

UPPER DUBLIN PUBLIC LIBRARY



T 69222E00 0E80 E

"This humane, thoughtful book turns the latest brain science into
practical advice for parents.... Read it. Your children will thank you."

—PAUL TOUGH, author of *How Children Succeed*

The Self-Driven Child



The **SCIENCE** *and* **SENSE** *of*
GIVING YOUR KIDS MORE
CONTROL OVER THEIR LIVES

WILLIAM STIXRUD, PhD,
and **NED JOHNSON**

Introduction

A major goal of this book is to help parents help their kids increase their stress tolerance—their ability to perform well in stressful situations—and to “throw off” stress rather than accumulate it. Stress tolerance is highly correlated to success in all aspects of life. We want to challenge our kids without overwhelming them, to stretch them without breaking them. We want them to experience some positive stress and some tolerable stress, but in the right ways, and with the right bolstering. We want to give their brains all the support and room they need to grow strong. The *how* of all of this comes back again and again to a sense of control. What this means for you as a parent will become clearer in the next chapter, where we encourage you to be a consultant for your child, not his boss or manager.

What to Do Tonight

- Make a list of the things your child has control over. Is there anything you can add to that list?
- Ask your child if there are things he feels he'd like to be in charge of that he currently isn't.
- Consider your language around making plans. Do you say, “Today we're going to do this and then this,” or do you offer choices?
- Tell your kids (if they're ten or older) something like this: “I just read something really interesting—that there are four things about life that make it stressful: new situations, situations that are unpredictable, situations where you feel you could be hurt, criticized, or embarrassed, and situations where you don't feel you can control what's happening. It's interesting, because in my job I get most stressed when I feel I'm

Introduction

The Most Stressful Thing in the Universe

expected to make something happen but I can't control everything that is necessary to make it happen. Are there things that make you stressed?" By identifying stress in your own life and talking about it, you are modeling stress awareness—a critical step in curbing the effects of stress. As the saying goes, "You've got to name it to tame it."

- If your kid seems to be really anxious, talk to your pediatrician about it. Determine whether some kind of professional intervention is necessary. Research suggests that treating anxiety early significantly lowers the risk of recurring problems.
- You can let your worried child know that she's safe, that you're there for her, but don't reassure her excessively. Let her know that you have confidence in her ability to handle the stressors in her life. But don't minimize what she is feeling or try to fix it for her.
- Think about ways in which you may, intentionally or inadvertently, be trying to protect your kids from experiencing mildly stressful situations that they could grow from. Are you too focused on safety? Are there situations in which you could give your child more independence or more choices?
- Dozens of scales have been developed over the years to measure a person's sense of control. The granddaddy of them all is the Rotter Scale, developed by J. B. Rotter in 1966. We highly encourage you to take it so that you can assess your own strengths and struggles when it comes to autonomy. For kids, we like a scale developed by Steven Nowicki and Bonnie Strickland, which asks questions such as "Do you believe that you can stop yourself from catching a cold?" and "When a person doesn't like you, is there anything you can do about it?" You may be surprised by where your child lands.

Parent as Consultant

"I Love You Too Much to Fight with You About Your Homework"

afterward, no "I told you so," no determination on Ned or Vanessa's part to swoop back in for the next test (though it took some self-discipline). Instead, there was a non-loaded discussion about what went wrong from Matthew's point of view, and what his thinking was about how to fix it.

As it turned out, though Matthew had botched the test, he was fascinated by the material it covered (the biological principles of life). The whole family went hiking the weekend after the test, and as they walked, Ned asked Matthew more about what he'd learned. Matthew went on and on enthusiastically about the subject of the test. He revealed that he'd spent quite a bit of time independently researching the topic since the test. Top grade? No. Real curiosity and learning? Yes!

Botched tests and missed homework aren't what we're going for, of course. But we would all do well to remember the big picture: that we want our kids to be thoughtful learners, and want them to be self-disciplined, not well disciplined. Assuming authority over your kids' responsibilities robs you of quality time and takes away home as a safe base. A mom recently told us she had been bemoaning her latest battle with her teenage son when one of her friends, whose son was in his twenties, told her, "It's not worth the fight. One of my greatest regrets is that the last few years my son lived at home, we spent most of the time fighting about homework. I wish I could have those days back and just enjoy him. Now all that fighting seems so pointless and I feel like I missed out on him."

What to Do Tonight

- Practice asking, "Who is responsible for this?" "Whose problem is it?"
- Determine if your home is a safe base. Do you fight frequently about food or screen time? What's the emotional temperature? If you are feeling frustrated with your kid, chances are he is with you as well. Ask him.

- If a kid hates or resists homework, suggest a homework club at school, find older kids to work with him, or approach your child's teacher about minimizing mandatory homework. If your child's strong negative reactions to homework are out of character, have your child evaluated to rule out a problem like a learning disability.
- Help your child create an effective learning environment and, if necessary, develop her own system of rewards for completing goals. If she does not meet a goal, respond with compassion: "I'm sorry you weren't able to meet your goals tonight." Don't get angry or threaten punishment. Your job is to help her develop ways to motivate herself.
- Express confidence in your child's ability to figure things out.

Giving kids some control

"It's Your Call"

So the next time he met with her alone, he asked her how she really felt about it.

"The plan's fine," she said. "The problem is the *we*."

"What do you mean?"

"It's all 'We have to get a good score on this,' and 'We have to get good grades this year,' and 'We have to write better essays.'" Clearly, Sarah had been holding her frustration in for a while. "My parents aren't writing the essays, I am. There is no 'we' here, and it drives me crazy when they talk that way. It's my life and it's my work, and it's my stupid essay that I have to write."

Remember that magic line: "I have confidence in your ability to make informed decisions about your own life and to learn from your mistakes." Sarah's parents were communicating the exact opposite to her. It's the same, really, as the mother who refuses to let her toddler fall. Sarah was a bright, motivated girl and all she could hear was that her parents didn't trust her decisions, or even consider them hers to make.

