliance repair. You can go fishing or camping with him. You can help him learn to swim, to dance. Many parents of learning-disabled children have become masters at finding ways to provide rewarding and productive day-to-day learning experiences for their children.

"Only the home can provide the variety, the repetition, the relevance that [this child] needs," Mrs. Golick says. "Parents can make mealtime, bedtime, a drive in the car, a trip to the supermarket and ordinary household activities into meaningful teaching situations. . . . If mother or father takes the trouble

to teach systematically some of the skills involved in cleaning, cooking, shopping, gardening, there is an ideal opportunity to develop finger dexterity, visual and auditory perception; to teach order, logic, arithmetic; to sharpen a child's ability to use language. . . . Involvement in the life of the household gives a feeling of competence that can help to counteract the sense of failure instilled by low marks."

(Parenthetically, there is rarely a parent, even one who is a good teacher of academic subjects for other children, who can be effective tutoring his or her own youngster. Parents are too emotionally involved with their children to be objective. When the mother-child relationship, or the father-child, is converted to that of teacher-child, the child in effect no longer has a mother, or a father, but only one more mediocre teacher. Yet so fixed is present-day society's lunatic demand for academic excellence that the minute a child starts to experience failure in first grade, his parents sweep in to tutor him. This usually is the beginning of misery for both parents and child.)

Parents help most when they know what a child can and cannot do. Encourage Billy to work only on tasks he can accomplish. There are a number of assignments suitable for him around the house, if you'll only think. They can be as simple a part of family living as folding napkins, setting the table, or helping with a minor kitchen chore like shelling peas. These give the child a feeling of success, and they are also helpful exercises for eye-hand co-ordination. If Billy makes a mistake, he need not incur anyone's wrath. Learning to hang laundry on a line could be a helpful activity for him if you don't insist that the clothespins be placed exactly at the seams or if you can bear to see things rumpled while he figures out a way to get them across the line.

If Billy fails at a job you've given him, it might be because you have expected too much. Find challenges that are within his abilities. If you match tasks to his level of functioning, Billy will succeed. And if you've paved the way with easy-to-wipe-clean surfaces and break-proof containers, for example, spills will fade in importance compared to the newly learned co-ordinative skill involved in concocting a salad. Montessori

books, available in your local library, describe in detail a number of jobs for children that you can easily adapt to your home. (These are Dr. Maria Montessori's "exercises in practical life.")

No child should feel he's being pressured to learn something every minute of the day. But, comfortably and consistently in his daily life, Billy should get a happy feeling that he is helping at home, handling things well, and having fun. All children, but especially learning-disabled boys and girls, learn best by practice in real situations. No lecture will be as effective as a demonstration of the activity itself—and then letting him do it lots of times.

Parents differ in their standards for doing a job right, so you should decide beforehand how strongly you feel about results. Reward any honest effort that is in the direction of the desired result. Children who are clumsy learn much more when they are free of pressure and criticism.

Too many parents get irritated by children who do their best and still get things wrong. Why should Billy try to hang up his trousers if, after he does so, you criticize him because he's done a sloppy job? He's trying, and he's getting there little by little. That deserves praise. Mothers get too impatient with fumbles in household routines, or when a child puts his shoes on the wrong feet and cannot tie his laces. Fathers become disappointed and impatient if their children are not good at sports or working with tools.

Think about *his* problems. Can you figure out something that will help Billy put his shoes on correctly? Perhaps you could draw outlines of his shoes on the closet floor and indicate which is left and which is right. Or could you mark the inside of the shoes with pictures to show where the big toe goes?

Mrs. Brown, you're concerned because Billy doesn't listen, can't remember his lessons, forgets his lunch money, dawdles over dressing and eating. We discussed this dependency—for that's exactly what it is—because it irritates your husband to see you "baby the boy." Billy is overly dependent on you. You're much more protective of him than of your older chil-

dren. Because of his handicap, his slowness and clumsiness in learning how to take care of himself physically, you bathed, fed, and dressed him long after you needed to. Your concern leads you to respond to Billy's whims instead of to his needs. Parents who do this, who give in at every turn, add to their children's problems. They cause their youngsters to regress, to become more, rather than less, infantile.

