

Especially For Parents:

**20 Things You *Absolutely* Need To
Know If You Are Considering
Counseling Or Medication For
*Your Child***

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1. How to get started if you are considering counseling for your child

If you are a parent considering counseling for your child, you may be confused about which direction to pursue. Someone has probably recommended counseling or medication, but you are not quite comfortable with either. You know your family needs some help — but where do you start? What I have found to be most helpful is interviewing potential counselors or therapists. Choosing a counselor is an important decision for you to make, and you need to know what credentials, experience and framework the counselor works with. Some key questions to ask in an interview are:

- What type of experience do you have working with children with issues like my child's? (Then describe your child's needs.)

- Will you communicate with my child's school staff if you have ideas that might help him/her at school?
- I have been told to take my child to a doctor to put him on meds, but I don't know if that is the best idea. How do I know if my child really needs meds?
- I am feeling overwhelmed, frustrated and scared because I don't know how to help my child. I feel guilty over our continuous battles. Do you work with parents as well as children?
- What type of results have you had with other children who have issues similar to those of my son or daughter?

The best thing you can do to get started is to educate yourself regarding what resources are available. You have the right and responsibility to make informed decisions, and every counselor should be happy to inform you of his or her approach before getting started.

2. How to choose an approach that makes sense for your child

There are many approaches used by counselors, therapists and coaches to help children improve their behavior. Depending on your child's needs, you could hear several different suggestions promising similar results.

Although there are several different paths to the desired result, I would like to introduce you to an approach that is somewhat newer, yet has been extremely effective. This approach actually grew out of frustration with the number of children on medications, the lack of long-standing results with treatment, and the fact that many children are given a diagnosis only to ensure insurance coverage of their counseling. The approach I use also advocates a pretty dramatic change in the way child behavioral problems are viewed. It looks more closely at the *root* of the problem for

challenging children — *their relationships* — and starts treatment there. It also pulls from other approaches in hopes of building each child up from the inside out. It has helped to keep a lot of children off unnecessary medication, to improve their academic scores, to decrease their behavioral problems at school, and most importantly, it has helped to teach challenging children how to use their intensity in a way that works *for* them, rather than against. This innovative approach is called *The Nurtured Heart Approach*™.

I have gained over 12 years of experience working with challenging children and their families. In that time, I have been exposed to several different approaches that are effective, but no other approach has been able to reach *all* children, challenging or not, with a wide range of mental, emotional and behavioral disabilities. Let me take some time to introduce you to this approach. Perhaps, like most parents, you are

confused as to why your child acts the way she/he does: you might have a hard time relating because you didn't act out as a child, or your parents' methods of discipline worked to get the behavior to stop. This confusion leaves parents with uncomfortable feelings like anger, resentment, confusion and guilt. Not knowing or understanding why your child behaves the way she/he does leads to feelings of helplessness. It is very difficult to parent children while experiencing these feelings.

I believe it is important for parents to develop an understanding of and empathy for their children, especially in the midst of problematic behavior. I spend a great deal of time teaching and coaching parents to help equip them with the right tools for this important job. The more understanding you have, the more effective you will be as a parent.

3. The approach I recommend and why

I use *The Nurtured Heart Approach*™ (NHA) because I have found it to be the most effective approach to working with challenging children. This approach is founded on the core principle of the dynamic, or relationship, between children and the significant adults in their lives (parents, caregivers, teachers). It works tirelessly to help adults create **time IN** and decrease negativity, while providing clear and strict limits and consequences. Many parenting approaches work on using consequences and rewards to change behavior, but I have found them to be minimally successful, because they do nothing to enhance a child's self-esteem or confidence. If children are trained to behave well only because they get something in return, they will not likely carry over that behavior into environments where there is no reward to be earned.

The NHA, by contrast, aims to motivate children *internally* by building them up from the inside out, so that they might become more aware of the skills and strengths they have to offer the world. They learn that the “prize” they can earn is emotionally nutritious and successful relationships with others.

4. Video game therapy?

The NHA is a parenting approach that was originally designed for working with challenging and intense children. However, when schools became interested and applied it in their setting, they saw it had tremendous impact on all the students. Because the NHA is founded on the principle that all children have something to offer this world and it is our job, as the significant adults in their lives, to help them reach their potential, it makes perfect sense to use it with everyone.

The NHA has three major tenets:

1. To create emotionally rich time “in” with the child
2. To de-energize negative behavior
3. To provide strict limits and rules

As parents and teachers begin to learn strategies for incorporating these tenets into their home and classroom, they quickly realize the profound effect it has on all children.

