

“The situation doesn’t call for blame or punishment; it calls for understanding and compassion.” —THICH NHAT HANH

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PART ONE

The Elephant in the Room

EMBRACING A FAMILY THAT
IS PERFECTLY IMPERFECT

Do You Have a Complex Kid?

Most of the time, we weather the occasional storms that life throws our way. But with complex child(ren)—kids who struggle with life or learning—it can feel like we are living in a constant state of high alert, with a tropical storm front threatening to move in at any moment.

It can be so deceptive. The skies can appear sunny and blue. Your child can be sweet and loving sometimes. But you see that grey cloud looming, closer than you'd like, and you never know when it's going to swoop in and rain on your parade. You never know when your child's challenges are going hijack family life.

If you are always on the look-out, walking on eggshells or waiting for the other shoe to drop, then you, like me, might have complex kids.

- Are you concerned that your child might actually be lazy or disrespectful?
- Do you feel hurt, watching your child suffer?
- Does your kid lash out in ugly ways, only to apologize later (perhaps with deep regret)?
- Does your smart kid think they are the opposite and struggle to do well school?
- Do you see your child struggling to make and keep friends, or build healthy relationships with siblings?
- Do you and your spouse or co-parent regularly disagree about how to help your kid? Does one of you accuse the other of being too strict or of "coddling" too much?
- Has your child been diagnosed with a chronic condition, such as ADHD, learning disabilities, anxiety, depression, autism, sensory processing, food allergies, etc.?
- Has your child never been diagnosed, but you suspect there is *something* going on?

If you find yourself feeling like you just don't know what to do to help our child, or like you've tried everything and nothing has worked, then you are in the right place.

I want to invite you to take a deep breath, and let it out really slowly. Take another breath, pause, and lengthen your exhale again.

Okay, now. In the first part of the book, we'll demystify what is really involved with parenting a complex kiddo. Take one more breath, and let's go . . .

SARAH'S STORY

Sarah wanted nothing more in her life than to have a family, and it didn't happen as easily as she expected. It took a lot of effort to get to a point that she and her spouse, Jake, had two healthy children, and they were grateful beyond measure—so much so that it took several years for her to admit that there was trouble in paradise. By age 8 their oldest child was quirky and emotionally sensitive, and their younger child, age 5, was following a similar path (though whether she was mirroring her older sibling was unclear). As Sarah grew more concerned, she spent a great deal of time trying to figure out how to get help. But Jake thought Sarah was over-reacting—coddling their kids and being too soft. With very different approaches to their challenging circumstances, their marriage was experiencing a friction that they never expected. The more Sarah sought help, the greater Jake's resistance and insistence that their child just needed a firmer hand. She desperately wanted them to be on the same page, but couldn't see a path to make that happen.

Bottom Line: It took several years for Sarah to admit that there was trouble in paradise. The more Sarah sought help, the greater Jake's resistance and insistence that their child needed her to be firmer.

CHAPTER 1

“This Kid Is Really Smart, But . . .”

Understanding the Six Key Challenge Areas

“Every life has its trials and tribulations. We can navigate them more skillfully when we don't waste time or energy shooting ourselves with a second arrow—such as dwelling on how much greener the grass in our neighbor's yard looks, compared to ours.” —THICH NHAT HANH

The Six Challenge Areas for Families with Complex Kids

Having a complex child (or parent) can affect every aspect of family life, without exception. For the last dozen years, I have heard literally thousands of examples of the “problems” families encounter in everyday life. The range of the impact is truly staggering.

Thousands of problems can be overwhelming to try to get a handle on, though, much less do something about them. So it helps to view most problems as falling into one of six key areas. Some families are particularly impacted in one or a few of these areas; others in all six. Whether you have one child with complex issues or it's a ‘family affair’ (as it is for my complex family of 5!), these six areas will help you begin to clarify the issues, so you can then identify where to focus your priorities for the changes you want to make.

Some of the examples offered here may seem familiar, though probably not all of them. Instead of looking for your specific problem, try to

consider the idea of each category so you can get a sense of whether it is a lead problem area for your family.

Challenge Area 1: Emotion Management

Whether a child is quick to anger, painfully shy, surprisingly silly, rule-following and serious, quick to brush things off, or given to take things personally, our kids often struggle with some aspects of emotional management. Maybe their highs are higher and their lows are lower than their typical peers. Maybe they fly off the handle when things don't go their way or they hear the word "no." Or maybe they can't handle it when others don't follow "the rules." It shows up in dozens of ways as they struggle with self-regulation in the most basic sense.