Billy can't stand up for himself. You feel sorry for him and fight his battles. He has learned to rely on you, to exploit you to get everything he wants without effort on his part. So he stands in his own way in developing independence. And you, like so many loving mothers, have become enslaved by the chains of dependency you helped forge. Listen to your husband when he says, "Let him do it himself." Try to develop some of his detachment. Fathers seem to understand the laws of cause and effect better than mothers do. Mr. Brown is legitimately concerned every time you allow Billy to miss school or get out of doing his homework because he has complained of a headache or that his stomach hurts. Mr. Brown lives in a real world; nobody in his office cares whether he's got a headache, as long as he produces his work. He feels, rightfully, that Billy has to learn this way of the world. He expects Billy to grow up to be a productive citizen and knows the boy must start learning to produce now. But Billy thinks his mother has given him a free ride.

Learning-disabled youngsters need firmness, consistency, and clarity more than other children do. "Routine is to a child what walls are to a house," psychiatrist Rudolf Dreikurs and Vicki Soltz write, in *Children: The Challenge*. "It gives boundaries and dimensions to his life." This is true for all children, but especially for youngsters like Billy. You have described the quarrel you had because Mrs. Brown let Billy miss school one day so he could sleep late. Mr. Brown had come in from a trip the night before, and Billy had been allowed to stay up past his bedtime to greet his father. He slept late the next morning. Mrs. Brown, you even wrote a note to Billy's teacher saying he hadn't been well. You were hurt and angry because Mr. Brown criticized you for letting

Billy skip school and for writing that note. By allowing Billy to stay up late, you denied him his right to attend to his own business the next day, and you interfered with his right to proper rest. It also ruined the next day for all of you, because Billy was even more active and disorderly than usual. The false excuse you wrote to the school told Billy that lies could be used to avoid unpleasant consequences.

Like all children, Billy will test limits. He'll try to see how far he can go. If he finds no boundaries, he'll become confused and will demand more and more license to do as he pleases. When someone finally clamps down on him, he won't know what hit him, and he might erupt like Vesuvius. Be sure Billy knows what you expect, the rules of the house. Tell him what the consequences will be if he does not obey the rules. Always follow through. Don't let yourself be swayed by his wiles. If a child senses his parents are wavering, he could provoke them to criticize each other in front of him. Try not to let this happen. Help Billy realize that he is responsible to both parents equally. But be sure he understands the rules and the penalties for infractions.

Not long ago one of the authors was stopped by a policeman, for speeding. The policeman politely handed out a ticket. With equal grace the judge accepted payment of the fine. Neither the policeman nor anyone in the traffic court yelled or nagged. The law was understood; there had been signs along the road to remind drivers of the speed limit. The author knew he was violating the law. The penalty was also known, and it was administered quietly, without scorn, without anger. Thus does everyone learn effectively that he has to pay for his actions. The penalty for speeding was paid in the same way that Billy must calmly and emotionlessly be brought to account for poor behavior. Calmly and deliberately, without rancor, without humiliating criticism, without derision.

Many adults who pride themselves on being loving parents somehow don't see anything wrong in mocking or teasing their children. They are surprised when told that their teasing is a harsher punishment than any honest beating they might administer. Somehow people believe scorn and derision don't

hurt children. "But it was just a joke," some will say. Derision is not funny. The fact that you are criticizing with laughter makes the criticism more scathing to youngsters, who would rather you told them straight out that you are angry—and why.

This doesn't mean you should not get angry. Try to deal with Billy as calmly as possible. But everyone is driven to angry outbursts at times. Express your anger honestly and directly: "I'm *damn* mad. You know I won't stand for your using my tools without asking. I looked all over for the wrench when the toilet wouldn't flush. And now I find it, two days later, lying in the grass and rusting. I'm furious, and you might as well know it."