Let me clarify, using a familiar analogy. When you are parenting according to the NHA, your responses are like a video game's: if children successfully follow the rules of the game, they are rewarded with a lot of *energy* in the form of tons of sensory messages communicating their success. The screen flashes, things blow up, credits accumulate, etc. If they break the rules of the game, however, it gives them *no energy*: it simply starts over and provides an opportunity to

try again. In essence, it delivers a boring, but quick, time-out. The player therefore has only positive incentives to follow the rules in order to receive lots of payoffs. The attraction of breaking rules is minimal or absent. Similarly, we want to teach parents how to create a relational experience with their challenging child by creating an *emotionally nutritious* relationship with them when they are succeeding and by delivering boring time-outs when they are not. Children can quickly learn there is really nothing to be gained by breaking the rules.



5. Why this approach is so effective with challenging children



When children live their lives through adversity, they form the impression that they get more out of life by **NOT** doing things. This impression is reinforced each time their parents relate and connect to them within the context of adversity.

Traditional parenting techniques do not work with intense and difficult children and, in fact, often make the situation worse. They focus only on the *problem* and feed the cycle of adversarial

behavior. Children easily become confused about what is a reward and what is a punishment. Not surprisingly, when the parent/child relationship is based on problems, all you get is a problematic relationship.

In The Nurtured Heart Approach™, the goal is to send the message that there is no longer anything to be gained from being adversarial. We communicate this by laying out clear and reasonable consequences, by refusing to energize negativity, and by creating a steady stream of emotional nutrition through *time-in*. Because the relationship is the prize, and the child is fully experiencing connection and nurturing within it, there is no longer any motivation to misbehave. Just imagine some of your power struggles with your child: if you were not there to exchange energy with him or her, would she/he continue the battle?

6. Toys 'R' Us

Believe it or not, *you* (the significant adult in your child's life) are the *PRIZE*. You are the ultimate entertainment center. You have more to offer than any video game or toy ever will. Your children were created to be in relationships with you. They *need* you. The NHA teaches us how to use this relational necessity to transform challenging behavior. As you learn how to be the prize, you will learn how to better understand their needs and behavior.



7. The real reason children act out

Consider asking yourself these questions: “What is the payoff for my child to continue to demonstrate problematic behavior?” and “How do others react to my child when he/she behaves a certain way?” Beware of “Why” questions, which tend to lead you in circles and are not as important as you might think. All children are created to be in relationships with adults. They are dependant upon these relationships for their very survival. Children have a need to belong as well. Often times, children use behavior to ensure that they have meaning, purpose, and belonging and that they are recognized by their parents. Children quickly learn they cannot be ignored when they have problems. Their behavior is a very creative way for them to get their needs met. The Nurtured Heart Approach™ looks closely at this “exchange of energy” to help parents discern what is the most effective way to help their children make better decisions.

8. “Exchange of Energy”? What do you mean?

An “exchange of energy” refers to any signal we adults give kids in response to their behavior. It can be eye contact, posture changes, verbal reprimands or any other reaction that communicates to the child that we are paying attention to him or her. Challenging children often are looking for, and even craving, large doses of energy. More often than not, we give the biggest doses to kids when they have problems. This can inadvertently send the message to the child that we are more emotionally alive and connected with them when they have problems. Viewing your child’s behavior through these lenses, doesn’t it make sense that he/she would continue the behaviors that attract the most attention?

9. How to know if your child really needs medication



This is the 20-million-dollar question. Having worked in the psychiatric and educational field for the past 13 years, I realize this is a touchy subject. I have yet to meet a parent who is excited

when someone of influence recommends that their child should begin taking medication. I have also found many children do not respond well to meds, whether because they didn't need them or because they were prescribed the wrong medication. Medication can easily become the front line to treatment, especially given the tremendous influence of insurance companies. At the same time, I have worked with several children who have clearly benefited from medication. So what should *you* do?

There are two routes to consider when weighing this question:

1. Put your child on medication and see if it helps.
2. Invest in some good parent counseling or coaching equipping *you* with some different strategies, and then see whether your child's behavior can be influenced that way.

I would definitely recommend trying Option 2 first, since it helps you as the parent feel as though you have done everything you can before trying medication. The Nurtured Heart Approach™ (NHA) is very effective at helping parents answer their questions about whether medications are necessary. With a few simple parenting tools, you can get a clearer picture of whether or not your child might benefit from medication.

10. Be careful of the message you send to your child if medication is needed

Whether your child is already on medication or it is still under consideration, be careful of the underlying messages you might be sending: you don't want your child to think there is something "wrong or shameful" about him or her. Children often get the message that their intensity needs to be controlled or that they have no self-control without medication. This belief has the potential to weaken children from the inside as they worry that nobody can handle their intensity, and therefore that it must be feared. Unfortunately, I hear over and over children's excuses that they just forgot to take their meds one day and should be given a pass. Conversely, we don't want to give the medication the credit when a child makes a *good* decision. The truth is, whether or not kids are on meds, they still have the final say over whether they are going to follow the rules.

