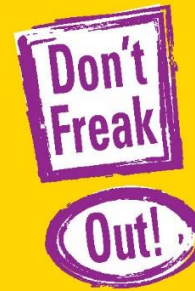


"A great way to avoid  
nightly homework wars!"

Thomas W. Phelan, PhD,  
author of *1-2-3 Magic* & *Surviving Your Adolescents*



**NEIL MCNERNEY, M.Ed., LPC**

# **HOME WORK**

**A Parent's Guide  
to Helping Out  
without  
Freaking Out**

# Homework:

*A Parent's Guide To Helping Out*

*Without*

*Freaking Out!*

By Neil McNerney, M.Ed., LPC

## Excerpt of Chapter 8

### The Mistakes We Make As Parents

*This Book Is Dedicated to My Wife*

***Colleen***

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## **Chapter 8: The Mistakes We Make As Parents**

Yes, I know—when do we NOT make mistakes as parents!? It seems I find myself making mistakes multiple times a day when it comes to parenting my kids. I have had to learn to not sweat the small mistakes that we all make as parents. In this chapter, though, I will focus on some general assumptions and mistakes we make about our kids that, if we think a bit differently, might yield some great results.

### **Mistake #1: The Heredity Assumption**

What we know about intelligence is that many parts of it are inheritable. Generally, smart parents will have smart kids. So the likelihood of success is much better for kids born of smart parents. But there are lots of other factors working here. We aren't just talking about intelligence; we are also talking about achievement, which is a completely different story.

The likelihood that a high achieving parent is also going to have a high achieving child is statistically and genetically improbable. There are some traits that will transfer, especially intelligence, but the drive that has gotten you where you are in life probably has less to do with genetics than it has to do with circumstances. I hear from many successful people that the reason they are so driven to succeed is because they came from a family that was NOT successful. They were driven to be better than their parents.

My childhood is a case in point, but maybe not the way you would expect. My parents were born in the late twenties and survived a childhood in the midst of the depression, both in very poor parts of Pittsburgh. I was blessed in a number of ways by having them as parents, including the fact that they were both very smart. In addition, they were both determined to do whatever it took to be successful. My mother rose in the executive ranks at the Ritz-Carlton by her late twenties. My father returned from World War II and took advantage of the G.I. Bill to get three college degrees. They both continued to be successful, both in status and in finances. My mother was a very creative thinker. In fact, she invented the “wreath hanger,” that piece of sheet metal that goes over doors so you don’t need to use a nail on metal doors.

I was raised in an upper middle class home in suburbia, never having to worry about food, or rent, or clothes. My parents still had the “depression era” mentality, so we lived frugally, but comfortably.

I am thankful that I inherited their intelligence, but I did not inherit their drive and ambition. By the time I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I was the classic underachiever, getting the minimum grades necessary so that privileges weren’t taken away. I had no desire to get straight A’s. I would search for the sweet spot where I could do as little work as possible without being punished. It wasn’t necessary for me to be “driven” as I was under the naive assumption that the comfortable life was easy to get. Of course I learned the hard way later in life why that’s not the case, but I learned it on my own.

No amount of lecturing from my parents convinced me that it was hard out there in the real world.

Today's kids are the same way. Many of us have given our children innumerable opportunities. I think it's a mistake to think they will just pick up those opportunities and run with them.

### **Try Something Different**

The main tool you can use to help with this is to watch how you think about your kids and then ask yourself: "Are my thoughts about my kids helping the situation?" For example:

"I have given so much to my kids. They should understand and appreciate these sacrifices and work harder."

In my opinion, the anger that these types of thoughts produces cause more problems than solutions. It might be true, but focusing on how much we give to our kids and the lack of gratitude just makes us feel worse—and it doesn't help our kids at all.

Instead, try to adjust your thoughts to something that might be more productive:

"I'm concerned about my kid's lack of initiative. What I can do to increase it?"



Do you hear the difference? The first one is focused on our sacrifices and their poor intentions. The second one focuses only on their behavior.

