

The
Self-Driven
Child



The SCIENCE *and* SENSE *of*
GIVING YOUR KIDS MORE
CONTROL OVER THEIR LIVES

WILLIAM STIXRUD, Ph.D.,
and NED JOHNSON

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To my parents, who adopted me, were crazy about me, and let me learn to run my own life.

—W. S.

...

To my beloved Vanessa, who kindled in me a passion for helping children.

To Katie and Matthew: I am endlessly grateful for having the greatest kids in the world.

—N. J.

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AUTHORS' NOTE

The stories in this book are all real. They are the stories of the children, parents, and educators we have worked with over the years. Helping and being helped, teaching and learning, requires trust and often invites great vulnerability. We are deeply grateful for the trust and faith so many children and their families have shown us, and we have, in some cases, altered names or certain identifying details to protect their privacy.

INTRODUCTION

Why a Sense of Control Is Such a Big Deal

AT FIRST BLUSH, we are not obvious partners. Bill is a nationally recognized clinical neuropsychologist who has been helping kids cope with anxiety, learning disabilities, and behavioral problems for thirty years. People often remark on his calm temperament, most likely a result of the decades he has spent practicing Transcendental Meditation. Ned founded PrepMatters, one of the most successful tutoring companies in the country. He's an energetic Gen Xer, raising young teens, whose students often say he has the enthusiasm of three people.

We met a few years ago as guest speakers at the same event. When we started talking, we discovered something interesting. Despite our differing backgrounds, disciplines, and client bases, we were trying to help kids overcome similar problems in surprisingly complementary ways. Bill approaches them from the perspective of brain development; Ned through the art and science of performance. As we talked, we found our knowledge and experiences fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. And while Ned's client might struggle with the panic that she might not get into Stanford, and Bill's might struggle to get to school at all, we each begin with the same baseline questions: How can we help this kid gain a sense of control over his life? How can we help him find his own inner drive and make the most of his potential?

We came to a sense of control through research on stress and studies of motivation, which we follow because so much of our work involves helping

kids minimize the extent to which stress undermines their performance and mental health. We try to steer them to a healthy level of self-motivation, somewhere between perfectionist overdrive and “let me get back to my video game.” When we discovered that a low sense of control is enormously stressful and that autonomy is key to developing motivation,¹ we thought we were onto something important. This impression was confirmed when we started to probe deeper and found that a healthy sense of control is related to virtually everything we want for our children, including physical and mental health, academic success, and happiness.

From 1960 until 2002, high school and college students have steadily reported lower and lower levels of internal locus of control (the belief that they can control their own destiny) and higher levels of external locus of control (the belief that their destiny is determined by external forces). This change has been associated with an increased vulnerability to anxiety and depression. In fact, adolescents and young adults today are five to eight times more likely to experience the symptoms of an anxiety disorder than young people were at earlier times, including during the Great Depression, World War II, and the cold war.² Are things really harder now than they were during the Depression? Or are we doing something that is dampening their natural coping mechanisms?

Without a healthy sense of control, kids feel powerless and overwhelmed and will often become passive or resigned. When they are denied the ability to make meaningful choices, they are at high risk of becoming anxious, struggling to manage anger, becoming self-destructive, or self-medicating. Despite the many resources and opportunities their parents offer them, they will often fail to thrive. Without a sense of control, regardless of their background, inner turmoil will take its toll.

We all do better when we feel like we can impact the world around us. That’s why we continue to push the button to close the elevator door even though most of them don’t work.³ It’s why, in a landmark study conducted in the 1970s, nursing home residents who were told and shown that they had responsibility over their lives lived longer than those who were told that the

nursing staff was in charge.⁴ It is also why the kid who decides on his own to do his homework (or not) will be happier, less stressed, and ultimately more capable of navigating life.

We want our kids to be able to participate in a competitive global economy, to be relevant, to feel they can hack it. We love them and want them to be happy and to thrive long after we're gone. All worthy goals. But to achieve them, many of us have bought into some false assumptions:

False Assumption 1: There is a narrow path to success and God forbid our child should fall off it. The stakes are thus too high to let them make decisions for themselves. This argument hinges on an assumption of scarcity, one that says that for young people to be successful, they must be competitive at all times—whatever the price.

