

# STRENGTHEN

## It's Their Survival Rope

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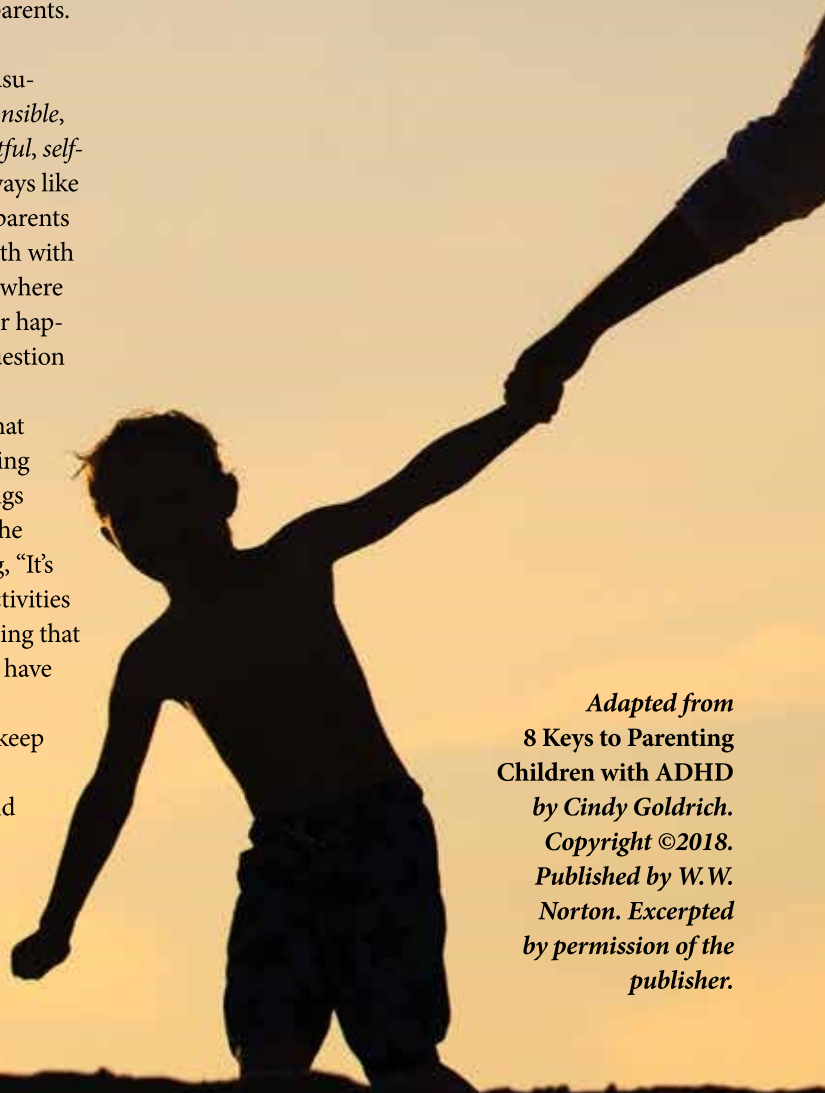
**MOST PARENTS I WORK WITH** are genuinely loving, caring people who want the very best for their kids. Some have gone to extraordinary lengths to become

parents; others had this greatness thrust upon them. Whatever your path, I ask you to take a moment to consider what you really hope to accomplish as parents. What traits do you want your kids to develop?

When I discuss this issue in my workshops, I usually get responses that include traits such as *responsible, independent, successful, resilient, confident, respectful, self-aware, and self-disciplined*. There is one trait I always like to include as well—*emotionally connected*. Most parents want their kids to share a bond of love and warmth with them and with other members of the family. But where does happiness fit in? Who is responsible for their happiness? This is a more complex and important question than it may seem.

Let's say your seven-year-old is disappointed that he can't go to the park because it started thundering and lightning. You offer suggestions of other things you can both do and plan another time to go to the park. Your son, however, starts crying and yelling, "It's not fair." Your attempts to engage him in other activities are met with anger and resistance. He is still arguing that he should get to play in the rain—a situation you have determined is unwise and unsafe.