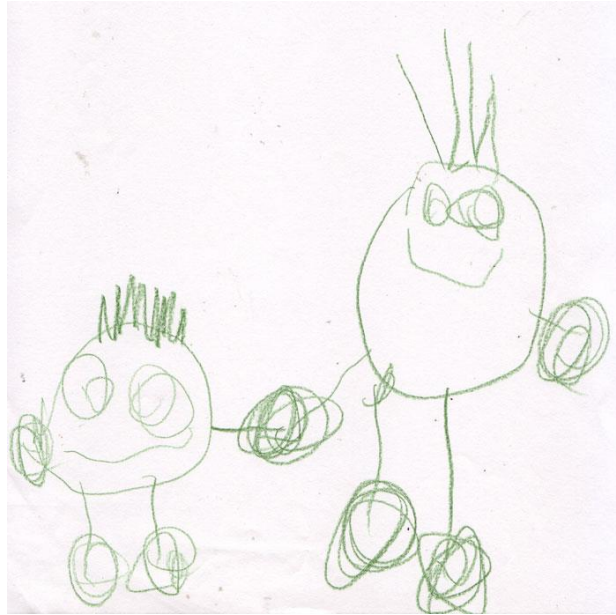
By focusing only on their behavior, we can then be much more clear about possible responses. Calm, clear thinking produces much better solutions than worried, muddled thinking.

Remember: Passion and determination might not be hereditary.

### **Mistake #2: Forgetting That Your Child Wants to Succeed**

Regardless of how bad a student might be performing, every child has an inherent desire for success. The problem is when we forget this.

My daughter recently received in the mail a drawing from her 3-year-old cousin. It was a picture of my daughter and her cousin playing. It was a typical picture drawn by a 3-year-old: legs drawn right from the head, no body at all, just everything coming out of the face.



By the time of our next visit with him a few months later, his pictures had changed quite a bit. Everyone now had bodies! Instead of Megahead, the drawings began to look more like stick figures, but with all the right parts.



What do we know about our cousin? Well, we can't be sure quite yet if he will be a portrait artist. But we know he has the same desire all kids have: To improve,

improve, improve. He wants to get better at drawing. Over time, his hand gets steadier, and his eye and brain get better at taking what he sees and putting it on paper.

He wants to improve.

This is crucial for us to keep in mind when thinking about our kids’ schoolwork. Every single one of them wants to improve—even if it *looks* like they don’t.

For example, take a look at a typical conversation that happens in my office:

Mom: “You got another C in math. What do you have to say about that?”

Son: “It’s just a C.”

Mom: “What do you mean, ‘just a C?’ I thought you said math was easy for you.”

Son: “A C is average, Mom. Can’t you just be happy with average once in a while?”

Mom: “You are not an average student...”

Son: “Every parent says that. Every parent thinks their kid is above average. One thing I did learn in math is that everyone can’t be above average!”

Now, I was very impressed with this kid’s ability to keep up with his mother, to listen carefully what she said, and find a way to turn the conversation so that he ended up

looking good. Because for him, that is the main point of the exchange: to end up not looking foolish and to not lose face.

I then excused his mother for a bit and talked with him about the school situation.

“I hate it when she does that to me. She makes it sound like I’m an idiot and can’t do anything right,” he told me. “She always does this whenever I screw up. I know what she wants me to say, but I’m not going to give her the satisfaction.”

I’m not going to give her the satisfaction.

This is the key to understanding the disconnect that happens when kids and parents discuss grades. We think what they are saying about their grades is actually what they think. Often times, it is not what they think. It’s what they are saying at the moment to try to get the upper hand in the conversation.

I’m going to repeat that: Just because your child is saying “A C is OK” does not necessarily mean that he really thinks that. He is saying it because you are his parent.

As we continued talking, he told me, “Of course I want to get a better grade in math. I want to be an engineer and I know I need to do better. I don’t know what happened this quarter.”

“What do you think happened?”

“I think I was too confident. I did really well in Algebra 1 and I thought Algebra 2 would be really easy. And it was. I was getting good grades on tests and quizzes, but I didn’t do the homework very much. I didn’t need to, since I understood it so well. But that really hurt my grade.”

“So what do you want to do different this quarter?”

“Do the homework, even if it’s boring and I already understand the work.”

“When your mom was in here, it sounded like you were fine with a C. Why didn’t you say this when your mom was in the room?”