3. Giving kids a sense of control is the only way to teach them competency—in decision making, and in whatever skill they're learning.

As the adage goes, "Wisdom comes from experience, and experience comes from bad decisions." Kids need to practice making their own decisions before they can do so legally. Telling our children how to make good decisions (or telling them how to do things for themselves) isn't enough. It's not enough to show them, either. They need to actually do it. They need practice. They need to experience the natural consequences of their choices, ranging from being uncomfortably cold when they decided not to wear a coat, to getting a bad grade on a test because they decided not to study. We commonly see adolescents and young adults go off to college without having had much of an opportunity to make decisions about the

things that matter, including how they want to structure their time, what they want to commit their energy to, or whether they want to be in school at all. Not surprisingly, they have difficulty setting and meeting goals and making good decisions when it comes time to pick classes or a major or more generally to manage their day.

This is true for a variety of other life skills, too. One mom who brought her two kids in for tutoring with Ned asked if he accepted checks. Though she knew a credit card was easier all around, she wanted her kids to have the experience of actually writing a check so they'd know how to. It reminded Ned of how he had once stopped to check on a car by the side of the road with its hazard lights on. The car had a flat tire, but none of the kids in the car knew how to change the tire. Presumably, they'd all been shown how to as part of driver's ed. But you can watch a hundred videos on changing a tire and still be helpless if you've never actually done it. Sure, AAA would have been there in an hour. But that is an hour in the dark by the side of the road when you could be taking care of the problem yourself. Agency takes practice.

4. You don't always know what's best.

This may be a hard one to swallow, but it's really hard to know what's in your child's best interest. In part this is because you don't know who your kid wants to be—that's for him to figure out, ideally with your help. Also, what seems like a disaster often turns out to be a blessing in disguise. There are many paths to success, and sometimes we only find the right one by getting a little lost.

As parents, we often make decisions for our children that seem perfectly reasonable, like signing them up for soccer instead of drama, only to kick ourselves later. The same is true in our own lives. Most of us work too much, eat too much, sleep too little, make bad investments, and find ourselves in careers that do not go as planned. Remember to be humble. Sometimes you just don't know what's right.

negative emotions, we can't. If a child is afraid after seeing a frightening movie, we can help her see that it is just a movie, but her response is real and will inform her readiness to watch a scary movie again. If a child is angry and feels betrayed, we can help her process her pain and learn to take a step back and consider the person she wants to be before retaliating. We want kids to practice tuning in to their own emotions, and asking, What's right for me?

A Sense of Control in Action

Encouraging your child to make informed decisions hinges on your being behind them and offering guidance. It means saying something like, "I trust you to make a good decision, and this will ultimately be your call, but I want to be sure you make the best decision possible, so I'd like to help you think through the pros and cons of either option. I also want you to talk to people who have more experience and to get their feedback. Finally, I think it's important that we talk together about a possible Plan B if your decision doesn't go the way you want."

There are many messages in this "speech." You are letting your child know, first and foremost, that you trust him. You are making it clear that you are present and that you will support him. You are helping him to think through what kinds of information he needs to make a good decision. And you are helping to gird him against setback, framing a misstep not as a failure but as a signal that it's time to come up with another plan.

Obviously, you can't use this exact speech at every age. But its basic principles can be marshaled even with very young children. Here are some examples of what "It's your call" looks like through the ages:

Toddlers: Offer to let them choose between two outfits. Or, if they are up to the challenge, let them dress themselves, offering

"It's Your Call"

your help but not forcing it on them. It may take them ages to put on their pants, and they may grapple with the frustration of not being able to do it correctly or easily. But they are learning to master important skills. You can also offer them agency within a larger framework. "Would you like to play with blocks or to paint?"

Preschoolers: Good preschool teachers have long known that one of the most important things they can offer children is an opportunity to make decisions about how to spend their time and what is important to them. There's a reason that "free choice time" is an important staple of the preschool world.

Parents of preschoolers can encourage dramatic play rather than video games or adult-organized activities such as sports. When children play in unstructured ways, they are making autonomous decisions about how to spend their time. They ask questions like, Should I make this cardboard box into a train or a castle? Should I dress up that doll or this one? Should I build a Lego airplane or a Lego vet clinic? Should I play dress-up or should I color?

When children are young, much of the work is demonstrating to them that they do have control. One wise friend of ours who was a parent educator for twenty years advises giving calendars to preschool-age children and writing down all the important events in their life, in part because it helps children understand the passage of time better, and how their days will unfold. We can't overstate the importance of the calendar tool in helping kids feel in control of their day. Have them cross off days of the week as you come to them. Spend time going over the schedule for the day, giving them choice in that schedule wherever possible. This communication expresses respect—they see that they are not just a tagalong to your day and your plans, and they understand what is going to happen, when, and why. As they get older, children will then start to write in important things for themselves, which further helps them develop their sense of control.

Kids as decision makers

"It's Your Call"

"Doesn't this just open the door to everything becoming a negotiation? That is exhausting. Sometimes I just want my son to go along."

We get it. Parents are busy, and when in the midst of making breakfast and corralling the family to get out the door on time, you don't always want to collaboratively problem solve with your twelve-year-old, or go through the pros and cons of wearing sandals on a rainy day.

Overall, try to remember that negotiating is a great thing for your kid to know how to do. You want him to learn to advocate for himself and to practice those skills for the real world. If he's never able to "win" with his parents, he'll internalize that message. He may be more apt to sneak, lie, or cheat to get what he wants, or to give up pushing back on authority altogether, believing that he has no voice. To improve your legitimacy, you have to show your child that he is being heard. So give him credit for making good arguments, by sometimes changing your position so that he knows that a well-thought-out argument is in fact a worthwhile pursuit.