False Assumption 2: It is critical to do well in school if you want to do well in life. There will be some winners and many losers. It is Yale or McDonald's. As a result, too many kids are either driven manically or have given up trying.

False Assumption 3: Pushing more will lead our children to becoming more accomplished and more successful adults. Our sixth graders aren't scoring as well as sixth graders in China? Okay, let's teach them ninth grade math. College admission is getting tougher than ever? Yikes, let's pack our kids' schedules so they'll learn and do more.

False Assumption 4: The world is more dangerous than ever before. We have to supervise our kids constantly to make sure they don't get hurt or make bad decisions.

Now many parents instinctively understand that these assumptions are untrue (and we will spend some time in this book debunking them). But that

perspective dissipates when they feel pressured—by peers, by schools, or by other parents—to ensure their child isn't falling behind. The pressure is rooted deeply in fear, and fear almost always leads to bad decisions.

We really can't control our kids—and doing so shouldn't be our goal. Our role is to teach them to think and act independently, so that they will have the judgment to succeed in school and, most important, in *life*. Rather than pushing them to do things they resist, we should seek to help them find things they love and develop their inner motivation. Our aim is to move away from a model that depends on parental pressure to one that nurtures a child's own drive. That is what we mean by the self-driven child.

We start with the assumption that kids have brains in their heads and want their lives to work and that, with some support, they'll figure out what to do. They know it's important to get up in the morning and get dressed. They know it's important to do their homework. They feel the pressure even if they don't show it, and if they are struggling, nagging them about it will only reinforce their resistance. The trick is to give them enough freedom and respect to let them figure things out for themselves. Even if it were possible to control our kids and mold them into who or what we want them to be, we might be less stressed, but they would be more *controlled* than *self-controlled*.

We will talk in this book about important research in neuroscience and developmental psychology and will share our experiences from our combined sixty years working with kids. We hope to convince you that you should think of yourself as a consultant to your kids rather than their boss or manager. We will try to persuade you of the wisdom of saying "It's your call" as often as possible. We'll offer ideas to help you help your kids find their own internal motivation, and we'll coach you in navigating an educational system that is often at odds with giving kids autonomy. We will help you move in the direction of being a nonanxious presence, which is one of the best things you can do for your kids, your family, and yourself. At the end of each chapter, we will give you actionable steps to put into effect immediately.

Some of what we suggest is likely to make you uncomfortable. But much of it should give you a sense of relief. However skeptical you may be, please remember that when we've shared our techniques and the science behind them with the families we serve, we've seen great results. We've seen perpetual defiance transformed into thoughtful decision making. We've seen grades and test scores dramatically improve. We've seen kids who felt overwhelmed, helpless, or hopeless take charge of their own lives. We've seen kids who floundered for a bit but ended up successful and happy—and much closer to their parents than anyone thought possible. It is possible to provide your children with a healthy sense of autonomy and to foster that healthy sense of autonomy in yourself as well. It's easier than you might think. Let us show you how.

CHAPTER ONE

The Most Stressful Thing in the Universe

ADAM, A FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD SOPHOMORE, walks from his family's cramped apartment in the projects on the South Side of Chicago to his underfunded public school every day. Last summer, his older brother was killed in a drive-by shooting while the two boys were hanging out on a street corner together. Now he finds it difficult to concentrate in school, has trouble retaining lessons, and is often sent to the principal's office for explosive behavior. He's not sleeping well and his grades, never very good, are slipping to the point where he may have to repeat a year.

Fifteen-year-old Zara lives in a multimillion-dollar house and attends a posh private school in the Washington, DC, area. Her parents hope she will make the cutoff for a National Merit Scholarship when she takes the PSAT this fall, so she fits in test prep between field hockey practice, volunteering for Habitat for Humanity, and three to four hours of homework per night. Zara is getting good grades, but she's not sleeping well. She finds herself talking back to her parents and snapping at her friends, and she complains of frequent headaches.

