

FAMILY • SERVICES

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The Blessings of a Skinned Knee

PARENTING WITH CONFIDENCE & BUILDING CHARACTER IN AN INDULGENT AGE

Children develop character and learn mastery by being allowed to fall and "skin their knees."

Are you caught in a parenting haze? Are you trying to do your best by your child, meet his every need, but finding that the more you do and the more you give, the more is demanded? If you need a new road map, you might want to read a little gem of a parenting book called *The Blessing of A Skinned Knee*. It offers a both a fresh perspective and a return to some age-old thought. Although this book draws on the wisdom of Jewish tradition, it offers inspiration and useful ideas for *any* parents trying to uphold their own values in a culture of fear, materialism, and self-interest. I will share some of the author's thoughts as we take a look at the challenge of parenting in an age of indulgence. This book gives us hope for raising self-reliant, ethical, and compassionate children today. Read on to learn more.

What's Wrong? Parents Give Their All But Children Are Miserable • Author Wendy Mogel, Ph.D. was a frustrated parent, as well as a successful child psychologist, who realized over time that "something fundamental was amiss." As she puts it, "children of fine parents were not thriving." Some of them were "on the outer edge of normal." They were filling her office. Much of the time both parents and children were unhappy. They both experienced a lot of anxiety. The parents were in angst over daily problems that were unremitting. They were successful and happy at work, but increasingly miserable at home. Although they encouraged their children to freely express their emotions and they worked hard to make sure their children understood the *reasons* for family rules, their children were often unresponsive. There was conflict at every turn. The children were angry and demanding, in spite of all the stimulating activities and extra attention paid to them.

Problems of "Character" • Nothing seemed to work. Even though these children had everything, they were unable to relax and be cooperative and respectful. Dr. Mogel began to find herself describing these troubled youngsters not with psychological terms, but with old-fashioned words, such as *obstinate, rigid, greedy, lethargic, selfish, petulant*. She began to wonder if these were problems that fell into a different kind of category that psychotherapy alone could not repair. She began to realize that these were problems of character.

The PROBLEM of OVER-INDULGENCE

What Are We Seeing Today?

As a therapist who works with children and families full-time, I am seeing some very disturbing trends:

- **A Culture of Over-indulgence**
- **Over-Anxious Parents/Over-Anxious Children** (worrying that their child isn't perfect, expecting too much too

One Typical Family

Becky and Jeff were typical of a "distressed, but not disturbed" couple, whose family life was not working well. They believed in helping their young son and daughter express themselves and understand the reasons for the rules. But their daughter, Jenna, was critical and angry with them and was doing poorly in school. Their son, Nate, had twice bitten other children at preschool. He screamed when it was time to leave the park or a friend's house. His standard bedtime routine was to tear all the sheets off the bed and throw everything out of the drawers.

At work, Becky and Jeff were both effective leaders, but at home they had little authority over time, space, or actions. The house was filled with toys, not just in the children's bedrooms, but in the family room, bathroom, kitchen—even in the sheets in Jeff and Becky's bed.

In this home, the children's interests ruled.

No place was sacred.

With help, Becky and Jeff began to see that they needed to take charge in their home. They realized that they had been so kind and democratic with their children, that there was no order in 'the universe of their own home.' The children were tuned into their own desires, but not to their obligations.

Becky and Jeff began to make changes.

They declared their bedroom off-limits, except with permission. They told their children that they needed to say, "Yes, please" or "No, thank you" when they were offered something. Most important of all, they stopped giving the children so much attention for every emotional and physical ache and pain.

Their home life improved immeasurably!!

(-Mogel, *Blessing of a Skinned Knee*, p. 25)

soon, "childhood" as we knew it disappearing in the push for academic and social success)

- **Permissive Parents/Children with Too Much Power** (and no skills to handle it)

OVERINDULGENCE • What is it?

Overindulgence is something that has slowly crept into our culture of parenting. Although parents have the best of intentions, they often unknowingly hurt their children by giving *too* much:

- ✓ **Too Much Stuff** – activities, possessions, money, power, etc.
- ✓ **Over-Nurturing** – too much assistance that reduces self-reliance
- ✓ **Soft Structure** – lax rules, inconsistent consequences, low behavioral expectations, few chores at home

What does "indulgent parenting" look like in everyday life?

- Children don't experience FIRM and predictable limits and boundaries.
- Parents are overly concerned about hurting a child's feelings when setting limits.
- Young children are included as equals in the "democracy" of the family. They become expert negotiators and learn that they can win by verbal debate.
- Children are given too much authority too soon--which puts them in the "power seat" of the family, with few skills to handle it.
- Parents are emotionally over-attentive.
- Children come to believe they are "special" and entitled. (i.e.: *It's all about ME!*)
- Children come to expect having things done for them, without having to do their part or give back.
- The mission is perfection: over-scheduling, over-expecting, not allowing for "imperfection" or "normal."