Challenge Area 2: Organization

Your child seems to leave a wake wherever they go, and may not even seem to notice. They don't put things away, and are often oblivious of the clutter that surrounds them. They struggle with planning, prioritizing, time management, or procrastination. Their room might be a wreck, or their backpack over-flowing. They don't follow directions well, and are constantly losing or forgetting things. They struggle to take care of their possessions and their responsibilities.

Challenge Area 3: Home/School

Your child is intelligent (maybe even gifted, though sometimes you wonder), but still struggles to perform well in school. They are not reaching their potential, despite all of your efforts to help them get organized. School reports consistently identify a child who could do better, if only they would just 'try harder,' pay attention or do their work when it is assigned. Maybe they do their homework, but neglect to turn it in; or they forget assignments and don't know what's expected of them. They have trouble getting started on tasks, and often ask for help at the last minute, especially on projects. They struggle to manage the expectations of them as a student.



The Six Challenge Areas for Families with Complex Kids

Challenge Area 4: Logistics

Mornings, after school, weekends, bedtime, and (sometimes) school breaks are much harder than you think they should be. Basic household routines seem impossible to implement consistently. Your child requires constant reminders to stay on task in order to get anything done. They don't seem to think sequentially or remember the systems you have in place, even though you feel like you've gone over them a million times. Reward systems and lists rarely work—at least, not for long. Your child struggles to adopt simple processes that could help family life run more smoothly.

Challenge Area 5: Relationships

Tensions are often high around the home, and explosions are not uncommon (from kids or parents). You worry that your child doesn't know how to make or keep friends, either at school or around the neighborhood. Your child has a hard time relating to extended family members, and even immediate family members don't seem to understand them. You disagree with your co-parent about how best to support your child, and maybe your marriage is suffering under the pressure. It's hard to find a baby-sitter who can handle your kids. You love your child, but sometimes you notice that you or your spouse are checking out because you just don't feel connected. Your child struggles with navigating relationships.

Challenge Area 6: Impact on the Parent (or Siblings)

This is not what you expected when you chose to bring a child into your life (whatever the circumstances), and you keep waiting for things to get better. Who thought parenting would be this hard? You are constantly feeling frustrated, disappointed, sad, embarrassed, guilty, or aggravated—or all of those combined. And above all, you're exhausted—all the time. Sometimes you even find yourself not wanting to go home. You love your child, and have so much to be grateful for ... and yet, sometimes your guilty secret is that you want it all to go away. You are struggling with raising a complex child.

Coach's Reframe: Up Until Now

So there are lots of problems facing your family. That's not a great surprise. But when you only focus on the problems, it's hard to find effective solutions. When you see the world only through the lens of the challenges you're facing, it narrows your perspective ... which can limit your options.

When you change your thinking, and shift your language, you'll end up changing what is possible. There are three words that can help you change your perspective and transform your life: Up Until Now.

There is nothing you can change about anything that has happened in your life, or your family's life, up until now. Absolutely nothing. School issues. Relationship dynamics. Arguments. That thing that happened a few years ago that you don't ever like to think about. The choices you made that actually made things worse even though you were following 'expert' advice.

You can't change one thing from the past. Nothing. Here's where you are. Now. And the beauty of this moment is that you have the power to change what happens . . . from here forward.

Up until now, you did the best you could with the information you had available to you. You tried to get support for your child, or your family, or yourself. You followed the guidance and advice of friends, family and professionals—even if it didn't always get the results you hoped for.

But from here, you have an opportunity to start again. Armed with the peaceful arsenal of tools and strategies that are available to you in this book, you can take on a new perspective. Every day you have the chance to start fresh, and try again.

"There are three words that can help you change your perspective and transform your life: Up Until Now."

"Say No" to Judgment

Judgment is a challenging concept, full of contradictions.

On the one hand, we use judgment to guide us in our lives every day. We reflexively categorize our experiences into good, bad and neutral, and that leads us to certain behaviors and decisions. In many ways, it makes life easier.

On the other hand, as Dr. Mark Bertin explains in his book, *The ADHD Family Solution*, judgment "leads us to wrestle with what is not in our control." This is particularly true and difficult when parenting complex kids. For example, it's understandable that parents of children with challenges feel disappointed when they can't control their children's behaviors. If a

hyperactive 10-year-old is bouncing off the walls, or jumping on the furniture, frustrated parents may come to the judgment that this kid is disrespectful and won't listen to them; or worse, that he will never live up to his potential.

"While there is no magic wand for stepping out of judgment, it helps to pay attention to your tone, and to any underlying messages you may be sending unintentionally."

tell the difference."