Also feel free to say, "You know, I love what a great negotiator you are. Some people get paid a lot to do what you do so naturally. But sometimes it's exhausting for me, and it's especially hard when we are crunched for time or when there's a lot going on. I'd be grateful if when I need you to, you could go with the flow, without the need for a discussion. If you can do that, it will help the morning run more smoothly and I will acknowledge that you've really helped out."

What to Do Tonight

- Tell your child, "You're the expert on you. Nobody really knows you better than you know yourself, because nobody really knows what it feels like to be you."

Kids as
decision
makers

- Give your child a choice about something you may have previously decided for her. Or ask her opinion about something. (If they're young, you can frame it as, "Do you think we should do it this way or that way?")
- Have a family meeting where you problem solve together about what chores need to be done and who should do them. Give them options. Could they walk the dog instead of doing the dinner dishes? Take out the trash instead of cleaning the toilet? Do they want to do it each Sunday or each Wednesday? Morning or night? Keep a consistent schedule, but let them choose that schedule.
- Make a list of things your child would like to be in charge of, and make a plan to shift responsibility for some of these things from you to him or her.
- Ask your child whether something in his life isn't working for him (his homework routine, bedtime, management of electronics) and if he has any ideas about how to make it work better.
- Do a cost-benefit analysis of any decision you make for your child that she sees differently.
- Tell your child about decisions you've made that, in retrospect, were not the best decisions—and how you were able to learn and grow from them.
- Have a talk in which you point out that your kid has got a good mind. Recall some times when he's made a good decision or felt strongly about something and turned out to be right. If he'll let you, make a list together of the things he's decided for himself that have worked well.
- Tell your teen you want him to have lots of practice running his own life before he goes off to college—and that you want to see that he can run his life without running it into the ground before he goes away.
- Emphasize logical and natural consequences, and encourage the use of family meetings to discuss family rules or family policies more generally (e.g., no gaming during the week).

Non-anxious presence

The Nonanxious Presence

horse to till his land. One day, the horse broke away. The farmer's neighbor came by and said, "You poor man! You were already so poor and now you have no horse." The farmer said, "Maybe yes, maybe no. It's hard to say." The next week the farmer was out with his son, pulling the plow, and it was ugly—the work was tedious, slowgoing, and exhausting. But then a week or so later, the horse came back and brought two wild horses with him—apparently, he'd found a herd and two of the herd had followed him back. The neighbor said, "What incredible luck! Now you have three horses to work your land!" The farmer said, "Maybe yes, maybe no. Life is very long. It's hard to say." The farmer's son got to work trying to break the wild horses. He was thrown from one and broke his leg terribly. "You poor man!" the neighbor said while the boy was convalescing. "Maybe yes, maybe no," said the farmer. Not long afterward, while the boy was still bedridden, word came down from the emperor that China was going to invade the Mongols, and every family needed to send a son. But the farmer's son could not walk, so he could not go, undoubtedly sparing his life. The point of the parable is clear, and one we should take to heart in parenting: life is long, and you just don't know what will happen next.

What to Do Tonight

- Spend private time with your child, ideally without electronics. Take turns with each child if you have more than one, so that the ratio is one-on-one. It is remarkably healing for kids and will help you to enjoy them. It also makes them feel like they are your number one priority.
- If you're highly anxious, do something about it. Treating anxiety is one of the best things you can do for yourself and your family. Consider participating in cognitive behavioral therapy: you can learn very effective strategies for identifying and "talking back to" the distorted

and unproductive thoughts that contribute to high anxiety. Learn to meditate. Take a yoga class. Be very regular in your exercise routine. Spend time in nature. Get more sleep. Socialize more with friends if it helps you feel calm.

Not -
anxious
presence

- Avoid making decisions for your child based on fear. If you find yourself thinking, "I'm afraid if I don't do this now, then—" stop. Do what you feel is right now, not what you feel you have to because of what you're afraid will happen if you don't.
- If your child is struggling, schedule a short time every day for you to worry about his or her problems. Literally write it into your planner. This will let your brain know that it is safe not to worry all day long.
- Remember who's responsible for what. It cannot be your responsibility to see that everything goes well for your children at all times.
- If you are very worried about your teenager and have talked through the issues together many times, write your child a short letter summarizing your concerns and offering any help the child might need. Then promise that you will not bring the issue up again for a month. When you break your promise (because you will) apologize and recommit to it.
- Get out a piece of paper and draw a vertical line in the middle. In the left-hand column, write statements such as the following: "It's okay for Jeremy to have a learning disability," "It's okay that Sarah doesn't have any friends right now," "It's okay for Ben to be depressed right now." In the right-hand column, write down the automatic thoughts that come to your mind in response (likely rebuttal) to these statements. Then question these automatic thoughts. Ask questions such as, "Can I be absolutely sure that this thought is true?" "Who would I be if I didn't believe this?" This kind of self-questioning exercise, developed by author and speaker Byron Katie and others, can serve as a useful tool for discovering the thoughts that trap you into negative judgments.¹⁸

Biology of
motivation

to get the reward without doing the job or assignment. This is why kids can get As in courses they hardly remember after a few months.

Our aim is to largely take away the carrots and sticks and to offer you instead a deeper understanding of the brain . . . which, happily, is all you really need.

What Makes Us Tick?