A "SPECIAL" CHILD speaks...

I know why this is so hard for me. My mom and dad always, always made me feel like I was the best: the most beautiful, the smartest, the most charming. And mostly I've done well in everything. But now I'm finding out that I'm not that unusual. Maybe I'm good enough, but I don't know anymore.

Research on the Consequences of Over-indulgence:

Social Research on the consequences of psychological and material over-indulgence is giving us pause. What feels "loving" is actually "hurting" our children. **What happens when we give too much?**

- The development of *conscience* is inhibited, and children show weaknesses in moral character.
 - Children are *more aggressive* and non-compliant.
 - Children don't develop *assertion skills* and *lack self-confidence*.
 - They show *lower levels of concern for others*.
 - They carry a *sense of entitlement*. They believe they are special & should be treated so.
 - Children show the roots of narcissism: they are *selfish and self-centered*.
 - They doubt their lovability (self-worth) and *need constant affirmation*.
 - They are *overly dependent and less self-reliant*. Children learn only one skill (over-dependence on their parent), and the tools they've mastered (guilt trips, excuses, manipulation, anger, intimidation) will be destructive to them in later relationships.
 - Children *feel too big and powerful*, which leaves them feeling emotionally unsafe.
 - Children develop *poor inner controls* because all the controls are external.
 - They have *serious problems in adulthood*. Spoiled children grow up to be adults who have poor inner controls. They are often impulsive and selfish. They are hostile when they don't get what they want. They have difficulty maintaining relationships, unless constantly gratified.

SURPRISE!

Children raised indulgently actually feel unlovable, need constant affirmation, have a lack of skills, and lack self-sufficiency.

The road to genuine happiness demands that children learn SKILLS.

Indulgent parents try to alleviate their children's frustration by giving them what they want. But, when children get everything they want, they don't learn skills.

The SCIENCE of GOOD PARENTING



Important Discoveries About Young Children's Brain Development

Children are actually hard-wiring coping strategies into their brains from the moment of birth. This only occurs within the context of their significant relationships. This is the importance of what we call *attachment*. Attachment is like an emotional feedback loop. Children learn from their experiences with

the people they love the most. They take in the emotional messages and the emotional skills they *experience*, and these become hard-wired in to their brains. The next time they are in a similar situation, they respond automatically.

Children of “soft parenting” are not developing healthy emotional regulation skills.

Self-regulation is the cornerstone of good mental health in adult life. It gets hard-wired into the brain early in children’s lives. Without this self-regulation, children can’t tolerate feeling bad. They act out impulsively, become aggressive, or tune out others. They don’t know how to “turn the volume of painful experiences down.”

EMOTIONAL REGULATION means...

- ✓ Internal strategies for getting ourselves self out of the pain of difficult experiences/events
- ✓ Ability to tolerate strong feelings and to “turn the volume down”
- ✓ Tools to cope with frustration/disappointment

How do children learn emotional self-regulation?

- (1) From adults who model not losing control
(Ex: a child experiences her mother’s calm in the presence of her tantrum and her mother’s calm later becomes part of the child’s ability to soothe herself)
- (2) From surviving (overcoming) surmountable obstacles in small doses
(Ex: Hearing “no,” facing disappointment, surviving a “skinned knee,” etc.)
Through repeated experiences, children learn to develop strategies for calming the storm within. They learn that they can cope, which gives them confidence.

<p style="text-align: center;">Examples of Self-regulation Coping Strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Reach out to compassionate others▪ Talk to self▪ Talk to others▪ Express emotions (tears, anger)▪ Self-soothe (calm self)▪ Perspectivize (look at the situation a different way)▪ Externalize (take a step back)▪ Explain things away▪ Overcome problems in small ways

Good discipline means teaching your child to learn self-control and emotional regulation. To be an effective parent requires clearly defined parenting principles, out of which your discipline strategies flow. Here are some guidelines.

PARENTING WISDOM from TRADITION

Can We Learn From the Wisdom of the Centuries?

That’s what author, Wendy Mogel, believes. Dr. Mogel had to make her own journey. She lost her faith in psychology and she lost her faith in herself as a mother. Her own anxiety fueled her search for something more that offered firm ground to stand on. From spiritual values, she distilled the following psychological “truths” and common sense strategies for building children with character.

Take a look at her ideas. This is not a formula for foolproof parenting, but it does give you a way to look at your world and your family, and it offers you guidance through the dilemmas of everyday life in our challenging world.

☞ Think about what fits for you. Incorporate your own values. Take what works and leave the rest.

