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# Children Need a Sense of Control

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“You aren’t the boss of me!” Even before they have the grammatical chops to say, “You aren’t my boss,” very young children will voice their sense of autonomy when they feel parents or older siblings trying to control them. Even earlier, infants resist being forced and signal their own needs in ways that require us to adapt to them. The desire to exercise autonomy doesn’t go away as kids grow up. Matthew, one of our teenage clients, would sit in a parked car outside his house rather than make his curfew. It was *that* important to him to assert his sense of autonomy or agency.

In fact, our brains are wired to want control over our lives, in large part because a low sense of control—or feeling helpless, hopeless or overwhelmed—is the most stressful thing we can experience. This is why people feel safer driving than flying, even though driving is much more dangerous. It’s also why we over-parent, even when we know it doesn’t help, because it’s less stressful than sitting on our hands. We want to *feel* that we can control events, even if we know we can’t.

## The Key to a Healthy Brain

But kids need to feel a sense of control over their own lives. When they feel a sense of control, children and teens are focused, goal-directed, present-centered and optimistic—and not highly stressed. They are also more autonomously motivated. Moreover, hundreds of studies have found that this *sense* of control—even more than actually *being* in control—is associated with virtually everything we want for our children, including physical and mental health, self-motivation, academic achievement and career success.

This is presumably because kids' brains work better when they have a sense of agency. When they perceive that they have control, their prefrontal cortex—the seat of executive function—regulates the rest of the brain, including the amygdala, which is the brain's danger-detector. The prefrontal cortex is logical and puts things in perspective: when it's in charge, kids are able to think rationally and broadly. When they feel forced, when they feel as if something is not within their control, the amygdala takes over, shutting down the prefrontal cortex and regulating the rest of the brain. Threat looms everywhere, and they are no longer able to think clearly.

It may be hard to see toddler tantrums or teenage resistance as manifestations of the stress response, but one needs only to think of the “fight” in the fight-flight-freeze response that is triggered when we feel threatened.

### **An Antidote to Stress**

Unfortunately, young people's sense of control has been diminishing over the last quarter century. They are constantly measured not by how much they have improved (which they can control), but by how they stack up against other kids (which they can't). They are told their success depends on admission to an elite college, a process over which they have very limited control. And, especially with girls, their sense of control is further diminished by the outsized role of social media in their lives. Photoshopping photos, accumulating “likes,” and waiting to be judged by others are guaranteed to lower any sense of personal control.

In light of the above, we see strengthening young people's sense of control as an extremely important antidote to the epidemic of stress-related mental health problems in children, teens and young adults that has developed over the last decade. This epidemic is particularly concerning given the evidence that stress, anxiety and depression change the developing brain in ways that make it more vulnerable to persistent sleep problems, chronic anxiety and recurrent bouts of depression. Many of the parents of high-achieving kids we've worked with over the years have assumed that

high levels of stress are necessary and acceptable side effects of their kids' pursuit of achievement. If their kid gets into the college of their choice, all of the sleep deprivation and emotional suffering will have been worth it.

We see it differently. We want young people to be as successful as they want to be, but we also want them to be able to enjoy their success, which they simply won't if they are chronically tired, stressed, anxious or, worse, depressed. In our view, no amount of achievement, money or prestige is worth the price of lifelong vulnerability to anxiety and depression. Fortunately, extensive research has shown that increasing kids' sense of control is a powerful way of helping them to achieve success and enjoy it.

Although we don't want young brains to be stressed, unhappy and overwhelmed for long periods, we do want kids to be challenged and to develop high stress tolerance—or the ability to function effectively in stressful situations. While chronic stress is harmful, we know that periodic, tolerable stress—with ample adult support—is actually helpful to the developing brain. When kids cope with challenges successfully, their brains become conditioned to cope, and this conditioning lays the foundation for resilience. So, we want kids to solve their own problems, with support as necessary, as much as possible.