Grasping the way motivation works in our brains and bodies will go a long way toward helping you understand your kids. Lucky for us, psychology and neuroscience are in agreement as to how to “make” motivation, and have even offered up a recipe. Here are the key ingredients:

- The right mindset
- Autonomy, competence, and relatedness
- The optimal level of dopamine
- Flow

It's all in your mind(set)

The work of the renowned psychologist Carol Dweck on motivation and mindsets may be familiar to you, as it's gotten a lot of attention across fields over the years. She posits that when students have a “fixed mindset,” they see their mistakes as coming from a lack of ability, something they're powerless to change. In contrast, when students have a “growth mindset,” they focus instead on their own effort as a means to become more successful. A growth mindset offers students a sense of control, as they believe that it's in their power to get better and better at something—indeed, at anything. Dweck's studies have found that students with a growth mindset tend to see learning as a more important goal in school than

obtaining good grades. Their motivation, in other words, is internal. They are not relying on someone else's pronouncement that they are worthy or smart. Promoting a growth mindset is one of the best ways to improve your child's sense of control, to foster their emotional development, and to support their academic achievement.²

To encourage a growth mindset, Dweck recommends praising effort and the various strategies kids use to solve problems, rather than their built-in ability. Say things like, "Your curiosity is really fun for me to see" over "You're so smart"; or "I'm really impressed with how hard you worked on that test" instead of "Fantastic grade!" In Dweck's words, "a focus on inner effort can help resolve helplessness and engender success."³ A growth mindset is the MVP of the self-motivated child.

Self-determination

Because motivation is such a strong focus of our work, we have studied the best thinking on this topic. Dweck is one of our great teachers in this area, and so are eminent psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. Deci and Ryan have developed one of the best-supported theories in psychology, known as self-determination theory (SDT), which holds that humans have three basic needs:

- A sense of autonomy
- A sense of competence
- A sense of relatedness

Autonomy, they argue, is the most important of the three for developing internal motivation, so let's start there. According to SDT, the best way to motivate a child (or an adult, for that matter) is to support their sense of control. Hundreds of studies of schools, families, and businesses have found that explaining the reasons

Intrinsic
Motivation

why a task is important and then allowing as much personal freedom as possible in carrying out the task will stimulate much more motivation than rewards or punishments. We now know that if teachers foster autonomy in their students, they will catalyze internal motivation and a desire for challenge, and that if parents promote autonomy and mastery, their kids will be more likely to explore their interests and extend themselves. The very best thing you can do to help your children develop self-motivation is to give them as much control over their choices as possible, including asking them what it is they want to be competent at and in charge of.⁴

Competence is the next piece of the puzzle, and this can be misleading. Many parents put all their focus on a narrow definition of competence, thinking that if their son or daughter becomes incredibly skilled at math, or at playing soccer, then his or her intrinsic motivation will kick in. These parents focus so much on the performative aspects of competence that, through their nagging and plan making, they actually compromise the fulfillment of the other two needs, autonomy and relatedness. Think of self-determination theory as a three-legged stool. One extremely tall leg won't make you sit higher, it will topple the whole thing over.

But competence is important, too. None of us want to do something we feel like we constantly stink at. Yet as Dweck revealed, competence is more about our feeling that we can handle a situation than it is about being really great at something. It's about feeling consciously competent, not about having an "I'm the Best!" trophy on a shelf. It's an internal rather than external barometer of accomplishment. Supporting our kids in developing competence is our job as parents. "You worked really hard on that science test and I'm proud of you even if you didn't get the grade you wanted. I imagine it's clear to us both that you are getting better and are getting nearer to reaching your goal." Remember that you can't develop competence for them, and any attempt to do so will just undermine their own motivation.

Intrinsic
Motivation

Inner Drive

Finally, relatedness refers to the feeling of being connected to others, of being cared about. When your child feels connected to his teacher, he'll want to work hard for that teacher. When Ned asks the students he coaches what their favorite class was the previous year in school, he always follows up their answer with another question: "Was it the class or the teacher?" At least half the time, the answer is, "It was the teacher. She was really great." Likewise, when your child feels connected to you, when you communicate unconditional love and he tells himself, "My parents care more about me than about my grades," then it is more likely that your child will internalize your values. Self-determination theory calls this "integrated regulation." It is a child's identification with the values and goals of the people who care for him and love him unconditionally.

If you believe in education and hard work, and want your children to as well, we don't recommend scolding them each time they come home with a subpar grade. Though you may think it's the best way to communicate values, it's actually counterproductive because it signals conditional love. Chances are that they are already irked by the grade, so offer a sympathetic, "I know this is upsetting to you. I know you worked hard on that. I'd be happy to talk through things to help you for next time, if you want." Note that this response is sympathetic (relatedness). You're also reminding your child that there are ways to get a better outcome next time (competence). And by ending it with "if you want," they see they are in control, that you're a consultant, not a manager (autonomy).

Dopamine: Your "get up and go" aid

Brain science backs up what psychologists have been arguing about motivation since the 1970s. As you may remember from Chapter One, the brain's reward system is fueled by dopamine, which activates and energizes the brain. When something really cool happens, and especially when you're anticipating something really cool

Dopamine

not have to nag her constantly to try new things and ask her what she would suggest you do. Negotiate a reasonable “compromise” between your desire for your child to be active and engaged most of the time and her desire to do as little as possible that’s unfamiliar or challenging.

4. Physical activity can be motivating to all kinds of kids. See if you can interest your Eeyore (with a short-term reward if necessary) in engaging in an individual sport that most kids don’t do, like fencing, rock climbing, or judo.

Anxiety

The Hermione Granger: *“My kid is stressed out of her mind. In her view, it’s Yale or nothing.”*

Some kids will get caught up in a competitive school environment or are wired to acquire as many accolades as they can. Harry Potter’s friend Hermione Granger falls squarely into this category. Most often, the pressure they feel comes from their parents or teachers, although kids also infect each other with anxiety and competitiveness.

Hermiones are intensely—even unhealthily—driven to excel or to live up to someone else’s expectations. Their motivation is largely fear based, as they experience anxiety about not being able to achieve the high goals they’ve set for themselves—or that others have set for them. They tend to have a very low sense of control and to feel “existentially impotent,” to borrow the words of Julie Lythcott-Haims, former Stanford dean and author of *How to Raise an Adult*.¹⁷

Obviously, if the pressure is coming from mom and dad, the solution is simple: stop pressuring them. Even if you are proud of your child, she may come to believe that she is loved because of her accomplishments. Most commonly, this is just an issue of communication that needs to be repaired.