Kindness and sympathy are essential, but they cannot take the place of firm, fair discipline for the learning-disabled child. When you punish, try to do it fairly and calmly—as the policeman did. "Punishment should be prompt," says pediatrician George W. Brown, in an article in the *Journal of Learning Disabilities*. "Delay causes the child to be confused about what he did wrong [and] gives the child a long period of worry and resentment that may be out of proportion to the situation. Let the punishment fit the crime. Do not impose a major punishment for a minor transgression. Don't punish the same behavior with widely different penalties at different times. Avoid long sermons, talk, logical reasoning. Make the handling of the problem direct and simple. Don't demand verbal assurances that he will never do such a thing again. . . . Try to avoid punishments that are violent or lead to great excitement. Don't let your own feelings of anger and frustration distort the situation into something it isn't. . . . Use punishments that involve withholding of privileges or putting the child in quiet isolation. Make clear to the child that you dislike his action, not him. . . . The child usually needs an improved self-image, not degradation. Avoid self-defeating threats, bribes, promises, and sermons. Politeness cannot be taught by . . . harangues; bickering and harsh criticism are sometimes more inflammatory than instructive. . . . It is a mistake to be too strict and then too forgiving. Avoid cold

anger at one time, then loving embraces soon after. Hold your temper if you want [your] child to learn that temper can be held."

A family must set up a structure, or routine, within which all members can live comfortably. Billy should have a regular time to get up every morning. Get him an alarm clock. Make out a timetable *with him* and pin it up in his room. Include time for play, homework, reading, television, going to bed, waking up, and meals.

He needs a list of chores, too. It doesn't matter whether you have a maid or Mrs. Brown is the maid. He can make his bed, clean his room, put away his own laundry, empty the trash, and run errands. He might not do these things as well as you would, but accept his efforts and express pleasure when he handles something particularly well. Don't rob him of his dignity by doing anything over again. Don't remake his bed. Never mind how it looks to others. Be pleased he got it together at all. You might even show him how to get it a little smoother next time.

Children need and love order. When rules and routines are established, they will live within them with a strong sense of security. And so will parents. There are times that rules or routines will have to be changed for good reason. But it must be made clear that those are exceptions, and are not just to satisfy parental or child whim.

Since you two are the authorities, the rules in your home will depend on your values and the kind of home you want. They should be based on the principles you have taught your children, the principles *you* live by and that your youngsters can understand and respect. Children who are taught to obey principles, rather than parental whim, are less often confused, rebellious, or misled by temptation. Be sure every member of your family understands the rules and the punishments for infractions.

Once you have set the rules, see that they are enforced evenhandedly. Don't let Billy badger one of you for an extension of bedtime when you both have already agreed what

that time should be. Don't let him appeal to anyone else. Refuse to be drawn into a popularity contest with grandparents, for example. Be direct with them. Be sure they know they aren't doing Billy any good when they vie with you for his favor by being permissive toward him. You should also be able to check if your other children are complying with the rules. Rules are meaningless unless you can enforce them.

Physical punishment is rarely good. Physical restraint, presented to Billy as your way of helping him to control himself so that he won't hurt himself, is a better idea. One of the authors learned a valuable lesson some years ago from his work with a number of learning-disabled boys who were "wall climbers." Some of these boys had withstood every effort of their parents and professionals to calm them. They were defiant, aggressive, accustomed to having their own way. Their tantrums were ferocious. These youngsters had learned to control any situation they were in. The adults around them, fearful of setting off small riots, had refused to exert their authority. One day, in desperation, the author firmly and unemotionally placed one child face down on the floor and sat on him—astraddle on his buttocks. The boy screamed and thrashed wildly, but soon realized he was helpless in that position. The dead weight on his buttocks, unyielding to any entreaties, persuaded him that freedom would come only if his antics stopped. The technique worked. He, and others on whom this method was subsequently tried, could have their freedom—could rejoin the human race—only by quieting down. It was amazing how quickly they did.