It's not easy seeing your child sad. Should you keep trying to make him happy by offering more and more ideas? Should you compromise your gut and go outside just for a little so he hopefully sees it's not fun out there anyway (which of course could backfire as he discovers massive puddles for splashing in!). That depends on your



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# CONNECTION



goal—making him happy in the short term... or perhaps helping him learn that he *can* and in fact *is responsible* to deal with his disappointment and find a way to be happy.

Certainly, most parents want their kids to be happy. However, when parents feel responsible to make their kids happy, it has the ability to alter what their instincts may tell them to do in the moment. Jonas Salk, inventor of the polio vaccine, once said, “Good parents give their kids roots and wings. Roots to know where home is and wings to fly away and exercise what has been taught them.” Most parents would agree that they are responsible to provide their kids with at least a basic level of food, shelter, and clothing. More than that, I would include an obligation to provide an opportunity to learn, and an emotionally safe and, ideally, loving environment. But what about happiness? And what about guarding your kids from failure or disappointment? For now, I ask you to consider how it feels to *not* be invested in their happiness and success—but rather in helping them develop their coping and regulating skills. It is said that true happiness is derived more from pride in accomplishments than from isolated experiences.

I know from having done this work for a while now that, while for some of you the relationship you have with your child is solid, for others who have been dealing with a “prickly cactus,” it may be difficult to feel close in the moment—even though you know that inside your child lies a warm, sweet, beautiful person. You may have a child who is

“high maintenance,” requiring you to be actively parenting much of the time—correcting, prodding, redirecting, encouraging, soothing, and so forth. This can create a lot of wear and tear on your relationship.

All kids need strong bonds to grow up emotionally healthy. Kids with ADHD are wired differently. They have unique challenges that can sometimes make establishing these bonds more challenging—but no less important *and* rewarding. The world gives kids with ADHD so many negative messages about who they are and how they act. So often, at school and at home, much of the attention these kids receive is negative: “Stop tapping the pencil. Stop running around. Why can’t you pay attention? Get started on your work already! Can’t you think before you act?” On top of the negative messages many children receive from others, some of these kids pile on more negativity by comparing themselves to their peers—knowing, for instance, that they have the intelligence to do just as well in school but can’t seem to show it in their performance. In addition to feeling down about themselves, they can begin to feel pessimistic about their futures.

All the negativity puts such a strain on them. And when they feel stress, it makes their symptoms worse.

Some kids respond to the stress with aggression, others with avoidance. The thing is, just when some kids may be acting in the most challenging, frustrating ways, they need your stability, guidance, and warm nest even more. All kids crave connection with their parents—even when it seems as if they are repelling it. And yes, this goes for teens too! So just as the *foundation* of our home must be *calm*, the *core* of our home must be *connection*.

Nothing is more powerful than the bond between parent and child. Without feeling truly accepted and unconditionally loved, it is very difficult to trust, to take risks, and to expose oneself. Your loving, emotional connection is the most powerful tool you can use to build your child’s immunity to adverse life events, draw out her strengths, teach her life skills, and shape her behavior. It doesn’t do the whole job, but without it the job never gets done right. A true, active connection—a strong bond with you—is your child’s lifeline. You need to make your child’s world feel safe so that she can take a chance on herself. Our kids need to know *we believe in them* and will never stop trying to find ways to help them and understand them. You have the opportunity to truly discover the depths of your own love. It can be transformational.

### **Creating a deep, lasting connection**

It starts, of course, with “*Parent the child you have*.” It is sometimes helpful to remind yourself that ADHD is a neurological disorder. For now, your child is not always able to monitor his own behavior. We will work on help-



ing him modify his behavior a little later on, but for now you need to work on your foundation of building a strong connection so that he can trust and grow as he needs. As a parent, you need to understand how your child thinks, what challenges he faces, and what motivates him. You also need to help *him* understand for himself how his own brains work so that together you can be prepared to face his challenges armed with tools, strategies, and the hopeful perspective that he *can* and *will* achieve.