But if you have told her, “Look, I don’t care about your grades

or where you go to school,” and still she is anxious and fearful, the fixes are more complicated.

We recently gave a talk about the effects of stress and sleep deprivation on the developing brain to a classroom of highly stressed and exhausted eleventh-grade AP English students. The students were courteous, took notes, and asked good questions, and they seemed to like the idea that they would ultimately be more successful if they were not chronically tired and stressed. When the talk was over, however, their teacher pulled us aside and said, “Every one of these kids think that if they don’t get into Yale, they’ll end up working at McDonald’s.” This is very similar to what we were told by an English teacher at an elite independent school in Washington, namely that by the time the kids hit ninth grade “they’re all terrified” at the thought of not getting into a prestigious college.

So how do you even begin to fix this? How do you encourage internal motivation for a kid who is so reliant on external signs of achievement? First ask her if she’d be willing to hear some information that might help her to work with a lot of motivation but maybe a little less fear and anxiety. If she is, tell her the truth: that where you go to college does not make an enormous difference to your success in life. Share proof of this with her. Researchers Stacy Berg Dale and Alan Krueger have followed the career trajectories of the same class of high school graduates for decades. Among students who had comparable SAT scores, whether or not they went to an elite college made little difference in their earning potential. This was true whether they applied to and were rejected from the same elite schools, or whether they were accepted to the elite schools but chose to go to another, less selective college.¹⁸ Another study from Gallup and Purdue University found that the type of college students attended (e.g., public versus private; highly selective versus less selective) made very little difference to their workplace engage-

Perfectionism

Inner Drive

ment and well-being. The factors that best predicted well-being were those more intrinsic to the college experience itself, such as: 1) having a professor who showed personal interest in them, stimulated them to learn, and encouraged them; 2) having an internship or job in college that allowed them to apply what they were learning; and 3) being actively involved in extracurricular activities or projects that took a semester or more to complete.¹⁹ Also, a study conducted in 2013 through the Pew Research Center found that graduates from public and private colleges reported equal levels of life satisfaction, including satisfaction with family life and personal finances, as well as job satisfaction.²⁰ What these studies suggest is that if you're bright and motivated, it doesn't much matter where you go to school. For some kids, knowing this makes it a bit easier to pay attention to what's really important to them.

You can also share the big-fish-little-pond theory with your Hermione. This idea, developed by Herbert Marsh,²¹ holds that you see yourself in a more positive light if you perform well in relation to your peer group. So, being a standout at a lesser-known school is often better in the long run than getting lost in the crowd at a more competitive school. In his book *David and Goliath*, Malcolm Gladwell told the story of a high-achieving student determined to go into science at Brown. She found the environment at Brown demoralizing, and let go of her science focus. At another, less competitive school, she may have given her natural interest more of a chance to bloom. Gladwell wrote, "Rarely do we stop and consider . . . whether the most prestigious of institutions is always in our best interest."²² Ask your child to think about whether it may be good for her to be a bigger fish in a smaller pond.

Help your Hermione see that while it can be frightening to fail at something, a poor grade does not translate to a permanently closed door. In fact, it can be liberating—as we saw with one friend of ours who failed an AP Music Theory class her freshman year of

Perfectionism

high school. While she was terrified initially, it ended up freeing her from a paralyzing fear of not achieving a GPA of 4.0. When she saw that the worst-case scenario actually didn't destroy her or close off her future, she was more empowered to take risks and more capable of living her life without feeling that a monster was chasing her around every turn. And that, ultimately, made her more successful.

When Bill's kids were in elementary school, he made a point of telling them that there was a low correlation between grades in school and success in life. He said that while he would look at their report cards if they wanted him to, he was much more concerned about their development as students and as people. They generally seemed to believe him and were happy that their mother and he were not on them constantly about their grades. Then one night when Bill's daughter was a junior in high school, she came to hear one of his lectures about the adolescent brain, at which he shared a number of the ideas discussed in this book. On the way home, she said, "I bet you don't really believe that part about high school grades not being so important for success in life."

Bill asked her why she thought this. She replied that her teachers and school counselors had always spoken about how important it was to be a good student (which she was). Bill assured her that, based on considerable research, he did believe it. To prove it, he offered to pay her a hundred dollars if she got a C on her report card, in any subject. He did this because he would have been perfectly happy for her to have the experience of having a C on her transcript and to see that her world did not end, that all her options for the future did not foreclose, and that she could still create a meaningful life. (She never took him up on it.)

Ned tells every Hermione he encounters (and he comes across a lot of them) that the most important thing she can do is develop the brain she wants for the rest of her life. Does she want a brain that's so stressed and tired that she is easily anxious and depressed thereafter? Does she want a workaholic brain? Or does she want a brain

Inner Drive

that is powerful, but also happy and resilient? Like Ned does, you can say, "You're clearly bright enough to do this. The question is whether it's healthy for your long-term development and consistent with your highest values." Then encourage her to think about her highest values, what's truly most important to her, and ask her to consider whether, when she thinks about them, she's driving herself in the right direction. Then help her set goals that are values based, because when we set goals we're in control of, our minds are happy. We'll talk much more about goal setting in Chapter Ten when we discuss the mental strategies that help kids succeed.

Inner
Drive

What to Do Tonight

- Support autonomy, support autonomy, support autonomy.
- Explore where your child's true inner motivation lies. You can do this by asking when in life he or she feels "really happy." Kids with a healthy self-drive will commonly think of times when they perform well in school or in sports, are engaged in pleasurable pastimes, or do something fun with their friends or family. In contrast, kids who are obsessively motivated or have difficulty sustaining motivation and effort will often say that they feel happiest when they have no responsibilities, when nothing is expected of them, and when they feel no pressure.
- Make a point of speaking with your kids about what it is they want in life. What do they love to do? What do they feel they're good at? If there's a reason they're here, what might that be?
- Help your child articulate (and write down) goals. We will explore this in more depth in Chapter Ten. For now, simply the act of voicing where she wants to get is a remarkably constructive step.
- Encourage flow in any activity by giving your kids the space and time they need to do what they love.