It is hard for parents and teachers to handle this kind of youngster. Usually a method can be found, but parents often let up too soon, before a technique has had time to work. Professionals usually have to prevail upon parents to try a method long enough to allow it to take effect. So it's often wise to begin a program of behavior control under guidance. Professionals can be objective concerning goals, the extent to which the child's behavior is being improved, and how long a specific method of behavior control might be needed

before it could reasonably be expected to help. You might need professional help to teach you to observe Billy, to define your goals for him, to identify what is acceptable behavior and what is not. More and more psychologists and special-education teachers are prepared to offer instruction in handling the behavior problems of learning-disabled children.

Whether their behavior is seriously out of control or not, most children, normal or learning-disabled, become more manageable when their parents are consistent with discipline. It is hard to be consistent, and virtually impossible to be so all the time. But few parents realize how uneven they are. Parents who talk with counselors about their disciplining efforts are often amazed to learn how many times what they *do* actually contradicts what they intend.

Children are keenly observant. They readily mimic what others do. The learning-disabled child is even more inclined to copy. Parents who contradict their discipline by their own actions will have major problems with a learning-disabled child. This boy or girl is most uncertain how to behave, and sometimes he is confused about the principles that are supposed to govern his behavior. However, he understands what he observes, and that is what he's going to use as a model for his actions. If you value a certain type of behavior, don't just talk it up; do it yourself. That's what Billy will learn. If you behave inconsistently, he will too.

The point applies to anything you tell him. There is no value in stressing the benefits of industriousness, for example, if Billy doesn't see you engaged in serious work. If you talk about learning as good for its own sake and he sees no evidence that you read books or discuss issues seriously, he will have no impulse toward valuing knowledge. If you decry materialism at the same time that you boast of each glittering new possession, Billy will sense that hard work is not necessarily its own reward and will expect to be paid off, as he thinks you are, for every effort he makes, for everything he learns. Set consistent, dependable models. Be sure there is no distance between what you practice and what you preach.

Keep your word. In the throes of a screaming tantrum at

the shopping center, Billy once got you to placate him with "If you stop crying, I'll take you to the zoo Saturday." Billy stopped, Saturday came, and you did not take him to the zoo. He had been rotten all week long and didn't deserve to go. But you had made an explicit promise. You should not have said it unless you meant to carry it out.

When Billy behaves well, try giving him simple immediate rewards or use tokens—things like poker chips—that can be translated later into things that appeal to him. If his good behavior always earns him an instant reward, even if it is a piece of candy, he will see a direct benefit, one that will be forthcoming consistently. Promises are empty to children with learning disabilities. They refer to a far-off time. Both you and Billy are likely to forget. Billy can't learn to control himself in public that way. He *can* learn if he is given a poker chip—later to be traded for something he really values, perhaps an ice cream cone—each time he keeps himself quiet and under control on a trip to the supermarket. All parents properly reward their children for good behavior by recognition, praise, often a treat. Learning-disabled children need a reward that is as immediate and concrete as possible. You're not bribing the child; you're helping him to control his behavior and to understand that he will benefit directly from this self-control. In time he'll learn to control his behavior without immediate, concrete rewards.

Be wary of making threats. So many parents usher their children through stores—and childhood—with virtual nonstop commentary on the order of "If you touch the counter one more time, I'll smack you!" The youngster keeps grabbing everything on the counter, and nothing happens—just another empty threat that the child comes to dismiss scornfully. Often the clever youngster understands that his mother will carry out the threat only after six to eight warnings, so he's fairly safe the first five times. Or he can detect a rising intensity in his mother's voice with each repetition and knows at about what decibel level she'll carry out her threat. What Billy will learn is not respect for his parent's wishes, but that his parents may or may not mean what they say, and he will learn how to

manipulate them. Don't threaten until you mean it. If you do threaten, fulfill the threat just as soon as Billy does the thing you have been warning him about.