11. Stage 1: Create rich time “in”

This is the first, and most essential, tenet of the NHA. If this leg is not mastered first, then the rest of the approach will fail. Children who are addicted to negative emotional energy need to have the *experience* of getting their emotional needs met when they are doing well. They need to know there is something to be *missed* — namely, emotionally healthy relationships — when they are misbehaving, rather than something to be *gained* — namely, emotionally negative attention — by misbehaving. There are a few simple techniques to utilize when you are learning this step. The key is to be *in the moment* as much as possible, giving kids clear, descriptive feedback regarding what they are doing well.

12. Stage 2: De-energize negativity

A common misconception with this phase is that it means adults should “ignore negative behavior.” This couldn’t be further from the truth. The *last* thing children need is for you to turn your back on them when they are breaking rules. (I will have more to say about this in a moment.) De-energizing negativity refers to not “leaking” emotions when rules are broken. Although you may feel frustrated, angry or annoyed, it is imperative that the “energy-challenged” child does not see your emotion; you could inadvertently send the message that there is a payoff for the child to continue. The sooner children realize there is little to be gained for misbehaving, the sooner they will stop. The goal is for them to realize that their misbehavior is useless and has no purpose.

13. Stage 3: Strict consequences & limits

The word “strict” in no way suggests that you should become mean or cruel. I am not suggesting that you turn into a drill sergeant either: rather, I advise parents to send clear messages to their children conveying their belief and trust that their children *can* follow rules. This clarity means that there should be a consequence every time a rule is broken. We adults shouldn’t give warnings, lectures, redirections or second chances — all of which, by the way, are forms of extra attention and energy payoff for breaking the rules. Rather, we should merely dispense boring time-outs. The goal is to teach kids that everyone makes mistakes and that they are defined *by how they learn and recover* from those mistakes. The duration of the time-out really



depends upon how long it takes for the child to recover; it could go on for just a few seconds or for several minutes. Your focus needs to be on getting the child back to “time-in” and then giving him or her more recognition for recovery.

This stage is confusing at first for most parents, and especially for those who were grounded, spanked, threatened, etc. when *they* were kids. Many of us grew up in a culture where punishment was the norm, namely because it worked. However, if we view consequences as a way to teach children the rules and limits of life, to help them focus on recovering and restoring relationships, and to give them lots of credit and energy when they behave appropriately, I believe we will raise children with more empathy and integrity. Children will *want* to do better because they believe they can.

Traditional punishment tries to curb unwanted behavior by making the consequences painful, in the hopes that children will not want to take the risk. Unfortunately, a lot of times those punishments are loaded with intense emotions and negative energy, and they can actually reinforce a child's challenging behavior. The NHA teaches that active punishment does little to honor the heart of the child.



14. The impact of yelling and negativity on your child's self-esteem

All children have a belief system about themselves. It is mostly formed from the feedback they get from those around them. If there is constant yelling and negativity surrounding a child's behavior, there is a good chance that his/her self-esteem is going to be impacted. By giving lots of emotional and relationship energy to behavioral problems, a parent sends a very confusing message to the child, effectively saying, "You are more important to me when you have problems." This message is rarely intentional. However, your child craves emotional energy and attention from you. If kids get big doses when they have problems, they learn very quickly to continue their behaviors. This process, no doubt, has an effect on a child's self-esteem.

15. Does praise help or make things worse?

There is a big difference between praise and encouragement, although these words are often interchanged. Praise is generally given when a parent approves of a child's behavior; it is more about the parent's feeling than anything else. Encouragement, on the other hand, is more about reflecting the child's behavior — and what it means about her/him as a person — back to the child. For example, if your child comes home with an A on a test, you could say:

- “Way to go, Johnny! I am so proud of you.”
(Praise)
- “Johnny, you showed me your test that you got an A on. You studied hard, which shows good study skills. I can see you are proud of your work!” (Encouragement)

Encouragement allows children to build self-awareness of their own strengths, whereas praise can lead to a child's always trying to please others and depending upon their evaluation.

16. From self-esteem to “Inner Wealth”

You can take your child's self-esteem to a new level. We call this “Inner Wealth.” Inner wealth refers to the belief system of a child who thinks “I have what it takes to be successful, despite life's challenges.” This attitude is so imperative for children today. Whether bombarded by every-day temptations or challenged by a disability or disorder, children need to be stronger on the inside now more than ever. The NHA provides very specific strategies to help you build children's inner wealth and increase their likelihood of success in settings outside of your home. These strategies include encouragement, recognition of character and empathy as a means to reach the heart of the child. We are looking to be specific about what we see in our children and to be honest about who they are.