He paused. I could sense he hadn’t really considered why he said one thing to his mother and then said something completely different to me. His answer was very telling:

“It’s always a fight with my parents when it comes to school. They freak out so quickly when it looks like I’m slipping. I’m tired of saying, ‘Yes mom, you’re right. I’m a loser and need to do better.’ I’m not a loser.”

He paused, and I could sense he was thinking about something he might not have realized before:

“I just wish that it felt like we were on the same team. It always feels like a battle when we talk about school. And the thing about battles is that there is always a

winner. And always a loser. And I'm pretty good these days at winning these battles," he said with a small smile.

This example is classic when dealing with kids who are struggling with something in their lives: What they tell their parents might not be what is really going on inside. It is so important for them to be viewed in a positive light by their parents, they will try to look good regardless of the situation. So, just because your child says that being an underachiever is OK, that is probably not what he is actually thinking.

### **Try Something Different**

1. Try to keep in the back of your mind the fact that your child wants to succeed. Regardless of what is coming out of his mouth or what you see in his behavior, he wants to succeed. Your first job is to convince yourself of this. Because if we don't have an assumption of success, it is going to be very hard to be a leader in our children's lives.

2. Remember that when your child is talking to you, that fact that you are a parent is a huge issue. Any answer they give will be colored by that relationship. Never forget the power of parental judgment, good or bad.

### **Mistake #3: Trying to Be "In Control" Instead of Trying to Be "Under Control"**

One of the best ways to help your child be successful in school is to be under control. Notice that I didn’t use the term “in control,” but “*under* control.” The difference is huge. By “under control,” I mean that *you* are in control of *yourself*, instead of someone else being in control of you.

When you are under control, you are saying that, regardless of what grades your child earns, regardless of how much homework gets done, you will decide how you feel and how you react.

The benefits of staying calm, regardless of what happens, are many:

Why do we want our kids to do well in school? Seems a pretty obvious question. We want our kids to do well so that they will be successful. When we can stay calm, we are increasing the odds of success. The calmer I am, the more likely my kids’ energies will be focused on their own actions instead of mine.

If I am not calm, then their thoughts and emotions are focused on me, instead. My emotional reactivity is saying to them, “Calm me down.” So, instead of thinking about doing well in school for their own success, they think they should do well in school to change our emotions. I know that I’m sounding like a broken record, but this point bears repeating. I have learned that when I am over reacting to a situation with my kids, I am basically saying “Calm Me Down!”

The reality is that we cannot control our kids without it costing us, and them, dearly. A goal that most parents want is for our kids to have “self-control.” If we are controlling them, then they don’t have the chance to exercise self-control.

I remember a teenager, Jordan, who was in my office with his father. Jordan had brought home a D in science. The previous grading period he had earned a C. The grades were going downhill, and his dad was not happy.

“What else should I take away from you to get you to get a better grade? You’ve lost just about everything except the clothes on your back. How else can I make my point?”

“You made your point,” Jordan said to his dad. “You are trying to control me. The only way to do it is your way. But I wonder if I made my point?”

“What point is that? That you want to fail?” said his dad.

“No. The point is that the more you try to control me, the more I will do it my way, even if it means getting worse grades.”

This teen was what is called “oppositionally defiant.” That means he will defy people by doing the opposite of what they want him to do. One of the biggest characteristics of kids who are oppositionally defiant is a strong sense of doing it their way, even if it hurts in the end. I knew what Jordan was thinking: In order for him to stay in control of his own life, he would not submit to his dad’s way of doing things.



This is another example of the classic “cutting off the nose to spite the face” responses. Jordan is saying that it is more important that he be independent than be successful. In fact, later in the session, he said something stunning:

“Actually, I’ve been doing pretty good in History. We are studying the Revolutionary War. I think I’ve found my role model: Patrick Henry. Remember what he said? ‘Give me liberty or give me death!’ He basically said that being his own person—and not under the tyranny of an oppressor—is more important than his own life.”

I was speechless. This kid had just aligned himself with a national hero and compared his father with King George! I wasn’t sure what to do next. I knew that if I tried to convince Jordan that he wasn’t being oppressed and his father wasn’t a tyrant, he would tune me out immediately. My only hope was to help his father to consider how he would become less of a tyrant in Jordan’s eyes—and more of a leader. I help his father see that if he focused on being less controlling, the results would be increased responsibility with Jordan.