Be direct in talking with your son. Don't be inveigled into tortuous explanations. Explain simply why his poor manners upset you. It doesn't make any sense to him when you say, "I just can't stand the way you act at dinnertime. I want you to be better behaved." It's much more understandable to spell it out: "The last time we had mashed potatoes I noticed that you tried to eat them with your knife. Tonight we're going to put just the mashed potatoes on your plate. I want to see you eat them with your fork."

Be brief; be clear. If you give an order be sure it's understood. Give the child time to follow through. Show your satisfaction. Then give the next instruction. Spell out what you expect in simple, easy terms. Try to be positive. Support and direct, rather than criticize. Avoid saying, "Billy acts like a baby, so we're treating him like one." Instead say, "Billy is learning to sit still at the table and eat his meal without a fuss." Give your instructions in a pleasant and encouraging tone of voice. Remember that Billy is not deliberately malicious. While his annoying behavior might be beyond his present control, you can eventually lead him, through your understanding, to learn to control himself better. A behavior pattern like Billy's is not immutable. He will mature and change.

Like many learning-disabled children, Billy frequently has difficulty following instructions. You won't always know if this is defiance or if he simply does not understand. Be as concrete as possible when you ask him to do something. One helpful technique is to phrase your directions simply, in short, terse sentences. Tell him, "Look at me while I speak." If you are not sure he understood, ask him to repeat what you said. If, in spite of his repetition, you still believe he doesn't know what you meant, ask him to demonstrate what you asked for.

Most of the behavior problems learning-disabled children have at home can be prevented by removing excessive stimulation and by making their activities as predictable as possible. Learn to anticipate what situations will be overstimulat-

ing to Billy. Keep those within simple, clear-cut limits. Overreaction to things that other children take in stride—a party, a picnic—need not be a fixed, unchangeable part of your youngster. A learning-disabled child's reaction can sometimes be altered if you clearly understand what causes it. Then you can modify the aspect of the family environment that triggers Billy's outbursts. For example, does having guests for dinner set him off? First, let him know in advance that company is coming. Then encourage him to stay in his room until the guests are assembled, because you understand that he becomes unnerved and overexcited by each new arrival.

Keep Billy's room simple and, if possible, in the quietest part of your home. It should be a retreat, a place in which he can relax. If he cannot have a room to himself, give him the part of a room that is farthest from the door and hallway, perhaps behind a folding screen. Keep as many of his possessions as you can on shelves in a closet. Few toys should be strewn about. As one mother suggests, modern laundry appliances enable most of these youngsters to get along with fewer sets of clothing, and therefore to benefit from less confusion over what to wear and from less of a visual jumble of clothing thrown about the room.

If you're not sure what activities overstimulate Billy, observe him carefully. It may be that activities do not bother him as much as his brother does, by picking on him incessantly. The two of them may have to be kept apart as much as possible. If you're not sure about cause, alter just one thing at a time and observe the effects carefully. Be sure you allow enough time for any behavior change to show.

Simplify family routine. Many children with learning disabilities are especially fussy and irritable at mealtime. Most people don't regard mealtime as anything out of the ordinary. But think how complex a situation it can be. Everyone in the family is talking. The table is laden with food; aromas assail the nostrils. The room is bustling with activity. There probably is teasing and banter. You think nothing of this, might even find it pleasant. Then everybody's serenity is shattered when Billy—unable to cope with all the sights, sounds, and

smells—yells, kicks his brother, and throws his fork across the table.