We all know to worry about Adam: statistics suggest he has a tough road ahead. What we don't know is that we should worry about Zara, too. Chronic sleep deprivation and toxic stress during a critical phase of brain development are endangering her long-term mental and physical health. If you put a scan of Zara's brain next to one of Adam's, you'd see striking

similarities, particularly in the parts of the brain involved in the stress response system.

In recent years, we've learned a lot about the damage athletes suffer from hitting their heads too much—either on soccer balls or on the 260-pound linebacker in their way. Today, we think about the long-term consequences of concussions: “Yeah, he looks okay now, but too many more of those and he's not going to remember his kids' names.”

We think stress should be talked about in this way, too. Chronic stress wreaks havoc on the brain, especially on young brains. It's like trying to grow a plant in a too-small pot. As any casual gardener knows, doing so weakens the plant, with long-term consequences. Rates of stress-induced illnesses are extremely high in every demographic, and researchers are working furiously to uncover the reasons behind the rise in anxiety disorders, eating disorders, depression, binge drinking, and worrisome patterns of self-harm in young people.¹ As Madeline Levine has made us aware, affluent children and teens are at particularly high risk for developing mental health problems such as anxiety, mood, and chemical use disorders.² In fact, a recent survey showed that 80 percent of students in an affluent and competitive Silicon Valley high school reported moderate to severe levels of anxiety and 54 percent reported moderate to severe levels of depression.³ Depression is now the number one cause of disability worldwide.⁴ We think of chronic stress in children and teenagers as the societal equivalent of climate change—a problem that has been building over generations and will take considerable effort and a change of habits to overcome.

So what does a sense of control have to do with all of this? The answer is: *everything*. Quite simply, it is the antidote to stress. Stress is the unknown, the unwanted, and the feared. It's as minor as feeling unbalanced and as major as fighting for your life. Sonia Lupien at the Centre for Studies on Human Stress has a handy acronym for what makes life stressful—N.U.T.S.

NOVELTY

Something you have not experienced before

UNPREDICTABILITY

Something you had no way of knowing would occur

THREAT TO THE EGO

Your safety or competence as a person is called into question

SENSE OF CONTROL

You feel you have little or no control over the situation⁵

An early study that looked at stress in rats found that when a rat is given a wheel to turn that will stop it from receiving an electric shock, it happily turns the wheel and isn't very stressed. If the wheel is taken away, the rat experiences massive stress. If the wheel is then returned to the cage, the rat's stress levels are much lower, even if the wheel *isn't actually attached* to the shocking apparatus anymore.⁶ In humans, too, being able to push a button to reduce the likelihood of hearing a noxious sound will reduce their stress levels, even if the button has no real effect on the sound—and even if you don't push the button!⁷ It turns out that it's the *sense* of control that matters, even more so than what you actually do. If you have confidence that you can impact a situation, it will be less stressful. In contrast, a low sense of control may very well be the most stressful thing in the universe.

On some level, you probably know this. You may use it as a justification for cleaning up your desk before starting on a difficult task. Most people feel safer when they are driving than flying (when it should be the opposite) because they believe they are more in control. One of the reasons why traffic jams are so stressful is that there's nothing you can do about it.

You may also have experienced the power of control in relation to your kids. If your child is very sick or struggling and you feel there's nothing you can do about it, your stress level is likely to rise. Even less distressing events,

like watching your teenager take the car out alone for the first time, or watching them perform at an athletic event or in a play, also cause stress. You're in the role of spectator, and there's little you can do beyond hope everything turns out okay.

Agency may be the one most important factor in human happiness and well-being. We all like to feel that we are in charge of our own destiny. The same thing goes for our kids. That's why two-year-olds will say things like "I do it myself!" and four-year-olds will insist "You are not the boss of me!" It's why we should let them do what they can for themselves, even if we're running late and it will take them twice as long. It's also why the surest way to get a picky five-year-old to eat his vegetables is to divide the plate in half and let him choose which half to eat. One of Ned's clients, Kara, was incredibly insightful about this: "When I was a kid, when my parents would say, 'You *have* to eat this or that food,' I hated it," she said. "So if they told me I had to eat something that I didn't want to, I'd throw it right back up on the table." Kara remarked that sleepaway camp was a highlight of her childhood because campers got to decide from a range of choices what to do all day, and what to eat. And given the freedom to act on her own, she ate responsibly.