### **Listen to the song your child is trying to sing**

Each child is born with innate gifts, talents, and passions. Sometimes your child’s interests are not what you would expect—or in truth, desire. And sometimes it may seem that she floats from one thing to the next so frequently that it’s hard to tell *what* she is really interested in. Be patient—these years are for exploration. Very rarely does someone stay with one interest or profession that he or she chose so early on. And if you do have one of those rare kids who is so single-minded, her drive will keep her on track more than your prodding. For now, helping her feel good about who she is and knowing that you are in her corner is more valuable than the activities she chooses to focus on.

Often, parents are guided to start making changes in their kids by focusing on reducing negative behaviors. This will be much more easily accomplished when we start, instead, with building on what *is* working. With all the negative feedback our children receive from themselves and others, we want to create a balance for our kids. We can start doing that by drastically increasing the positive feedback they receive. Remember, your greatest role as a parent is to form a strong connection with your child to help support him in his growth.

How do we cement that connection with our kids? By providing positive recognition for who they are and what



they do. How? By catching them in the act of being good—even if we have to create the opportunity!

Actively paying attention to our kids' good behavior is not something we always do. We may see them doing something good; we may think about it; it may even make us smile. But do we always let them know they have done something good? Sometimes. But often, parents take this opportunity to do some chores, read a magazine, or make a phone call. After all, why interrupt a good thing? The answer is simple—because positive reinforcement and praise not only build a kid's self-esteem but also serve to strengthen the bond between you and your child. Kids notice when you have more time for them when they are acting out than when they are playing peacefully. The dishes may seem important to do when they are playing nicely, but suddenly they are not as important when you hear fighting going on. Be careful not to have time for them only when they are in need of correction. It's about the relationship, not just giving them attention.

### Encouragement—not just simple praise

Praise has the ability to build self-esteem, autonomy, self-reliance, self-awareness, and motivation for learning more. But praise can also be viewed as manipulative. While very young children are

likely to take praise at face value, older children may become suspicious if it does not feel true and heart felt. Tell a child he is doing “great” when he has perhaps become more self-aware and is cognizant of others' performance, and he may not accept your comment as genuine. Praise can also unintentionally reduce a child's motivation and optimism in his ability to learn and succeed, as I will show shortly.

For praise to be effective in helping your child learn and grow, it must focus on specific feedback about his effort and intent, not just the outcome. Kids with ADHD have lower levels of dopamine, causing an understimulation in the reward and motivation centers in the brain. Some kids aren't as motivated by pleasing others, so praise in itself may not be a motivator unless it provides feedback they find useful.

Praise also can have a powerful impact on a child's “*mindset*” for learning. Carol Dweck, a researcher in the field of motivation, found that the words we use in commenting on kids' work can greatly affect their motivation and effort in learning. During a research study on typical seventh-grade students, she administered a series of puzzles that were easy enough for all the children to do fairly well. She randomly divided the group. Half of the students were praised for their *intelligence* and told, “You must be smart at this.” The other



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## Guiding Thoughts

- Being connected gives you the best opportunity to teach your child and help your child shape his or her behavior.
- There cannot be enough quality time without spending quantity time.
- Negative feedback may stop behavior, but positive feedback can help improve behavior.
- Praise with impact: Notice, Name, and Nurture.

students were praised for their *effort* and told, “You must have worked really hard.” The results were very clear.

Those who had been praised for their effort welcomed more challenging puzzles and spent more time working on them, while those who had been praised for their intelligence became reluctant to tackle more challenging puzzles for fear of not looking smart and of risking embarrassment. In subsequent tests, they did more poorly than their peers who had been praised for their effort, ostensibly because they did not believe *their* effort was the crucial variable, so they did not work as hard or as long. She found that when we praise kids for their intelligence, looking intelligent becomes the focus, so they do not take risks that may lead to mistakes.

If we want to help our kids develop a “*growth mindset*,” one where they believe that their intelligence and expertise can be developed through their effort and learning, then we must be careful to comment on their *process* more than their *result*. Their effort in many cases is far more important than the outcome. It is steps on the path-way, forward movement.