### **Try Something Different**

When our kids see us more as tyrants and less as leaders, it’s time to seriously consider what we are doing that gives them that impression. Sometimes it isn’t what we are saying (content), but the way we are saying it (style). Consider becoming less angry and abrupt at these times and more conversational. Try to remember that your main goal is to get “buy in.” You would like to convince your child of the reasons to

try things your way. The words won't matter if the style doesn't allow the words to be absorbed. For more ideas about this, see the discussion in Chapter 5 on being a Consultant.

#### **Mistake #4: Dispensing the Wrong Punishment**

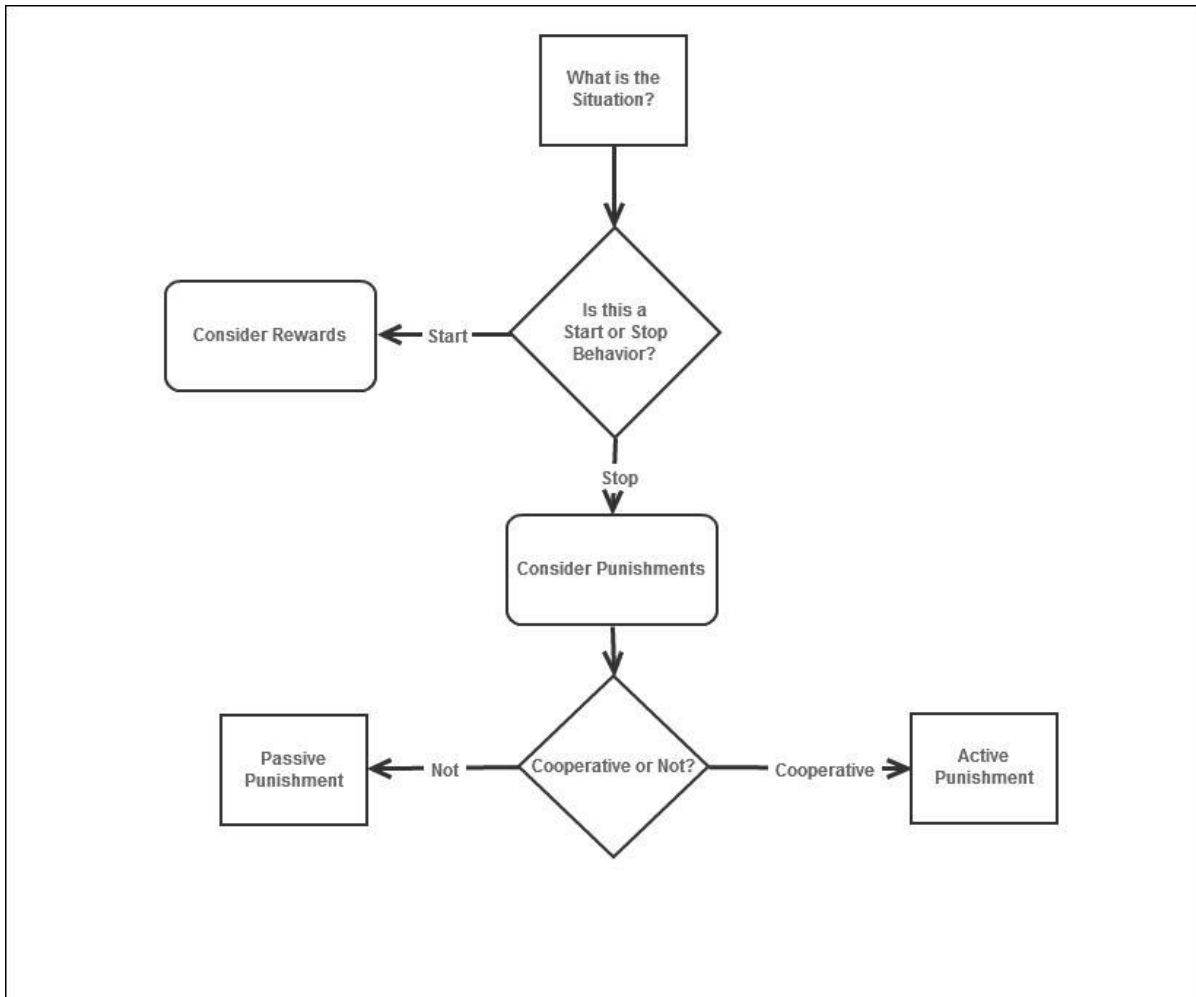
Punishments are a tool we as parents have at our disposal, but sometimes we use that tool in the wrong manner. Just like a hammer used upside-down, if we don't use our tools properly, we are bound to do some damage.

