

Taming the Spirited Child: Strategies for Parenting Challenging Children without Breaking Their Spirits

by Michael H. Popkin, Ph.D.

Forrest Gump might have observed that kids are like a box of chocolates: you never know what you are going to get. Some are born with a peaceful temperament while others seem to rant and rave 24/7. Some are shy while others are hell on big wheels. Kids can be introspective, extroverted, humorous, aggressive or fearful. Some possess a spirited nature that can test the patience and skill of the most conscientious and skilled parent.

Whether you are a biological parent, a stepparent, a foster parent or any other type of caregiver, there is much about your child that you had nothing to do with creating. What you do with that natural born temperament can be for better or for worse. It can mean the difference between your child using his inborn traits productively or misusing them on the way to self-destruction; whether he winds up in the principal's office or gets a corner office; whether he finds the limelight or the line-up...or something in between.

Do you have a spirited child?

If you saw the movie *Seabiscuit*, you may recall the scene in which this feisty 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 (and spirited) jockey and a wise owner saw potential in this rare creature and found a way to turn him into a champion.

Spirited children are the Seabiscuits of childhood. They can drive us crazy with their energy and antics, but once tamed they have the stuff to succeed. In my years of working with such children (including my own spirited son, Ben) and their parents, I have found five characteristics that best describe these kids who live life with more energy and enthusiasm than their peers. Because these kids go through life in capital letters, bigger and bolder than the rest, I use the acronym CAPPS to describe them. They are more **C**urious, **A**dventurous, **P**owerful, **P**ersistent and **S**ensitive. Sound like anyone you know? If you aren't sure, here's one final clue: their parents tend to find themselves angry a lot, like the time my own mother blew her stack as I ran through the house shooting off my cap gun (another type of CAPPS) 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 who are more curious, adventurous, powerful, persistent and sensitive can be a handful to raise, these same traits are incredibly useful for succeeding in today's competitive world. Seabiscuit, an undersized colt, beat the seemingly invincible favorite, War Admiral, in 1938 by four lengths, giving hope to "the little guy" struggling to

succeed in a depression era economy. 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 who's boss or have her yield to authority. I use the term "taming" as it was used by the author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in his imaginative children's book, *The Little Prince*, to mean "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 resources constructively. The methods for doing this can be likened to an eight-sided corral, much like the corral a gifted wrangler will use to tame a wild horse. Each of the eight planks that form the corral represents an area of parenting skill and information 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 to you. Use a firm and friendly tone of voice; allow input within limits; allow freedom within limits. 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, adventurousness, power, persistence and sensitivity.) Learn what triggers CAPPS to lead to misbehavior, and learn how to defuse these situations before trouble can start. Redirect your child toward using these traits in positive ways. Understand the dynamics of anger: how it can fuel a child's desire to rebel, and how you can keep it under control.

Plank 3. RELATIONSHIP

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

Plank 4. POWER

Understand the principles of power and learn to sidestep power struggles. Your spirited child can sometimes seem "power drunk," so focus on helping him learn to manage this powerful quality, using it for motivation, not intimidation. Learn the same lessons for yourself if need be.

Plank 5. STRUCTURE

Provide structure for your child to help her learn to live within limits. A structure operates like a corral helping a wild horse learn to accept limits to his freedom as the handler works to tame her. Understand that spirited children need a **flexible structure**. When buildings are constructed in an earthquake zone, a rigid structure will crack and break under the stress. Modern earthquake-proof buildings use a flexible structure that is strong, yet able to give with the impact. Similarly, the structure you make to organize your child's time, space and behavior should be able to bend without breaking.

Plank 6. DISCIPLINE

Use respectful forms of discipline to enforce the limits of the situation. Avoid discipline that is too harsh, but do not fail to offer discipline as needed. Understand that effective discipline includes empathy and problem solving; your child can live within the limits and get her needs met at the same time.

Plank 7. PROBLEMS

Teach your child to problem-solve. Help him identify alternative solutions and anticipate consequences. Teach him to identify his feelings as well as his desires. Use effective communication skills to provide opportunities for teaching empathy for others; this will help him learn to resolve conflicts cooperatively.

Plank 8. RESOURCES

Recognize that you may need help in taming your spirited child, and identify where in your community that help is available. Reach out to your child's school, spiritual organizations, recreational leagues, health professionals, family and friends, and others.

Taming a spirited child requires time. It can not be done overnight, and it can not 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 his life! The payoff also comes in the deepening understanding that emerges from your relationship with your child. “One only understands the things that one tames,” says the fox to the little prince. Allowing your child to remain wild not only does a disservice to him and to others, it robs you of the true joy of parenthood—that of really understanding your child and what makes him the special person he is. ■

About Michael Popkin

Dr. Popkin is best known as the pioneer of video-based parent education with the introduction of *The Active Parenting Discussion Program* in 1983. Since then, millions of parents have completed his parenting courses, including the best-selling *Active Parenting Now* and *Active Parenting of Teens*. A frequent keynote speaker and media guest, Dr. Popkin has appeared on hundreds of shows including “The Oprah Winfrey Show” and Montel Williams, and as a regular parenting expert on CNN. Look for his newest book, *Taming the Spirited Child: Strategies for Parenting Challenging Children without Breaking Their Spirits* (March 2007, from Fireside/Simon and Schuster). You can visit his website at www.ActiveParenting.com.

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