<p>The PRINCIPLES of PARENTING*</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Accept that your children are both unique and ordinary.▪ Teach them to honor their parents and to respect others—family, friends, and community.▪ Teach them to be resilient, self-reliant, and courageous.▪ Teach them to be grateful for their blessings.▪ Teach them the value of work.▪ Teach them to make their table “an altar”—to approach food with an attitude of moderation, celebration and sacredness.▪ Teach them to accept rules and to exercise self-control.▪ Teach them the preciousness of the present moment.▪ Teach them about God.
<p><small>*From <i>The Blessing of a Skinned Knee</i> by Wendy Mogel</small></p>

THE BLESSINGS

The Blessing of Acceptance ≈ Discover Your Unique and Ordinary Child

Parents are so anxious to be raising perfect children today. They fear the ordinary. “If their child is doing well in everything it’s like a badge for them that everything is OK.” This thinking fuels the “specialness myth,” where parents have difficulty accepting a child’s limitations or weaknesses. They rush in to rescue their children, thinking they are helping their self-esteem. Sadly, this puts more pressure on children, who just feel more and more inadequate inside.

The age at which we expect children to become very good at everything is getting lower and lower. “Parents want everything fixed by the time their child is eight. Children develop in fits and starts—but nobody has time for that anymore. No late bloomers, no slow starters, nothing unusual accepted. If a child doesn’t get straight A’s, the parents start fretting. Parents seem to think that children only come in two flavors: learning disabled and gifted. Not every child has unlimited potential in all areas.”

Pride and fear of the future make parents anxious. For some, it is “achievement by proxy.” These parents use their children’s achievements to fulfill their own sense of security or unfilled dreams. Other parents try to conquer their fear of the future by pressuring their child to be perfect. They believe that only the child who excels at everything will survive in this hyper-paced world. They are trying to second-guess the skills their children will need twenty years from now. But the only things that are certain to be valuable are character traits, asserts Dr. Mogel, such as honesty, tenacity, flexibility, optimism, and compassion—the same traits that have served people well for centuries.

Remember that our children are on loan to us. “Your child is not your masterpiece,” says the author. Your child is not even truly “Yours.” Children are a precious loan to us, and each one has a unique path on life. Our job is to help them find out what that is. When we ignore a child’s intrinsic strengths in an effort to push him toward our notion of

extraordinary achievement, we undermine a bigger plan. If the pressure to be special gets too intense, children end up in the therapist’s office with stomachaches, depression, eating disorders and other ailments.

Give your child a sense of BALANCE

Keep two pieces of paper in your pockets at all times. On one, write “I am a speck of dust.” On the other, write, “The world was created for me.”
(p.49)



“Try to see your child as a seed that came in a packet without a label.

Your job is to provide the right environment and nutrients and to pull the weeds.

You can’t decide what kind of flower you’ll get or in which season it will bloom.”

- A Modern Educator (p. 51)

The antidote to “Special-itis” is “Ordinary Holiness.” By this, Dr. Mogel means accepting the paradox that we are BOTH ordinary and divine, both a speck of dust and uniquely special. It is all about BALANCE.

Helpful Guidelines for Seeing Your Child’s Gifts and Limits

- **Expect differences**—this is normal.
- **Learn and accept your child’s temperament**-- Your child may not be rebellious, she may just be being true to her nature. One of the greatest gifts you can give your child is to understand her temperament and work to accept it. There is a broad variation in these characteristics in children:
Emotional intensity, Persistence, Flexibility, Sensitivity (to noise, texture, moods, taste, etc.), Energy, Sociability, Reactions to new situations, and Mood (optimistic v. serious).
- **Stay tuned into gender differences**—understand boys’ energy and be wary of beauty myths for your daughter.
- **Accept “good enough” for your child**—in order to flourish, children don’t need the best of everything; they simply need what is good enough.
- **Don’t pressure yourself to be an extraordinary parent**—be a good enough parent, not a great one! “Have a little less ambition for yourself and your children. Plan nothing. Just hang around your children and wait to see what develops.”
- **See your child’s teacher as an ally**—not the enemy. She is the expert on children your child’s age.

Consider this...

When life is *mostly* ordinary and just *occasionally* extraordinary, your child won’t end up with expectations of herself and those around her that can’t be met on this worldly plane!

-W. Mogel

The Blessing of Having Someone to Look Up To ≈ Honoring Parents & Respecting Others

As Dr. Mogel says, rude children are nothing new. But today, more than ever, we “sympathetic, fair-minded parents” need to make a conscious effort to establish ourselves as “the honored rulers in our homes.” We need to teach respect. That sounds rather old-fashioned to many of us. The truth is, many parents today actually feel guilty demanding respect from their children. “They tell me they have an aversion to being authority figures, that it feels presumptuous, rigid and undemocratic. Many prefer to think of themselves as their children’s friends.”