- Teach and model a love of challenge and persistence in the face of difficulty. Attribute positive motivational qualities to young kids (e.g., "I've noticed that you don't give up on things.").
- Teach your kids not to be overly preoccupied with pleasing others. If they're focused on external feedback, consider occasionally saying something like, "Everybody feels good when they're successful at things and get positive feedback from other people. It's completely normal. My experience, though, is that the wisest thing is to evaluate your own performance and to focus on getting better at doing the right thing."
- If your child doesn't seem to have a passion, remember that there are many people and experiences that will positively influence their lives. Seek out mentors or role models in different fields, and expose them to a range of careers and life choices.

Inner
Drive

learn, however, and Quiet Time programs can be more challenging to implement, as TM can only be taught by a certified teacher. It is encouraging, though, that the David Lynch Foundation and other donors have raised money to enable thousands of students in underserved schools across the country to learn and practice TM.

While TM, mindfulness, and daydreaming are critically important to the developing brain, the pièce de résistance of radical downtime, the foundation on which so much of our lives depends, the activity we should spend a third of our lives engaged in, is *sleep*. Sleep is so important, it is the star of our next chapter.

Downtime

What to Do Tonight

- Look for opportunities during the day to let your mind wander. This could mean just sitting quietly for a few minutes looking out the window or at the clouds. It could also mean engaging in activities you can largely do "mindlessly" (e.g., mowing the lawn) that enable you to "be with yourself."
- Talk as a family about the importance of going off-line and giving yourself truly free time. If they're open to hearing it, tell your kids that it's only when they aren't focused on anything in particular that they can really think about themselves and other people. Also tell them that discoveries and insights will often come when you let your mind wander, and that they need downtime to solidify the things they're learning in school.
- Ask your child, "Do you feel you have enough time to yourself, time when you're not studying, doing sports, texting, or talking to other people? Do you have enough time just to chill?" If your child says no,

Radical Downtime

help him to think through when he might find a few times in his day to sit quietly and let his mind wander. Think out loud with your kids about the challenge of building in enough time for yourself.

- The next time you're driving with your child, instead of turning to technology, say, "Do you mind if we take a couple of minutes to just take in the scenery?"
- Consider learning to meditate yourself. The University of Massachusetts Medical School has a Center for Mindfulness with great resources (umassmed.edu/cfm), as does the University of California, San Diego (health.ucsd.edu/specialties/mindfulness/Pages/default.aspx), and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (centerhealthyminds.org). You can also visit the main TM Web site (tm.org). If you're interested in TM, attend an introductory lecture at your nearest center, and see if your middle- or high-school-age child would be willing to come along. Let your kids know about the dozens of celebrities who practice and endorse TM, including those who are popular with teenagers (currently Katy Perry, Kesha, Margaret Cho, and Hugh Jackman) to pique their interest.
- If you're interested in mindfulness, you could try a mindfulness app with your child, such as Headspace or Mind Yeti, which can be particularly useful at times of stress. For younger kids, check out Lauren Alderfer's book *Mindful Monkey, Happy Panda* and Eline Snel's book and CD combo *Sitting Still Like a Frog*.

Downtime

Sleep

it will make it much harder for him to fall asleep on Sunday night. But if he's listening and weighing the pros and cons, let it be his call.

What to Do Tonight

- Make sleep a family value, and set a family goal of sleeping more. Ned always tells his teenage students, "Pay yourself first," a lesson adopted from financial planning that involves putting money into your savings account before you pay your bills. He tells kids "you'll need to sleep something in the neighborhood of sixty-three hours a week (nine hours a day), so plan that and then plan what you'll do the rest of the time." It's good advice for you as well as your kids. Talk to your kids about your own sleep-related challenges, and let them know if you've found things that have worked for you. Tell them you're open to their suggestions.
- Assess whether your child has an effective wind-down routine before bed. If not, read about what experts call good sleep hygiene, or sleep habits. Try getting ready for bed before you're really tired, as it's harder to inhibit the desire to do one more thing or watch one more episode when you're tired. Encourage your teens to try the same thing. Dim lights and pull shades at least thirty minutes before a child's bedtime, which will trigger melatonin production. Try using blackout curtains and/or relaxation tapes. Also try warm milk, which actually does have a sleep-inducing effect. If necessary, talk to your pediatrician about the use of melatonin, which can be very effective for highly anxious kids and for kids with ADHD. Encourage exercise during the day, particularly if falling asleep in the first place is hard.
- If your child is a light sleeper or struggles to fall asleep, consider a white-noise generator.
- If your child is an athlete, do a Google search for studies that document the incredibly powerful effect sleep has on athletic performance. A

Sleep

study of Stanford basketball players found that they all ran faster and shot more accurately after several weeks of training when they got more than eight hours of sleep a night.²⁹ Let your kid know that, on the advice of sleep specialists, many NBA teams have eliminated morning shootarounds to give players more sleep.

- Talk as a family about creating technology-free zones in the bedroom at night. Danny Lewin recommends that kids (and parents) leave their devices charging in the kitchen thirty to sixty minutes before bedtime. (This gives us a chance to resist our phone only once, rather than all night.) Lewin also encourages negotiating with teenagers in a respectful way. If no phones in the bedroom seven nights in a row is too much for your teenager to manage, how about five? Then you and your child can discuss the difference between what happens when the phone is in the room and when it isn't. If your child insists that she needs her phone because she uses it as an alarm clock, go to the store immediately and buy her an alarm clock. Get her the most high-end kind she wants. It's money well spent.
- Suggest that your high school child ask her friends or other kids in her grade who *do* get eight-plus hours of sleep a night how they do it. Kids commonly learn more from each other than they do from adults.
- If your kids are tired, remind them to be patient with themselves and with others. Help them recognize that their emotional reactions will be different when they're tired—and that they'll be more irritable with you and with friends.
- Ideally, we want kids to learn to calm themselves. But there are some—particularly those with ADHD or anxiety problems—for whom it's too hard. Some kids need to listen to music (but not on their phones) or even to have the TV on to fall asleep. Though it's not ideal, it's not worth fighting about if it works.