If this happens, don't let the situation get overheated to the point that everyone becomes upset. Step in immediately and take charge. Give Billy an escape route. You might let him leave the table and sit at a small table off to one side of the room. He might have to sit by himself, with a pared-down table setting, for a while. When he can take that much stimulation, you might ask him to rejoin the family group for dessert. Give him some extra space at your table. Move him bit by bit into more difficult situations. At first he might still become overexcited by the talk at the dinner table, and all of you would have to control yourselves. If the dessert experiment is successful, let him rejoin you for a full meal. Perhaps by then he'll be able to juggle his food and a bit of conversation, too. Later he can share the experience of eating at a friend's home, and later still in a restaurant. Start with the simplest situations, and gradually introduce complexities as you believe Billy can take them. The goal is to *help him* join the family in as much of its routine as possible, as long as he can keep himself under control, enjoy a family experience, and not shatter the rest of the family.

If Billy gets seriously out of control and simplification of family activities doesn't do enough, you will have to consider other techniques. Try a "time-out" room. Tell Billy what kind of behavior you expect of him. Define what you will accept as good behavior and what you will punish with isolation. If he doesn't comply, calmly and unemotionally place him alone in any quiet room. You might have to restrain him to get him into this time-out room. In this case, pick him up firmly, without hysterics, and *move* him.

Billy is there to regain his composure, to settle down. Tell him he can rejoin the family as soon as he has himself under control. Combine use of the time-out room with rewards, praise, and support for his good behavior.

Billy doesn't play well with other children. He hasn't had much chance to learn. First, he can't keep up with them.

Second, your excessive concern leads you to behave differently with him than with your other youngsters. You don't interfere with their squabbles; you don't try to protect them from getting hurt. Unlike Billy, they are learning to give as well as take, to know that other children have the same rights as they do.

Billy has to understand that he must live with other children in a world that doesn't revolve around him. Yet he still requires organized routine and help. Consider sending him to camp next summer. He will be nine—that's old enough. Don't worry about his wandering off or losing his shoes. He'll learn to keep track when no one is there to take care of things for him. Camp also will give him good training in physical coordination.

In the meantime, Mr. Brown, work with Billy on game skills. He can learn to succeed at some games, at first simple ones broken down into small component parts that will be easy for him to handle. Try to adapt some of these games to your home. Start with ones that don't demand the abilities he lacks. Gradually introduce others that require more and different kinds of skills. Card and board games come in all levels of difficulty, and with judicious selection you can gradually introduce concepts at higher and higher levels. Elements of popular games like baseball can be taught separately. There may be no hope for Billy's batting, but he can be helped to play an easy position in the field. First teach him to catch large, slow objects—yarn balls or balloons.

Build his confidence and interest so he will welcome being with other children, playing with them. He must feel he has something to contribute. This is extremely important. The most miserable child in school is not the one who can't learn to read, but the one who always loses the race, who can't handle a ball, who is never chosen to be on anybody's team—clumsy Billy, who needs him? He's miserable on the playground, because other children don't want him. You might be upset because Billy can't carry a glass of water, even one only half full, without spilling it. But your concern doesn't come near the agony that Billy must feel every day. (It's

ironic that after a boy grows up nobody cares if he's clumsy. How many times have you asked your chairman of the board to play tetherball?) Parents often find that their learning-disabled children get involved in their worst quarrels during games they cannot play well. It's little wonder that many develop into poor losers. Be alert to help Billy *avoid* frustrating games in which he has no chance of success.

The child who learns to live comfortably within his family unit as a rule-abiding young citizen will learn self-respect and the initiative to take responsibility for his own actions. Parents can encourage self-starting tendencies, or they can squelch them without even knowing it. In the office, Mrs. Brown, you were constantly trying to help Billy by undressing and dressing him, answering questions for him, interpreting for him, admonishing him, even trying to help him draw. He wasn't able to carry one action through to completion. It was a superb illustration of the way most parents interrupt their children's activities or do things for them unnecessarily: "Put that away now, honey, so we can go to the store"; "Hurry up; mother's late. I'll do it for you." Just as a youngster is about to put the last block on a tower of twenty, a feat he looks upon as a triumph, some adult will either finish it for him or knock it over with "Okay, that's enough time wasted. Put the blocks away and go up for your nap."