Be A Good Model
One of the wisest things we can teach and practice is the wisdom of holding back if we cannot say something positive. (p. 87)

Our children “don’t need two more tall friends,” cautions Mogel. They need PARENTS. Only *you* can guide them so they grow up strong and secure. Only you can teach them the rules, so that when they grow up, they will know how to fit in. But here’s the catch, as Mogel says: the only way children will accept our guidance and listen to our advice is if they *respect us*. “And it’s fair to say that if you don’t teach your children to honor you, you’ll have a very hard time teaching them anything else.”

Children are not our equals and they don’t want to be. It makes them feel insecure. “Parents get fooled because children are such great debaters, but children are not psychologically equipped to handle winning those debates,” cautions Mogel. They don’t have the maturity to regulate their own TV watching or teach themselves manners. They need us to do it. They need us to be bigger and stronger and to have the courage to take a stand. Then they can relax and feel safe.

How well are you teaching your children about honoring you?

- ✓ Do you allow your children to interrupt your unnecessarily—on the phone or in conversation with others?
- ✓ Do you have a designated place at the table? Do they sit in your place?
- ✓ Do they consistently argue and contradict your words?
- ✓ Do they talk back to you in public?
- ✓ Do you give your children enough opportunities to help out? To demonstrate thoughtfulness?
- ✓ Do they respect your privacy? Do they enter your room without asking or take things without asking?

Do you believe you deserve respect? Many parents have bred disrespectful children because they don’t demand respect from them. Why? Because deep down they don’t believe they deserve it or they don’t believe they can be strong enough to master the struggle it would take.

Ideas for Teaching Respect and Owning Your Authority as a Parent

- **Establish Rules and make RESPECT your bottom line**—teach children the habits of politeness and manners. (Say please and thank you, greet family members, offer to share food and help.) The words they say and the tone they use matters!
- **It’s OK to say, “Because I’m your mother”**—your *word*, not your reasoning, is what matters.
- **Short-circuit arguments**—shift your emphasis from trying to get your child to agree with you (consensus) to teaching her the importance of listening and respecting your decision.
- **Teach children to respect your privacy**—make your bedroom a sanctuary, children sleep in their own beds, learn not to interrupt you while you are on the phone, etc.
- **Hold your place at the “head”**—you maintain control of the TV, the remote, the computer, etc., not your child. Keep your place at the table—both literally and figuratively!

Teach Children to Honor Guests In Your Home

- We make eye contact.
- We begin a greeting with the person’s name: “Hi David.”
- We tolerate small talk with grace.
- We try to remain cheerful, we ask and answer questions, and we walk friends to the door when they leave.

The Blessing of a Skinned Knee ≈ The Dangers of Over-Protection

“Our job is to raise children to leave us.” Most everyone would agree that our job is to raise what Dr. Mogel calls “hardy children.” If we see our children not as our possessions, but as a gift on loan to us, then we must see that the gift has some strings attached. We must give our children the skills to find their own way in life. “If they stay too carefully protected, children will become weak or fearful or feel too comfortable to want to leave” the nest.

We are trying to inoculate children against the pain of life. Rather than helping our children, we may be hurting them.

Our over-protectiveness may be denying our children the opportunity to overcome their fears and to mature. Well-meaning parents are becoming more and more deeply enmeshed in their children's lives, preoccupied by their children's

Worrier Parents raise Worrying
Children who see the world as
overwhelming and threatening. (p. 97)

If we overprotect them, we
enslave them with our fears.

problems. Instead of enjoying time with them, we are busy "fretting and fixing" our children. Parents are trying to inoculate their children against the pain of life. But without pain, children cannot grow strong. Without some struggle, children won't learn to swim. And most insidious of all is the message that is communicated by all this loving protection: *You don't have what it takes to swim alone!*

Dr. Mogel points out that FEARS are behind our over-protective parenting style, and they "seep out every day in the form of worries," from child abduction to academic readiness. She reminds parents that the first step is to *try to put common sense and faith before emotion.*

How do you know if you're worrying too much about your children?

- ✓ If you notice that even during seemingly perfect moments, you're thinking about potential troubles ahead.
- ✓ If your children seem overly cautious or anxious.
- ✓ If your spouse, teachers, or friends tell you, "I don't know what you're so worried about."

One strategy: Keep to the "Twenty Minute Rule." Limit yourself to twenty minutes a day of worrying!

Withdraw Your Power. Withdraw your power, if you want your child to grow. The world in which we are raising our children presents many challenges. If we overprotect our children, they become trapped in our fears. "*Real protection means teaching children to manage risks on their own, not shielding them from every hazard,*" insists Dr. Mogel.