Sleep

Sleep

- Encourage your sleepy teenager to take a twenty-minute power nap after school or during study hall. Naps shouldn't be longer than that, otherwise they can cause grogginess and throw off sleep rhythms for the night. Think of them as a little pick-me-up to get through to bedtime.
- For kids who have sleep disorders and/or are suffering from severe sleep deprivation, consider having a doctor write a letter recommending that they be permitted to miss first period. Also check out the sleep tool kit on www.racetonowhere.com/sleep-page.
- If your kid's circadian clock is off, exposure to bright light early in the morning can be an effective tool, but consult with an expert on sleep before trying light therapy. Also, if weather permits, go camping. We constantly encounter kids who struggle with sleep the whole year, and then summer camp gets them back on track. For the duration of the camp they're in bed at 9:30 P.M., because there's no electric light or digital technology. A camping trip won't be feasible if it's in the middle of winter, or if you live in the northern parts of the world where the sun doesn't go down until very late. But it's a very effective technique when you can swing it.
- Continue reading about sleep. Books we recommend are Helene Ensellem's *Snooze . . . or Lose!* and Dr. Richard Ferber's *Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems*.
- Assess the extent to which school commitments—and particularly homework—are undermining your child's efforts to get to bed. This last is not a simple matter—which is why your child's school environment is the subject of the entire next chapter.

Sleep

Taking a Sense of Control to School

been driven for too long is too high a price to pay for that admissions letter. Getting in is only one piece of the college experience. The most crucial question, which we will turn to later, is what happens when you get there.

What to Do Tonight

- Teach your kids that they are responsible for their own education. Kids should feel in charge, not that school is being done "to them." Note this is very different from blaming kids who are struggling.
- If your child is not learning from his teacher, acknowledge this without blaming the teacher. "Mr. Cooper is doing the best he can. He just doesn't know how to teach you the way you learn." Encourage your child to think of what will motivate him to master the material being taught in the class anyway.
- Remind your child of the big picture, that grades matter less than the ways he or she develops as a student and person.
- Resist the pressure to push your child if he's not ready, be it reading in kindergarten, algebra in eighth grade, or AP classes in high school.
- Create an advocacy group made of up teachers, parents, and kids to talk about what you can all do to make school a less stressful experience. Consider advocating for brain-friendly experiences in school such as exercise, the arts, and meditation.

Self
Control

But here's what you can do. Always know their password, and let them know that you will always know it. If you are paying for their data plan, you can make that contingent on their respectful use of technology. If they won't put away the phone at night, you don't pay the bill. As we said in Chapter Seven, if your child claims she needs the phone in her bedroom to set the alarm, buy an alarm clock. Most important, let your high schoolers know that although you're looking forward to their getting an excellent education, you won't be sending them off to an expensive college until they can demonstrate that they can regulate their technology use well enough to be successful. Otherwise it will be a waste of their time and your money.

A Few Common Questions

"How much screen time is reasonable?"

This is a simple question with a complicated answer. It used to be that when parents asked us about video-game time, we suggested no more than an hour a day. But then we heard that kids would get frustrated because it took an hour and a half to get to the next level of their favorite game. There is no one right answer here, but we do have some guidelines. For starters, encourage everyone in the family to make a technology-use plan. It is helpful for you to do this together with your children, so that they will see you monitoring your own use. Suggest that they start by mapping out the number of hours they need to sleep, how much time they want to spend on sports or other nontech leisure activities, and how much time they need to spend on schoolwork, dinner, chores, and getting ready for school and for bed. This will make it easier to think about how much tech time will fit comfortably in the daily or weekly schedule. What we can do is plan for the things we know are important and work backward.

Screen
Time

The answer is easier for young kids. We believe that preschoolers develop best by interacting with people and, where possible, with nature, by engaging in dramatic play, by singing, building, and making art. There is no evidence that young children need technology to develop optimally or that kids who are exposed to technology early are better for it.

"How do I get my kid who loves electronics to be interested in something else?"

The child who loves video games more than anything is likely to have a different conception of "reasonable use" than you. For school-aged kids, we recommend framing the discussion by recognizing that you want them to be able to use technology, and that you know how important it is to them. If your kid seems technically inclined, say "You may grow up to be a techie." Then you can tell them about some of the other things you don't want them to miss out on—family time, reading, socializing with friends, or sleep. Say something like, "I know how much fun these games are, and I'm not going to say you can't do it, but as your parent, I'm concerned that there are other important things you're missing out on. So it would help me a lot if we could have a conversation about how much time a week you really need to enjoy games you want to play, and come up with other things you'll do each week so I'm not worried about you. If we can both agree on a plan and you can stick to it, I'll leave you alone."

"I want to limit screen time, but my child's school requires him to do his homework onscreen—sometimes hours of it. What can I do?"

Though screen time is a complicated issue, we believe adults should work together to tell our kids that we don't want all their waking hours spent in front of a screen, and we support parents in talking with schools and administrators about the issue. Tell them you are

Screen
Time

Another Cultural Shift

We feel optimistic about the way that many teens are talking about the impact of technology and the need to counteract its negative side. There is a countermovement at work, one that we hope will make it easier for parents to place limits on technology. In a study of younger millennials, 80 percent reported needing to unplug and enjoy simple things.⁴⁴

There's been a resurgence in the popularity of quieter, hands-on activities like baking, sewing, and crafting among millennials. Even retail is getting into the low-tech movement, with more and more shops and restaurants branding themselves as tech-free. We know of several restaurants that unapologetically ban cell phones, and a board game store in Seattle (started by Microsofties, ironically) uses the marketing line "Unplug and Reconnect."

