

# Parenting Challenging Children...

...But Without Breaking their Spirits

By Michael Popkin, Ph.D.

To paraphrase Forrest Gump, “kids are like a box of chocolates... you never know what you are going to get.” Some children have a peaceful disposition while others seem to rant and rave 24/7. Some are shy, while others are hell on wheels. Kids can be introspective, extroverted, humorous, aggressive, or fearful. And some possess a spirited nature that can test the patience and skills of even the best of parents.

Whether you are a biological parent, stepparent, foster parent, or other adult caregiver, there isn't a lot you can do about genetics. But how a parent handles a child's natural-born tendencies matters. It can mean the difference of whether your child:

- Uses his/her abilities usefully *or* self-destructively;
- Whether the child winds up in the principal's office *or* gets a corner office; and
- Whether he/she finds the limelight *or* a police line-up...*or* something in between.

## Do You have a Spirited Child?

If you remember the movie *Seabiscuit*, you'll recall the scene in which this mighty horse rebelled against his handlers, rearing defiantly while they tried to break his spirit. Failing to do so, they gave up and prepared to put him down. Fortunately for our four-legged hero, a young jockey and a wise owner saw potential in this rare creature and found a way to turn Seabiscuit into a champion.

Spirited children are like Seabiscuits. They can drive us crazy, but once tamed they can succeed. In my years of working with such children (including my own spirited son, Ben) and their parents, I have found five characteristics that describe kids with more energy and enthusiasm than their peers. I use the acronym CAPPS: These children are more:

- Curious;
- Adventurous;
- Powerful;
- Persistent; and
- Sensitive.

Sound like anyone you know? If you aren't sure, one final clue: their parents are angry a lot, like the time my mother blew her stack as I ran through the house shooting off my cap gun while my baby sister tried to nap. As one mother told me, “I never even knew I *COULD* get angry until I had Alex!”

## Taming (not Breaking) the Spirited Child

While kids with CAPPS characteristics can be a handful to raise, these same traits are very useful in succeeding in today's competitive world. Seabiscuit, an undersized filly, beat the “invincible” favorite, Man of War. A horse with a broken spirit could never have accomplished this amazing feat. Yet, neither could an untamed Seabiscuit.

Taming a spirited child is not about using coercive and harsh discipline to teach him/her who is boss as the child submits to authority. I'm referring to the “taming” that author Antoine St. Exupery in his children's book, *The Little Prince*, describes as meaning “establishing ties.” It is only by connecting with these unique children and establishing a heartfelt bond that we can teach them to calm themselves and use their immense talents constructively.

The methods for doing this can be likened to an eight-sided corral; much like a gifted wrangler will use to tame a wild horse. Each of the eight planks that form the corral represents an area of parenting essential for success with spirited children:

### Plank 1. LEADERSHIP

Establish yourself as a firm, yet friendly leader in the family. Show respect to your children and expect them to show respect in return. Use a firm

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and friendly tone of voice; allow input, within limits; allow freedom, within certain limitations. Be confident while recognizing that all parents make mistakes, and so will you.

### Plank 2. PREVENTION

Anticipate and prevent problems. Understand your child's unique CAPPS (curiosity, adventure, power, persistence, and sensitivity.) Learn what triggers these CAPPS and how to defuse them beforehand. Learn to redirect your child to use these traits in positive ways. Understand the dynamics of anger and how to handle this primary emotion.

### Plank 3. RELATIONSHIP

Establish a positive relationship with your child, building on the friendlier aspects of parenting. Make time and develop the skills to establish ties with your child. Provide sincere and realistic encouragement on a regular basis.

### Plank 4. POWER

Understand the principles of power and learn how to sidestep power struggles. Your spirited child can sometimes seem power happy, so learn how to teach him/her to manage this powerful quality and use it for motivation and not intimidation. Learn the same lessons for yourself if necessary.

### Plank 5. STRUCTURE

Provide structure for your child to help him/her learn to live within limits. These structures act like the corral that helps wild horses learn to accept limits to their freedom as the handler works to tame them. Understand that spirited children need a **flexible structure**. Like buildings constructed in an earthquake-prone environment, a rigid structure will crack and break under the stress. Modern earthquake-proof buildings, on the other hand, use a flexible structure that is strong, yet able to give with the impact. Similarly, the structure you set up needs to be flexible, not rigid.

### Plank 6. DISCIPLINE

Use respectful forms of discipline to enforce limits. Avoid discipline that is too harsh but do not fail to discipline when it's needed. There is an interaction between discipline, empathy, and problem solving. Use this understanding to teach your child to live within limits while allowing his/her needs to be met at the same time.

### Plank 7. PROBLEMS

Teach your child to solve problems. Help him/her identify alternative solutions and anticipate consequences. Teach your child to identify feelings as well as desires. Provide opportunities that teach the child about empathy.

### Plank 8. RESOURCES

Recognize that sometimes you need help to tame a spirited child. Find out where help is available in your community. Possibilities include school, church, recreational leagues, health professionals, family, friends, etc.

### Summary

It takes time to tame a spirited child. It can't be done overnight, and it can't be done without committing effort and energy to the process. But the payoff comes in knowing that you have made a huge contribution to your child — and to every person that child will come into contact with throughout the rest of his/her life!

The payoff also comes in the deep understanding that emerges from your relationship with your child. Allowing your child to remain wild not only does a disservice to the child and to others, it robs you of the true joy of parenthood; of really understanding your child and what makes him/her a unique and special person. ■

*Dr. Popkin is the pioneer of the video-based Active Parenting Discussion Program. He is a frequent keynote speaker and guest on shows like "The Oprah Winfrey Show," and "MON-TEL." His newest book, "Taming the Spirited Child: Strategies for parenting challenging children without breaking their spirits" will be available in March 2007, from Simon and Schuster. Visit his website at [www.activeparenting.com](http://www.activeparenting.com). Copyright © 2007.*