Allow Your Child to Experience "Ordinary Unhappiness." Many parents today are determined to keep children safe from emotional pain, as well as physical pain. They try to protect their children from the pain of "ordinary unhappiness," such as being sad, angry, disappointed, frustrated, and afraid. One measure of resiliency is the ability to tolerate emotional distress. If parents rush in to shield their children, they don't get the opportunity to learn that they can suffer and recover on their own.

Building good
character is a lifelong
process.
We can help children
become calmer and
more resilient by staying
calm ourselves.

-Mogel, p. 113

SIX KEYS to a STRONG CHARACTER

- **Know when to insist on independence.** "Having the courage not to pamper or overprotect your child means that sometimes she will be uncomfortable, or unhappy, or even in peril, but that you are willing to take a chance because of your commitment to her growth and development."
- **Get children in the habit of solving their own problems.** Be wary of rushing in too soon. Be a coach, not a rescuer. Help your child *think* for himself.
- **Give your children the chance to exercise the divine gift of free will.** Allowing your child to choose doesn't mean being permissive. It means letting her choose badly, at times, and to learn from her mistakes.
- **Let your children experience the world, warts and all.** If we protect children from people who are different, inappropriate, or even challenging, they'll be too easily frightened and shocked as adults.



If children don't have the chance
to be bad, they can't choose to
be good. If they don't have the chance to
fail, they can't learn. And if they aren't
allowed to face scary situations, they'll
grow up to be frightened of life's simplest
challenges. (Mogel, p113)

- **Teach your child not to panic over pain.** Young children titrate their own level of upset based on their parent's reaction. If a parent reacts with panic, a child will, too. "Treating children's daily distresses as an expected and unalarming part of life is an effective way to discourage them from turning small difficulties into big dramas."
- **Raise your children to leave you.** Think of yourself as the hothouse gardener preparing his plants for the outdoors by gradually exposing them to additional hot and cold temperatures. Prepare your children for rough conditions by teaching them to tolerate some stresses and extremes.

The Blessing of Longing ≈ Teaching Your Child an Attitude of Gratitude

Children (and adults!) frequently confuse what they want with what they need. Today especially, our children are growing up in a culture that sells us "desire." This contributes to children taking for granted what they already have, wanting more than they need, and forgetting to count their blessings. It is so easy for all of us to be consumed by desires for what we don't have.

What can we do? Try Guidance—not Consensus. We reason too much. Explaining cause and effect rarely works with children because their passion and their sense of omnipotence overwhelms their capacity for logic. Their desire is much powerful than any line of reasoning! We waste our breath trying to convince our children of the “high road.” It doesn’t work. You might want to use a different approach to teach your children moderation and gratitude.

SPOILED “SPOILERS”

When things come too easily for children, they not only get spoiled, but they can also become “spoilers” when they grow up.
-W.M.

Teach children the difference between wants and needs. Needs include what children are fully entitled to: respectful treatment, healthful food, shelter, clothing, doctor’s visits, and a good education. Everything else is a privilege. Your child does not need to agree with this point of view. Only you do.

Begin the practice of saying no. Respect your child’s desire for “stuff,” without caving in. Because a child can come up with a reasoned argument, parents give in. Or parents think they need to come up with a counter-argument to win their child’s understanding. This back and forth debate can drag on forever. If you cave in, you teach your child that wearing you down is an excellent strategy for getting what he wants.

Try calmly ignoring your child’s arguments. Listen briefly. Understand and appreciate his desires, without condemning them. Don’t go overboard on naming feelings and don’t try to be overly understanding. (This can be irritating or come across as weakness on your part.) A firm “no” and a short explanation is best. Learning to say, “*Nevertheless...*” can help. Then end with, “*I know you want _____, but we are not going to discuss this any more. The case is closed.*”

Cultivate an attitude of gratitude. Gratefulness can tame greed. This takes some practice. Teaching children to look for the blessings in their life is one way to counter the longing for things. Try going around the table each week and saying your “gratitudes.” Ask your child what she liked about her day. Stop before each meal to give “thanks.” Both psychology and Jewish tradition agree: feelings follow actions. If parents put limits on children’s begging and whining and require them to perform good deeds, children will eventually become less greedy and more grateful. Don’t focus on eliminating longing in children. Instead, we must teach our children how to appreciate what we’ve been given.

Allow your child to wait. We have all seen how the sooner a child gets something, the sooner she’ll be on to the next desire. “Longing is also a blessing, because children who get most of their desires satisfied right away don’t have a chance to appreciate what they’ve already got.” Give your child the opportunity to long, to dream, and to appreciate.