## Building connection

Deepening your connection and bond with your child takes time. I suggest that you actively plan to spend one-on-one time with your child. Aim to spend twenty to thirty minutes with your child three times each week for the next three weeks. This may seem unreachable—only you know what is really possible. Just keep in mind that there cannot be enough *quality time* without spending *quantity time*. So get ready to spend some terrific time with your child, whom you love and want to nourish. Don’t worry about shaping and changing your child’s behavior during this special time; think instead about shaping and changing your relationship together. It’s so vital for you both to have these positive experiences to fall back on when things become strained or stressful. Actively spending joyful time to break some of the stress also gives you the chance to accentuate the positive. Celebrate who your child is, ADHD and all—his energy, creativity, uniqueness, and so forth. Spending one-on-one time with your child creates an opportunity for you to:

- Get to know your child in deeper and richer ways than you may have known him or her before
- Deepen your connection with your child—to build trust and love and create wonderful opportunities to learn about each other
- Learn more about your child’s interests, fears, concerns, styles, and motivations
- Catch your child in the act of doing positive things that you can comment about. Remember: *Notice, Name, and Nourish!*

We all need to feel special and valued. What better way to say to your child, “I love you and love just being with you” than to tell him or her, “Let’s make sure we put aside special time for us together!” After all, play is really kids’ main way of communicating. That’s when all the good stuff comes out. It certainly doesn’t come out after school. “How was your day?” “Fine.” “What did you learn?” “Nothing.” It’s usually not until bedtime when you really get to hear about the fight they had or the problem with the teacher! In fact, I strongly recommend that for the first ten minutes after they come home from school, you don’t even ask them specifics about the day. Certainly, if they initiate it, go with their direction. But be aware that they may need a break from the stress of their day and a chance to unwind a bit (and refuel), just as grown-ups do.

Just follow these guidelines for your one-on-one time together and enjoy!

- Tell your child that you would like to spend special “one-on-one” time with her. Let her know when and how long you are planning to spend with her. No, this



doesn't mean you won't spend other time with her—this is just a special time that you both get to look forward to together. For older children and teens of course, you will choose a time together.

- No other children can be involved in this time—this is your special time with one child. If you have more than one child, plan separate time for each one.
- Let your child choose what you will do together. This is a great time to help her explore her interests. Try to avoid TV, as it is primarily a passive activity, but video games that are interactive are acceptable. If you feel it might be helpful, give your child a few choices of activities you think will appeal to her.
- Refrain from giving directions, making corrections, or giving instruction during the activity. Ask questions if you are curious, but not to direct the activity. You want this activity to be time led by your child.
- This should be nonjudgmental, nonteaching time. Make only positive, neutral, or descriptive comments. (This is easier said than done.)
- Ignore minor misbehaviors. Determine within yourself whether the behavior is merely irritating or more serious. If it

is minor, briefly ignore it until the behavior stops. Then make a positive comment. If it is more serious, then stop the exercise and correct the behavior. If you need to end the time together completely, let your child know that you will spend one-on-one time with her again tomorrow (or whenever you have determined) and that the next time will go better.

Relax and enjoy—there is nothing that needs to be accomplished other than a positive experience with your child. Show interest in what your child is interested in.

Be patient and forgiving with yourself if it doesn't go perfectly the first few times. Just stay with it and adjust what you need to. **A**

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**Cindy Goldrich, EdM, ACAC**, is a mental health counselor, certified ADHD coach and teacher trainer. She is the author of *8 Keys for Parenting Children with ADHD* and the creator of the workshop series *Calm and Connected: Parenting Children with ADHD*®, designed to teach parents and caregivers how to manage and support their children's unique needs successfully. Her workshops are offered nationwide by her staff of trained ADHD parent coaches. She is also a recognized keynote speaker and provides professional development for school districts nationwide, addressing how ADHD and executive function deficits impact children and how to help boost behavior and performance in school and at home. Through her ADHD Parent Coach Academy, she trains other professionals to become ADHD parent coaches.



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**LOOKS**  
*and my bad grades.*

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