For the third time this year, your son has waited until the last minute to begin a big term project. Out of sheer frustration, you tell him, "That's it. You are grounded for a month." After you calm down, you realize you went overboard.

Now what?

We have all been there. We let our emotions, instead of our principles, dictate our actions. Then we end up regretting our decisions.

Let's go through the decision tree to consider how to best deal with this situation.



You have two choices when you are being the Boss: Rewards and Punishments. The thing we know about getting homework done is that it is a “Start” behavior, so right away we know a punishment will be less effective than a reward.

The second problem is that we are using a punishment that is longer than we would ever want to enforce. Do you really want a resentful, angry kid around your house for a month? One thing we know about punishments is this: They begin to lose effectiveness within 24 hours. Just think about how ineffective 24+ days will be!

## **Try Something Different**

Let's assume you have gone overboard. What's next? I've seen many parents use the "you can work off the punishment" technique—with limited success. I am not sure exactly why, but I have rarely seen this approach work. I think the child knows what we are up to and will put in the minimum effort to get the punishment to go away. In fact, many kids will admit they like the "grounded for a month" punishment because they know the parents will not enforce it.

My suggestion? Just admit your mistake, tell them the new plan, and move on. I'm amazed at how many parents have trouble telling their kids that they have made a mistake. I promise that nothing tragic will happen in admitting you are human. In fact, I believe the more we admit our mistakes in front of our children, the more likely it will be that they will talk about their own mistakes with us. This would limit them having to save face with us.

### ***Mistake #5: I Stopped Taking My Parenting Job Seriously and I Started Taking It Personally***

We should take our parenting job seriously. Being such a major influence on a child's life is extremely important. If we don't take it seriously, we are not doing all we should for our kids. But when we take it personally, we have a tendency to get confused, hurt, angry—and we become much less effective.

Watching my son at football practice, I was reminded of a word I hadn’t used for quite a while. The coach kept telling the players to lower their center of gravity. Problem was, the kids had no idea what he was talking about! They were about 9 years old and hadn’t learned about gravity yet! What he was trying to teach them was to squat down a little lower so it would be harder for the opponent to push them around.

This got me to thinking about the concept of the gravitational pull our children have on us. I don’t mean the real gravitational pull, but the emotional pull they have on us. If you remember your high school science, here’s the concept in shorthand: the more massive object will have a greater pull on the less massive object. Therefore, the less massive object will tend to be much more affected than the more massive one. If you think of planets, it means the less massive object will begin to orbit around the more massive one.

We have been told, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, that our kids should be the most important thing in our lives. That the minute we have kids, our center of gravity should completely shift and we should begin to orbit ourselves around our children. And in the beginning, that certainly is the case. Their lives take complete precedence. They call the shots.

But as our kids move into the school years, I think our center of gravity should shift much more back to ourselves and not as much as it was on our kids. If we can find a

way to balance the gravity issue so that our kids don't have as much affect on us emotionally, I think our ability to be strong leaders in their lives will increase a lot.

What happens if we don't shift our center of gravity? Then our kids become our whole lives. As Hal Runkel writes in *ScreamFree Parenting*:

“You cannot orbit around your child without giving her the distinct impression that the world revolves around her. And then you act surprised when she acts both selfish and incapable. Homework hoverers forget whose homework it really is. As you learn to calm your own anxiety about her performance, you do not have to pick up this gauntlet.”

When we take our kids' actions too personally, it is because we have gotten a bit too emotionally close to them. One of the great things about being a human is balancing the fact that we are individuals, and at the same time we are driven to connect with others. But when we over-connect, we lose our sense of self.

### **Try Something Different**

In the long run, the more we take our kids' actions personally, the more it will backfire on us—and ultimately on our kids as well. Whenever I start to feel parental anxiety creep up on me, I ask myself, “Am I taking this seriously or personally?” That one question has saved many a conversation between me and my kids. Plus, it then calms me down enough to carefully consider what my best leadership action should be.