Ways to Nurture Appreciation and Down-play Desire

- ✓ Don’t use the word *need* when you really mean *want*.
- ✓ Notice how much you verbalize envy for other people’s things in front of your children.
- ✓ Try not to let your children see you spending lots of time reading mail-order catalogs.
- ✓ Avoid frequent conversations about how much you want to own things you see advertised on TV.
- ✓ Try not to let the mall become your most frequent family outing. Visit friends, a park, or go for a walk instead.



Teach your child to give to others and to care for our earth. Giving to others can be a way to acknowledge one’s blessings. All children love the appreciation they get from doing something nice, even if they have to be prodded into doing it. Get your child into the habit of service. Words alone don’t teach about the good of giving rather than receiving. Actions do. Take every opportunity to find ways your child can give, whether it’s folding used clothes to give away, making a cheery card for a sick friend, or fixing something that is broken instead of throwing it away.

The Blessing of Work ≈ Finding the Holy Sparks in Ordinary Chores

The key to life is taking advantage of everyday “holy opportunities,” asserts Mogel. At the core of this blessing is the value of “right action.” Working together is important in a more cosmic sense: it creates in children a sense of their obligation to other people and to the universe. It elevates work to a place of “holiness.” Doing chores (looking after themselves and helping their family) are children’s first good deeds. Mogel suggests that we think of our homes as our “little holy place” and our family as a little community. When we work together to create a peaceful home, we teach our children something deeper.

Children learn by doing. Ordinary chores are the foundation of our children’s character. Doing chores gives children survival skills and teaches them a habit of responsibility early. They gain the confidence to take on bigger challenges as they get older. Helping out raises children’s self-esteem. They know that they are not just loved, but they are needed.

Why is assigning chores so difficult? Modern parents are plagued by uncertainty. We're not certain that chores even matter to our child's growth (What's more important--caring for a sibling or a violin lesson?) We try to make chores fun and keep children entertained. We give the impression that chores have no value beyond the immediate payoff /bribery. We get so exhausted that we give up. At the heart of it, we are ambivalent. Our children have "highly functional ambivalence barometers," says Mogel, and they pick up our uncertainty. To win the chores war, we must become aware of our own internal struggles. Until you believe in the value of chores, you won't have the resolve to follow through.

Chores require parental commitment and strong enforcement. Here are some helpful guidelines:

- ✓ **Children learn responsibility in phases.** Add more tasks as the years go by. Give children useful work. Start with self-care and move on to caring for their own belongings and helping with household chores.
- ✓ **Imagine your child in a larger family.** Think about the kinds of chores your child might have to do if he were one of six children, where everyone had to take a part or the whole operation would fail.
- ✓ **Make a wish list of child chores.** Think of everything your child could be capable of doing. Match jobs with your child's interests and temperament.
- ✓ **Don't under-estimate your child.** Seven year olds can actually make their own lunches!
- ✓ **Grant authority with responsibility.** Let children make mistakes and learn from them. If you demand that they do it exactly your way, you'll take the creativity out of the task and increase their resistance.
- ✓ **Devise a system of rewards, privileges, and consequences.** Motivate your children. Use positive rewards (such as staying up later, watching a TV program, choosing meals, etc.), which is different from "entertaining children into compliance." Motivating children requires clear, predictable consequences for non-compliance too.
- ✓ **Stop nagging and follow through.** Parent educator Barbara Colorosa says it's not the severity of the consequence that has an impact on children--but the certainty. The same is true for rewards. Do what you say.

The Blessing of Food ≈ Bringing Moderation, Celebration, and Sanctification to Your Table

Food is a sacred gift. Too often, meal times become catching food on the run, a battle-ground for control issues, or a place of complaints. Sitting down together and saying a blessing can put mealtime back into a special place in our lives. Try to avoid control battles at meals. Even good eaters turn up their noses at certain foods. Steer clear of arguments and coercion. Set a good example. Enjoy your food. Teach children to eat in a healthy way and use good judgment. But don't throw out the pleasure. Today, we run the risk of "tarnishing our children's food experiences with joyless food theologies," cautions Dr. Mogel. We can over-focus on the sins of eating a slice of warm pie or the virtues of a carrot stick. She reminds us to aim for moderation and balance. There is a place for "both nutrition *and* delight." A yummy dessert can be "holy ground" as well.

Changes you can make at meal time:

- ✓ **Create a peaceful environment for eating.** The point is not elaborate preparation but breaking bread together and eating it in a peaceful environment. Create rituals. Light a candle, even daily. Talk about your day and encourage your child to talk about his.
- ✓ **Sit down and take your time.** Stop multi-tasking. Heighten gratitude and family pleasure by eating together more often.
- ✓ **Remember that not everyone has enough to eat.** Consider connecting eating with giving. Do something for those who have less. Children love to help in tangible ways. Put money for feeding a needy person in a jar.
- ✓ **Use a blessing as a consciousness-raising tool.** It makes us stop and think about what we DO have.