Perhaps our favorite example of the low-tech movement comes from the University of Maryland women's basketball team, who created a media stir a few years ago when they voluntarily gave up their phones during tournament time. "To give up our phones is probably one of the best things we decided to do as a team," guard Lexie Brown told the *Washington Post*. "I mean, I like my phone. But this has taught me I don't need it." Instead, the teammates played card games and talked more to one another than they would have otherwise. Another player said, "When we got our phones back, it was like we wanted to give them right back."⁴⁵

What to Do Tonight

- Have a family meeting in which you talk about setting up technology-free times or zones. At the very least there should be no cell phones during meals or in the bedroom, but you may also want to carve out

Screen
Time

more cell-phone-free zones for the family. A friend's wife says, "No cell phones on the couch. If you are on the couch, talk to me."

- Model healthy use of technology. For example, *never* text while driving. If you need to send a text while you're in the car, be sure to pull over. If you are on your phone when your child walks into the room, stop and greet him or her. If you need to check your phone for a text, e-mail, or alert, ask permission. "Is it okay if I check this? It might be Dad/I told so-and-so I would look for her message."
- Try to have at least thirty minutes of unplugged "private time" every day with your kids during the week and at least an hour a day on weekends when you don't take calls or check your phone. Consider identifying a certain period during the weekend (e.g., Sundays 9:00 A.M. to noon) as tech free—"It's pancake, read the *Times*, and play a game time." Negotiate with your kids if necessary about the best time for digital downtime. If your child has difficulty letting go of her phone, let her set a timer and tell her she can check her texts every ten or fifteen minutes. Ten to fifteen minutes seems obsessive—and it is, in our view—but kids who have a harder time with tech-free time will resent it less if you're not rigid. Be respectful and know that even short periods of tech-free time may be hard for her.
- When out and about, point out social situations in which one person is ignoring the other through their use of a phone (bad dates, parents ignoring soccer games, concerts, Starbucks where every single person is on a phone). Ask them, "What do you think the other person is feeling?"
- If you're ready to give a younger child a phone or Internet access, study resources such as Adam Pletter's iParent101.com and the American Pediatrics Association's Media and Children Communication Toolkit to educate yourself about the games and apps your kid uses. The Entertainment Software Rating Board (esrb.org) offers useful

Screen
Time

information about setting parental controls on games. Other sources we recommend are OnGuardOnline, which offers tips for protecting your computers; Common Sense Media, which rates programs and apps; and iKeepSafe.org, a fount of information about keeping kids safe online. Above all, talk to your children and let them know that it's your job to help them learn to use technology well. Say, "There's a whole world available on this gadget. If you get into something that's scary for you, I want you to let me know."

- Let kids know you'll check their texts and Twitter page randomly until you feel they are not using it in a way that's hurtful to others or that makes them vulnerable to being hurt—and then do it.
- Make video game use contingent on not freaking out when it's time to quit.
- If your kid is using technology excessively, consider consulting with a psychologist or counselor.

Screen
The

Exercise #2: Pay attention to what your brain is telling you.

In our experience, when a child understands what is going on in his mind, he has more control of himself and will tend to behave and perform better. Knowing even a little bit about the brain—and about what may be unique about his particular brain—can restore his sense of control.

Even kindergartners are capable of understanding the basic functions of the brain. Dan Siegel, child psychiatrist and author of *The Whole-Brain Child*, uses a visual of four fingers closed over the thumb to teach kids what happens inside their brains when they get stressed. The thumb represents big emotions—things like fear, worry, and anger (this is the amygdala, though that's a big word for kindergartners). The fingers over it represent the parts of their brain that help them to think clearly and solve problems (the pre-frontal cortex). When their worry or anger gets too big, the fingers lose their grip on the thumb, which Siegel describes as “flipping your lid.” When kids feel themselves beginning to flip their lid, he encourages them to consider what they need to do to calm down—like going to a designated cool-down spot—so that their fist is closed again.

One of the more challenging kids Bill tested was a nine-year-old boy, Ben, whose parents were concerned about his distractibility, his anxiety and perfectionism, and his very low frustration tolerance. They were desperate to find out how they could help Ben be less reactive and difficult at home and in school.

Within the first few minutes of testing, Bill saw what they meant. While Ben was bright and articulate, he peppered his answers with sentences like, “I’m not going to be very good at this,” “I can’t do anything fast,” and “You’re gonna give me a bad grade, aren’t you?” When he got to the first hard item, he slammed his fist on

Teach about
The
brain

What to Do Tonight

- Consider the exercises in this chapter and ask your child if he thinks there's one that would help him, you, or the whole family.
- Have a family meeting in which you share your written goals. Ask your kids for their thoughts on your goals or those of their siblings. Validate their suggestions.
- Encourage your kids to set their own goals—and to visualize achieving them. Ask, "What would you like to do or accomplish for the next week/ month/ semester/ by the end of summer?" Help them make SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-Bound). When you break a goal down into discrete, actionable steps, you increase the dopamine released when they see progress.
- Build on your child's SMART goals to add in mental contrasting. Are there inner obstacles? How will your child handle it if he is thwarted? How will he feel, and how will he recuperate and move on?
- Make Plan B thinking a family practice. Ask your kids if they want to hear your thoughts about their Plan As and Bs. If they don't, back off.
- Model positive self-talk and self-compassion. You might say something like, "I realized yesterday that I was being really hard on myself about something I screwed up at work, harder than I would have been on anyone else. Everyone messes things up sometimes and getting down on myself won't help me avoid mistakes."
- Make physical fitness a family value. Don't force your child to play a sport and don't choose an activity for him, but explain that it is important that everyone in the family make physical activity a part of their life, and help them to decide what they would like to do.

Exercises
Brain