Children surely must come to consider themselves insignificant creatures, always at the mercy of some powerful intervening being who looks upon their actions as having little or no value. Most parents treat strangers with more respect than they do their own children. When a visitor comes to their home for dinner, they never tell him, "Close your mouth when you chew" or "Shut up and pass the salt."

Every child needs to learn that he is significant. He will realize it only when he is treated with respect and allowed to do his own work—even if it's building a tower of blocks. His mother could say, "That's a great tower. Daddy will be home soon, and we'll save it to show him. As soon as you finish, it's time for your nap, dear." The child will learn to respect him-

self and his property, and this will, in turn, allow him to respect others and their property. Your Joe and Lisa have been gaining self-respect all along, but Billy hasn't, because others have usually completed his work for him or made excuses for him, instead of helping him to do things *in his way*, however slower and more awkward that is. He has not been allowed to learn that he can be master of his own actions. He can be, you know, but it will take more time and patience on the part of everyone in the family.

By now, perhaps you've begun to realize that much of your anger with each other has grown out of disagreements over Billy. Your son might not have caught on to reading, but he has learned to tyrannize the two of you. Remember when you canceled the trip to New York because of a fight over him? He had staged a tantrum and torn up some of the other children's toys. Mr. Brown, you punished him severely, and Mrs. Brown fell apart. Billy came downstairs calm and serene after his explosion to fix himself a glass of chocolate milk, but you two canceled a vacation and spent that time storing up more resentment against each other.

Support, encourage, and appreciate each other, so that Billy will be able to reflect this strengthening kind of love. Help him move gradually to independence, so he can maintain the dignity of childhood and the self-respect that comes with doing as much as possible for himself. Accept his contributions to the family, no matter how small, with appreciation and a genuine pleasure that he can recognize. Accept his individuality. It will be harder for Billy to learn to cope with many things, but with the patience and kindness that accompany your respect for him, you can find a way to teach him.

Be optimistic, be positive, but most of all help your child to help himself. Don't hinder him. He needs you. Your job is far more important than that of the teacher, the pediatrician, or the psychologist. Don't get discouraged; don't let up. Ultimately you will see the success of your efforts, as Billy develops talents and becomes independent and his own

master. The greatest gift you can give Billy is to provide him with a home life that teaches him he is a valuable and responsible part of it, a contributing member of the family, loving and very lovable. He can learn these lessons *only* at home. And they are far more important than spelling, the multiplication tables, and learning how to print neatly.

## 9 / Adolescence: You're Not Out of the Woods Yet

What is it like to be a teen-ager?

Psychiatrist Theodore Lidz, in *The Person: His Development Throughout the Life Cycle*, says that these are years in which a youngster "blossoms into an adult, beset by conflicting emotions, struggling to maintain self-control and to achieve self-expression under the impact of sensations and impulses that are scarcely understood but insistently demand attention.

"It is a time of physical and emotional metamorphosis. It is a time of seeking: a seeking inward to find who one is; searching outward to locate one's place in life; a longing for another with whom to satisfy cravings for intimacy and fulfillment. It is a time of turbulent awakening to love and beauty but also of days darkened by loneliness and despair . . . the transition from childhood to the attainment of adult prerogatives, responsibilities and self-sufficiency."

Adolescence is the critical years from thirteen to nineteen in which a teen-ager becomes responsible for himself while continuing under the family mantle of guidance and protection. Though still dependent, he is forging a new identity for himself. While his parents are still available, he is learning to know himself better and is exploring his world. He is finding opportunities to test his abilities by assuming new roles, donning and shedding new characteristics, to see which help him best to relate to others and to be comfortable with his limitations. It is the youngster's apprenticeship in living, his tryout period in adapting to the ways of the world.