As parents, that means fully understanding our child's challenges and accepting them for what they are. And it means helping our children learn self-management, slowly but surely, in developmentally appropriate ways, one step at a time. We'll talk about this in many ways throughout the book, and especially in chapter 12 in the Coach's Reframe: "Is it Naughty or Neurological?"

While there is no magic wand for stepping out of judgment, it helps to pay attention to your tone, and to any underlying messages you may be sending unintentionally. When you stop your hyperactive child from trying to see if he can fit in the laundry chute, examine your thoughts and feelings at that time. Are you aggravated or annoyed? Or are you laughing at your child's insatiable curiosity and incredible energy? Your thoughts — and the words and tones that follow them — communicate volumes.

"Say Yes" to Acceptance

Once we have children, their lives influence ours, their friends' parents become ours, their schools become a focus of our attention, and their

So what's a parent to do? How do you redirect your child's behaviors and foster resilience and self-confidence at the same time?

Dr. Bertin encourages parents to replace judgment with discernment. "Discernment is recognizing what we can and should change, and what we cannot, much like the traditional serenity prayer: To accept what we cannot change, to change what we must, and to find the wisdom to

TAKING A STAND FOR SELF-CARE

Imagine this. You're rafting down a river on a gentle float with your child (and maybe a spouse), when you encounter a choppy section filled with rocks and eddies. You hit a bump that throws you out into the water. While you're surprised, there's no time for panic—you've just got to hustle to get back in the boat! After all, the water is rather polluted, there might be snakes in there, and it's hard to see clearly beneath the surface. The sooner you get back onto the raft, the better your chances of enjoying the ride (chances of survival improve significantly, as well!).

But when we have complex kids, we have this strange tendency to resist all efforts to get us back into the raft. We disregard the impact on us because we just want to make sure our kid stays in the boat. But if we're not there to skillfully direct our family's course through the rocky rapids ahead, how exactly are we going to help? We've got to prioritize ourselves so that we're not left barely treading water behind the raft, and then wondering why we're too exhausted to help them miss the next set of rapids that might come out of nowhere.

activities become an outlet for our volunteerism. We are enmeshed in each other's worlds. For most of us, we create a vision of what it will be like when our children achieve certain milestones—kindergarten, school dances & proms, graduations. Along with that vision, we create a picture of what the experience will be like for us. It's very personal—a vision for ourselves and our future.

In order to support kids in their growth and development, all parents need to shift those images we created when they were little. We need to change our expectations to meet the child we have, not the child we

thought we would have. But when you have complex kids, that means modifying our dreams for ourselves, as well. As difficult as it is for parents to shift expectations for our kids, I've come to believe that it's even harder to change what we envision for ourselves.

Self-Care Self-Talk: Step Out of Denial

When raising children with chronic conditions of any kind, self care starts with climbing out of the muddy river of parenting denial.

Parents get stuck in denial for many reasons—some focused on their kids, and some on themselves. Of course, we rarely recognize when we're in denial, so here are a few examples that I've heard from parents to give you a sense of how it shows up. While this is definitely not an exhaustive list, you might recognize yourself in one of these examples:

Denial can be a way of trying to protect our kids:

- I don't want to 'label' or 'stigmatize' my kids, so I'll wait, and hope, and do everything I can to "normalize" life until they 'grow out of it.'
- I don't want my kids to use a diagnosis as an 'excuse,' so I won't tell them about the reason for their struggles and frustrations.
- I want to build my child's self-esteem; if they don't think that anything is 'wrong,' they'll feel good about themselves.

Denial can be a way of trying to protect ourselves:

- If I am already overwhelmed with parenting, then I can't think about adding one more thing to my plate.
- If there is nothing 'wrong' with my child, then I'm a good parent.

- If I'm doing everything the experts suggest, then I can "fix" this before it really becomes a problem.

When our kids face complex issues it's a lot like getting thrown out of a raft and into choppy waters. We can't steer the raft and from the middle of the water—we can't even see the obstacles that threaten its path. So we must climb back into the boat to navigate the rapids and correct its course. That is what I mean by stepping out of denial. We've got to acknowledge the challenges and tackle them head-on in order to guide our kids to safety and success.

You do not have to abandon your goals and dreams when you accept that things aren't going exactly as you planned. In fact, hold fast to your dreams! But you don't have to stay stuck in the muddy river of parenting denial, either. It's scary down there in the muck. When you accept and acknowledge that something's going on that needs your attention, you'll be able to climb back into a boat for safety—and get the help you need to help your child succeed!