Advice to Parents

Engaged in Eating Battles:

Light a few candles, pour a little wine if you like, relax, and enjoy your meal.

Concentrate on your blessings and invite your child to do the same.

He may catch the spirit. (W. Mogel)

The Blessing of Self-Control ≈ Channeling Your Child's Intensity

Dr. Mogel has an interesting way of looking at a child's intensity. Jewish wisdom calls this energy the "yetzer hara." It's like the yeast in the dough. This impulse has the potential for trouble but is also the source of all passion and creativity.

All normal children have extremes—in mind, behavior, and spirit. It's our job to civilize our children because they don't come that way naturally. "The parent's challenge is to teach their child how to control the energy of his 'yetzer hara' and transform it into greatness. This means not only enforcing a set of rules, but also accepting your child's temperament, respecting his limitations, and shoring up his strengths," writes Mogel.

Think of your stubborn child as persistent, your argumentative child as forthright, your bossy child as commanding, your shy child as observant, your loud child as exuberant and your picky child as detail-oriented. It helps!

Your child's greatest strength is hidden in his worst quality, just waiting to be let out.

-WM

Channeling Your Child's Intensity:

- ✓ **Remove the stumbling blocks.** When does the trouble arise? Is my child tired? Hungry? Need time alone?
- ✓ **Allow some "preventive havoc."** All children need to break loose from constraints once in a while. Does your child get enough time to horse around? To make noise? To get into trouble? Make sure there is space for this.
- ✓ **Presentation is everything.** Watch how you ask your child to do things. Are you presenting your request as a fun opportunity or as an irritating burden? Whisper requests. Transform responsibilities into an honor.
- ✓ **Don't be overly demanding.** Try to let go of impossible expectations. Avoid saying *always* and *never*. Take your child's good intentions into account. Your child can't *always* tell the truth, remember to bring home all his books, or sit at the table without squirming.
- ✓ **Remember that success motivates.** Find your child being good and mention it. Look for areas of competence. Make it easy for your child to succeed by setting up his environment to help him. Instead of saying, "*If only she would try harder, she would do better,*" say, "*If she did better, she would try harder.*"
- ✓ **Don't talk too much.** Be quiet and listen more. Don't try to provide instant solutions to your child's problems. If you find yourself arguing with any child older than two, you are wasting your time, says Model, because their skills are better than yours! Avoid the lecture. Talk less and act more.
- ✓ **Express displeasure without humiliating your child.** Use the One-Minute Rebuke Strategy in the box.
- ✓ **To find effective punishments, reframe entitlements as privileges.** Videos, sweet treats, TV, bicycles, play dates, and even grilled cheese sandwiches prepared on the spot are all privileges to be earned, if necessary. Change your wording to "*When.... then....*" "*When you remember to put your clothes in the hamper for three days in a row, you can watch television in the evening. Now, tell me what I said so I know we both understand it the same way.*"
- ✓ **Making amends repairs the world.** In the Jewish tradition, to make amends means "to return" —to your truest best self and to God. Making amends is a good way to help children learn exactly what they have done wrong because they are required to actively undo or repair the unacceptable behavior. It teaches new behaviors.

The One-Minute Rebuke

- If you are too upset to speak calmly, leave the room.
- When you are calm, tell your child that you need talk with her and go to a private place.
- Get down to her eye level and look directly at her.
- Put your hand gently on her shoulder and describe the specific behavior that is unacceptable to you. (*I saw you and Sarah killing ants with my tweezers.*)
- Tell your child how you felt about what she did. Be brief. And use some face saving comment. (*Alicia, this isn't like you. You are usually kind to animals.*)
- Don't label or bring in other problems or behaviors.
- Tell your child the consequence of her behavior. (*From now on, until I tell you, you are not allowed to go into my bathroom without asking.*)
- Finally, offer an opportunity to make amends. (*What do you think you can do to make up for your actions?*)
- Touch your child to remind her of your love and to reassure her that you are not rejecting her. (*I am sure it won't happen again.*)

-Adapted from M. Adahan and S. Johnston's One-Minute Rebuke

The Blessing of Time ≈ Teaching Your Child the Value of the Present Moment

In the wisdom of the Jewish tradition, time is a *resource to be utilized* (make the most of the quality of your life) and a *treasure to be enjoyed* (resting on the Sabbath). Perhaps we can take a lesson from that wisdom as we rush through our hurried lives. In order to use our time well, we must work to protect it as carefully as we guard our children's health and education. As Mogel says, when we guard our time, we are offering our children something that no one can buy. "We are offering them ourselves, and we are showing them the path to a rich and meaningful life."