17. Why the NHA makes perfect sense for the whole family

I have found that it is often easier for families to implement the NHA with their whole family instead of just “the difficult one” for several reasons: for one, the “good” kids in the family tend to become resentful of the new relationship that you are creating with the challenging child and may act out to get in on some of the nurturing. For this reason, we recommend implementing the approach within the entire family at its inception. The Golden Rule: The more intense the child, the more intense the intervention. It’s OK if your children get differing levels of intervention — just make sure that all of them are reaping the rewards of this approach.

18. When children behave differently at home than at school: how to encourage success in both settings

The Nurtured Heart Approach™ has been very successfully integrated into homes *and* schools. Since it focuses on developing children's healthy relationships with significant adults, it makes sense that kids would respond to teachers working with this approach as well. Many schools have abandoned their behavior management programs and replaced them with an NHA social curriculum. If the school is not yet implementing or aware of the NHA, however, there are several ways to use a credit system at home which carries over to school. By celebrating and recognizing children for their behavior at school, parents can offer them a great opportunity.



19. What types of services are available for parents?

Parents who are interested in learning more about how to truly become their child's best advocate can consider parent groups, parent coaching, individual counseling sessions, workshops, etc. Since I am an Advanced Trainer for The Nurtured Heart Approach™, I provide parent workshops and parent coaching. The parent coaching model I use to teach the NHA generally is 7 weeks long. Most parents appreciate this style, because the focus is on learning specific skills and accomplishing goals.

The coaching is very structured and has worked for parents willing to try some new things to transform their difficult child's behavior. It is guided by books, workbooks, video and other resources to give you all the tools you need to be successful. My goal is to teach you how to

become your child's best therapist. Phone coaching is also available for those who are not able to make it to in-office sessions.

The NHA really is about recognizing, nurturing and defining the strengths of parents *and* their children. It is not helpful to blame parents or focus on the things that are not working. When parents begin to learn the specific ways to nurture their children's qualities of greatness and to invest energy in them at the right times, they usually see immediate results. The parents get the credit, and the children experience a deeper connection with their parents based on their success. Honor, peace and love replace hopelessness, anger and frustration.

20. Where to go to get more information on The Nurtured Heart Approach™

Visit www.thecompass4life.com. As an advanced trainer for the NHA, I have set up valuable information on my website that will help guide you in learning more, such as book recommendations, parenting tips and upcoming trainings. If you are feeling like you need some professional coaching or counseling, you can always contact me, and I will be happy to help in any way I can. Most people find it effective to have a coach to help make the initial changes in their perception of their child's behavior.



About the Founder

Dan Peterson, MS, LCPC (Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor), and Advanced Trainer for The Nurtured Heart Approach™, has over a decade of experience working with challenging children in residential and therapeutic day schools, as well as outpatient and community mental health settings. More recently, he has started his own business as a school consultant, parent coach and workshop speaker with the intent of training others in The Nurtured Heart Approach™. He has developed many programs to fit the needs of families, parents and school systems. He especially enjoys designing programs to help adults who work with or have children with behavioral difficulties.

Philosophy

I believe that intense and challenging children use their behavior to communicate their needs and to solve their problems. Unfortunately for them, they often go about doing this in a disruptive way, drawing extra attention to their deficits. The more attention they get, the more likely their behavior will continue, despite the best intentions and interventions of the adults in their lives. My goal is to use the proven techniques of The Nurtured Heart Approach™ to show you how to break this cycle. By tapping into the strengths of the child, you will create successes that might not otherwise exist, instead of suffering through power struggles and frustration. When children begin to experience this new relationship, their behavior, self-esteem and trust immediately improve. This change makes them much more receptive to learning in school and at home. My goal is to help parents, teachers and professionals transform their relationship with children from one that focuses on weakness to one that thrives on success, strength and power.

Mission

The mission of the Compass Program is to provide support for adults who work with or are raising challenging children. Through counseling, consultation and coaching, I provide a variety of different options to give you the tools and guidance you need to create an environment of success. I specialize in working with challenging children and the adults in their lives. Many of these kids have been diagnosed with ADHD, ODD, PDD and other mental health and educational diagnoses. My goal is to introduce an approach that will have a lasting and profound effect on the relationship between you and your child.

Typical Descriptions and Behaviors of Challenging and Intense Children:

- Strong-willed
- Difficulty focusing
- Angry, defiant
- Poor impulse control
- Poor social skills
- Challenges authority
- Sibling rivalry
- Tantrums
- Mood instability
- “No” is never the end
- Stubborn
- Disrespectful
- Struggles at school
- Low self-esteem
- Anxious

Typical Concerns of Parents:

- Uncomfortable with putting child on medication
- Feeling guilty about not being able to “fix” a child’s behavior
- Feeling responsible or like they have done something wrong
- Worried about the future
- Concerned about all the negativity and stress
- Wanting their child to be happy
- Wanting to stop walking on eggshells

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Heart Approach™ visit:
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