### **Be Your Child's Consultant—Not Your Child's Boss**

One of the most effective ways to help foster a strong sense of control in kids is to think of ourselves as a consultant to our children—rather than their manager, boss or taskmaster. An important place to apply this principle is in the often-fraught realm of homework. Many of the parents we work with liken homework time to World War III—a constant battle to get kids to do their work—while others report micromanaging the school assignments of kids who don't fight back.

To the former, we recommend telling children, “I love you too much to fight with you about your homework.” We suggest that they then say something like, “I'm willing to do anything I can to help you. I'm willing to be your homework consultant

and to set up consulting hours from 6:30 to 7:30 every night, and I'll find a tutor or try to get you extra help in school if you need it. However, you're the most precious thing to me, and I don't want to fight with you every night about your work. Also, I don't want to take responsibility to see that you do your work, because it's really your work. If I act like it's my responsibility to get your work done, or if I work harder than you do to develop your academic skills, I'm going to weaken you, and I don't want to do that." Families that implement this approach often make comments such as, "The temperature in our house after dinner time has gone down by 30 degrees." For kids who don't fight back, this message of not wanting to take responsibility for something that's really theirs is equally powerful.

When we lecture about this idea of thinking of themselves as a consultant, parents often think that what we're saying is, "Back off and let them fail." What we're actually saying, though, is to stay involved with your child in a supportive role and offer, not force, any help that's necessary. We don't want to see kids fail—unless that's what it takes for them to learn that this is their life and they are responsible for their own education. Some kids, especially those with ADHD or learning disabilities, *need* help from parents or other supportive adults to complete almost any kind of assigned work. We support this help 100 percent—as long as the kids don't fight it tooth and nail. Learning whether, when and from whom to accept help is part of their education. Parents should be a tool in their children's toolbox, rather than their foreman.

This approach is quite different from the approach taken by parents of many of the kids we work with. In fact, one of our clients sent an email after reading our book saying, "I just told my 8th-grade son, 'I love you too much to fight with you about your homework.' First he smiled, then he hugged me, and then he said, 'Is something wrong with you, Mom?'"

And following through on this consultant role isn't always easy because, at least temporarily, it lowers parents' sense of control.

If our kids don't immediately pick up and run to the finish line with their newfound freedom, we're tempted to leap in and regain control because doing *something* is much less stressful than doing nothing. In our view, though, playing this consultant role is a great gift to our kids, because it is in line with the reality that 1) we really can't make kids do their homework, and 2) it's really their work, and thus their responsibility. As consultants, we offer help to our children, rather than try to force it on them. We offer advice rather than laying it on kids; we let them solve their own problems wherever possible.

### **Building Influence, Not Control**

When Ned's son Matthew was in middle school at Sidwell Friends School in D.C., his mom was helping him with his homework and noticed an assignment that had not been completed. She asked him (probably with an accusatory tone of frustration) why he hadn't done it. Defensively (and perhaps accurately) he fired back, "Because you didn't remind me." Houston, we have a problem. Yes, Matthew's mom was way more able to keep on top of things than Matthew was, because he didn't have the fully mature brain that his mom has. But he couldn't develop the executive function skills he'd need in life by letting his mom manage his affairs. And he certainly wouldn't feel the sense of control he'd need to develop the inner drive and stress tolerance he was going to need at an intensely academic high school. So, Matthew's mom (and dad) made a concerted effort to walk the talk, replacing "Did you study for that quiz?" or "Shouldn't you be doing your homework?" with "Is there anything we can help with?" and "Do you feel like you have a handle on your homework?"

Fast forward to high school, and Matthew's parents have the kind of relationship and influence with (not control over) him they would have hoped for. In the midst of his work on a research paper, they can ask, "Would you like help with that?" or "Would it help you if we kept your phone for the next few hours so you aren't distracted?" And rather than sullen retorts or eye rolls, they get, "Thanks, not," "I've got it" or "Yeah, that'd be great."

Recently, in advance of a party following a school dance, Matthew asked his folks, “So, what should I do if people at the party are drinking?” This afforded Ned and his wife the opportunity for a meaningful discussion and a chance to share their advice on the kind of topic all parents hope to be consulted on.