Amid all the hurry, it's hard for children to learn essential life skills: vegging out, contemplating life, relieving boredom by entertaining themselves, and feeling a general sense of peace and contentment.

-WM

Ways to Guard Your Time

- ✓ **Create some "holy down time" at your house.** Unplug the phone and make certain times "protected time" for your family. Maybe it's an uninterrupted dinner hour, time alone with your spouse, protected time at bedtime, a night with no television, or Saturday morning breakfasts together. This takes fierce devotion and commitment.
- ✓ **Find time to connect.** Children hunger for listening, more than anything. If we are always distracted, we're only half there, and our kids know it. They'll stop talking.

- ✓ **Let your children dawdle once in a while.** Try to balance high-pressure time with time that is leisurely. Leave plenty of time for bedtime rituals.
- ✓ **Don't do things you hate.** When spending "quality time" together, do things that *both* you and your child enjoy.
- ✓ **Make sure your children have a chance to get bored.** Children need a chance to build up their "boredom tolerance muscle." Treat daydreaming and fooling around as valuable activities. Examining life takes time.
- ✓ **Guard time for childhood.** Children are being pushed and enticed into growing up too quickly. Treat a seven year-old for what he is—just seven. Protect his childhood innocence.
- ✓ **Marriage first, then children.** In our race for time, we often neglect our marriages more than our children. Get out of the house one evening a week. "Time with your spouse can weatherproof your relationship."

The Blessings of Faith & Tradition ≈ Introducing Your Child to Spirituality

All children have a deep need to believe in something more, something bigger than themselves. Young children are particularly open to wonder and reverence, whether it's their awe over a beautiful rainbow or their profound questions about life. Wendy Mogel invites parents to explore their child's need for spirituality and challenges us to "lose our fear of the G word." Children find tradition and ritual deeply comforting. Parents who have spiritual beliefs and want to pass them on to their children might be interested in some of the ideas below. Others may pass this section by.

In her counseling practice, Dr. Mogel discovered that the children she saw needed something different from their parents. She encountered so many loving and sensitive parents who were looking in the wrong places to remedy their family's distress. They were "measuring their children by sizing up their moods, their grades, or their social standing." But we need to take a longer view and measure differently, argues Mogel. We must "look at children's capacity for reverence, for gratitude, and for compassion."

Building strength and self-reliance requires something more. These are qualities that don't kick in automatically, least of all from a math tutor. It requires planning and discipline. It takes *us* figuring out what we believe and becoming conscious about bringing that into our lives through our teaching, our values, and our practices. "Children can learn to play tennis whether or not you play," writes Model. "They can learn desktop publishing and how do refined Web searches, but learning values and

developing a sense of the holy must start at home. You are your child's first teacher."

How to talk to a child about God

"Can you see love?" you might ask your child.
 "[Love is something we know is real, but we can't see it. I show my love for you by the way I tuck you into bed at night and bandage your knee when you fall.
 To meet God we have to be like detectives and look for clues. Just as a candle hidden from view sheds its glow all around, we can see God in God's reflections, in the good things people do for one another, in the miracles of nature, in our ability to grow and change. (W. Mogel, p.244)

Many parents avoid the topic of "God" because they aren't sure what they believe and they don't want to harm or confuse their children. Furthermore, many of us lack the concepts or language to answer our children's questions, as well as our own, so we steer clear of them. You don't need to know the "right" answers, she says. You can let your child know you haven't figured it all out yet, but that you want to keep thinking about it and talking about it throughout your whole life. She explains that children are very literal and they need to hear the concrete. So if you want to talk about God, you need to give child examples close to her as you notice them. Mogel also presents a thoughtful way of understanding the "conflict between God and science," which might be helpful for some parents. She suggests telling

children that "God is so different from science that we can't use the same parts of our mind to understand. To teach about God, we use stories and we use the part of our mind that sees beauty in nature and goodness in people."

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You and your family may choose a different path than that of your forebears, but if you don't want to get caught up in the anxiety, materialism and competition all around us, you must choose some path to walk on with your children. You must name it, follow it, and plan the curriculum for their spiritual education as thoughtfully and intelligently as you plan for their academic education. (WM)

IDEAS

- ❖ Science tells us how things work and our faith tells us why it's important.
or
- ❖ Science gives us a map to the stars and our religion gives us a map to heaven.
or
- ❖ Spirituality teaches us how to be good people and take care of the two big gifts we have been given: the gift of life and the gift of the great wide world.

SOURCES

The Blessing of a Skinned Knee by Wendy Mogel. Penguin Books, 2001.

Over-Indulged children: Dealing with At-Risk Youth & Their Enabling Parents, American Society of Prof. Education, Version 2.04, 2004.