## **Mistake #6: Misusing Rewards and Punishments**

OK, I probably know what you are thinking: “Of course the reason for rewards and punishments is to change behavior. Why else would I do it?” Bear with me for a minute as I explain my take on this subject.

Our kids, especially the ones who have a tendency toward independence, have a very strong radar when it comes to what we want them to do. If they get the feeling that we really want them to do something, they will often dig in their heels to the point where they suffer.

“Dad can make me go upstairs to do my homework, but he can’t actually make me do it.”

Even though your child wants to do well in school, if you try too hard, it then becomes a power struggle, which you will lose.

In my opinion, the reason we have consequences for our kids is not to change their behavior, but to teach them about life. Life, in general, works like this:

If you do well, good things will happen. If you do poorly, bad things will happen.

Our job is to lead our children to an understanding of this. Our job is to create situations where we can teach this lesson. If they work hard and get their homework

done, good things might happen. If they slack off and watch TV instead, bad things might happen. This is how we teach them about life.

If we keep our focus on how we should lead, instead of focusing in whether “it’s working,” there is a much better chance that we will stay consistent.

A favorite aspect of my work is travelling to different parts of the country and speaking to parents about the subject of schoolwork. And at least once during each seminar, a parent will respond to a specific piece of advice by saying, “I tried that. It didn’t work.”

This is what our kids love to hear. “I give up.” They have waited us out and we have decided that a certain technique, punishment, or reward doesn’t “work,” so we stop using it.

### **Try Something Different**

I am asking you to stop determining whether you are being effective by looking at the results too quickly. It’s not your job. It’s not your job to wear him down. It’s not your job to “break” him. Your job is to teach him about life.

When you get your homework done by 8 p.m., for example, you get to play video games. That’s the rule, whether it “works” or not. Try to begin measuring whether you are effective based on YOUR actions, not based on the immediate effectiveness of your actions.



## **Mistake #7: Making Decisions Based on Worries Instead of Principles**

There are two major ways to base our actions toward our children: One is by considering our principles; the other is by considering our worries. Most of the time, when we parent based on our worries, we are going to be ineffective.

If you notice your child telling you, “Don’t worry” pretty often, that’s a sign you are basing your decisions on your worries instead of your principles.

I love the analogy used by University of Virginia professor Jonathan Haidt. In his book *The Happiness Hypothesis*, he uses the concept of the elephant and the elephant rider. The elephant is our emotional side and the rider is our logical side. Each side has its own strengths and weaknesses. The elephant is extremely powerful and, when steered in the right direction, can do great work. But when left to his own devices, the elephant can also be very destructive.

The rider, on the other hand, has very little power in comparison to the elephant. But the rider has something that the elephant doesn’t: the ability to use logic and planning. When the rider uses his logic and planning to steer the elephant’s energy in the right direction, good things can happen.

I would like you to consider that your worries are like the elephant, and your principles are the rider. When you let your worries run the show, without planning and logic, bad things can happen between you and your child. But when you use

planning and logic to harness your worries in the right direction, good things can happen.

### **Don’t Freak Out Summary**

We all make mistakes as parents. How could we *not* make mistakes—it’s the only way to learn how to do things the right way! Keep in mind that our goal is to stop making the same mistakes so often.

### **Don’t Freak Out Exercise**

Think of a schoolwork- related situation that you know is very stressful for you, and write it down here:

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Now, think about the elephant, the pure worry side of you, and write down what the “elephant” side of you might do if there was no rider:

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Now let’s add the rider to the equation. Write down what you think would be the best solution when you have added the additional skills of planning and logic to the equation:

Hopefully, you were able to see that the chances for being an effective leader increases when you take the time to let the rider lead the elephant, instead of the rider holding on for dear life as the elephant barrels through the village!

## Acknowledgements

Writing this book was exactly what I thought it would be: The easiest thing I have done—and the hardest thing I have done. Depending on the day (or the week), it either flowed like water or was stuck like granite. There are many people I would like to acknowledge who helped it along and kept me going when the motivation was, well, granite-like.

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To all the families I have had the pleasure to know these past 20 years; this book is due to their hard work and dedication to themselves and their futures. These families shared countless examples and pieces of advice. My duty is to share those great pearls of wisdom so that others can gain from them.