### **Put Them in the Driver’s Seat**

Another powerful way to nurture a sense of control is to encourage children to make decisions about their own lives—and to *require* teenagers to make their most important decisions. Kids want to be successful; with support and adequate information they can quite quickly become capable of making good decisions for themselves. When kids make decisions, their prefrontal cortex becomes engaged and they self-reflect, seek information, tune into their emotions to determine the right thing to do, and ask for help when needed. Conversely, when they feel forced or backed against a wall, their amygdala will trigger the stress response and they will fight—even if what they’re fighting against is in their best interest. We want teens to own their decisions. Too often, we see young people invested in their own failure: consciously or unconsciously, they seem to feel it’s worth torching their own goals so they can say, “I told you so.”

So, we recommend telling even young children “It’s your call” as much as possible—and going with their decisions (unless any reasonable person would say “That’s a terrible idea”). With adolescents, we believe that the best message we can give them (other than “I’m crazy about you”) is the following: “I have confidence in your ability to make decisions about your own life and to learn from your mistakes. And I want you to have a lot of experience making your own decisions before you go to college.”

### **Collaboration and Respect**

An additional bonus of encouraging kids to make decisions for themselves is that when they feel trusted and supported, they are more likely to use our advice and go along with us as much as they can. We recently consulted with the mother of a 12-year-old

boy in an observant Jewish family who refused to become a bar mitzvah because he didn't believe in God.

We suggested she start by taking the threat level away, so they could have a reasoned conversation. She started by telling her son, "Your father and I are not going to force you to do a bar mitzvah; obviously we couldn't make you do it if you really fought us. I want you to understand, though, that it is really important to your father and me, and also to your extended family. We aren't asking you to believe every tenet of Judaism, and we respect the honesty and integrity with which you are approaching this. We hope you can find a way to do the bar mitzvah that will not sacrifice your integrity but still will enable us to have the satisfaction of welcoming you into the Jewish community. It would mean the world to your grandparents, aunts, uncles and friends."

No longer operating from a place of stress, the boy agreed to do it—and then bargained with his mother about his conditions, which included inviting only his extended family and a few friends, conditions to which his family was happy to agree. As soon as his mom said, "We're not going to force you," the rational part of his brain was able to turn itself back on. When he felt respected, he was motivated to find a way to go along with his parents.

Kids won't always make decisions we like. But it's very rare for them to refuse to negotiate altogether when their parents come at the subject collaboratively and respectfully, and with a mind toward giving their child a sense of control. Absent excessive pressure or a warping motivation, kids *want* to make good decisions and want their parents' approval.

### **What Consulting Looks Like**

It's important to emphasize, however, that the decision-making process should be an informed one, as that's part of the deal—which means that kids need to be willing to talk through the pros and cons with parents and other knowledgeable people. Also, this doesn't mean you forego all parental rights by giving your kids a sense of control, or that you are a second-class citizen who must bend to their every desire. You are still the parent, and it's

perfectly fair to say, “I’m sorry, I just cannot support your sharing pictures of yourself like that on the internet. While you and I can’t control who sees you on the internet, we can control what they see about you.” Or, “I’m sorry, I wouldn’t feel like a good parent if I let you spend your entire Sunday in front of a screen when I know that too much screen time isn’t good for kids.”

But whenever you can, encourage your kids to be responsible for their own school work, to make their own decisions, and to solve their own problems. For toddlers, this might look like putting the sippy cups in a cupboard within reach, so they can get out their own cup, whatever the color. For grade-schoolers, it might look like letting them choose what clothes to wear or activities to try, work out a bedtime that makes sense, or decide whether it would be helpful to work with a tutor. For adolescents, it might look like not reviewing their grades unless they want you to, or insisting they be responsible for driving the college search and application process.

With practice, this consultant role is much less stressful than the role of manager or boss, as we stop trying to control things that are really not within our control (namely our kids). And making home a less stressful place is good for everyone. When home is a low-stress “safe base,” it offers an ideal environment for nurturing healthy brains—one in which kids can develop the inner drive, problem-solving skills and resilience they’ll need to build successful and happy lives.

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