Alas, sleepaway camp is not the world we live in. When she was around twelve or thirteen, Kara began to experience anxiety. "I think I first started having anxiety when people started telling me what to do," she said, "when I didn't feel like I was in control. And then when I switched schools and had to worry about fitting in and about what other people thought, I think that made it even worse. For me, feeling like I have a sense of control, that I am in charge of my own life, is so important. Even now, I like it when my parents give me choices. My friend's mom will say, 'Let's play this game for a while and then let's bake cookies.' And that's great and all, but it would make me nuts to always be told 'Here's the plan' instead of asking me what I want."

These are exactly the circumstances most kids experience every day. Lest you doubt how little control children and adolescents like Kara actually have,

think of what their days are like: they have to sit still in classes they didn't choose, taught by teachers randomly assigned to them, alongside whatever child happens to be assigned to their class. They have to stand in neat lines, eat on a schedule, and rely on the whims of their teachers for permission to go to the bathroom. And think of how we measure them: not by the effort they put into practicing or how much they improve, but by whether another kid at the meet happened to swim or run faster last Saturday. We don't measure their understanding of the periodic table, but how they score on a random selection of associated facts.

It is frustrating and stressful to feel powerless, and many kids feel that way all the time. As grown-ups, we sometimes tell our kids that they're in charge of their own lives, but then we proceed to micromanage their homework, their afterschool activities, and their friendships. Or perhaps we tell them that actually they're not in charge—we are. Either way, we make them feel powerless, and by doing so, we undermine our relationship with them.

There is another way. Over the last sixty years, study after study has found that a healthy sense of control goes hand in hand with virtually all the positive outcomes we want for our children. Perceived control—the confidence that we can direct the course of our life through our own efforts—is associated with better physical health, less use of drugs and alcohol, and greater longevity, as well as with lower stress, positive emotional well-being, greater internal motivation and ability to control one's behavior, improved academic performance, and enhanced career success.⁸ Like exercise and sleep, it appears to be good for virtually everything, presumably because it represents a deep human need.

Our kids are “wired” for control, whether they're growing up in the South Bronx, Silicon Valley, Birmingham, or South Korea. Our role as adults is not to force them to follow the track we've laid out for them; it's to help them develop the skills to figure out the track that's right for them. They will need to find their own way—and to make independent course corrections—for the rest of their lives.

Hitting the Sweet Spot: A Better Understanding of Stress

Let us make one thing clear: we don't think it's possible to protect kids from all stressful experiences, nor would we want to. In fact, when kids are constantly shielded from circumstances that make them anxious, it tends to make their anxiety worse. We want them to learn how to deal *successfully* with stressful situations—to have a high stress tolerance. That's how they develop resilience. If a child feels like he's in control in a stressful situation, then in later situations when he might actually *not* be in control, his brain will be equipped to handle that stress better.⁹ He is, in effect, immunized.

Bill cried every day for the first week of first grade because he didn't know any of his classmates. His teacher was quietly supportive, and when other kids would whisper, "Mrs. Rowe, he's crying," Bill would hear her say, "He's going to be fine. He'll like it here, don't worry." He did, in fact, figure out how to manage the stress of an unfamiliar situation and the coping skills he learned appear to have generalized, as he never cried again in an unfamiliar environment. (So far, anyway.) The teacher was right to let him work it out, instead of swooping in and giving him the sense he couldn't handle it on his own.

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child has identified three kinds of stress:¹⁰

1. Positive stress motivates children (and adults) to grow, take risks, and perform at a high level. Think of kids preparing for a play, nervous and a little stressed beforehand, but then filled with a sense of accomplishment and pride afterward. We could call this the jitters, excitement, or anticipation. Unless the jitters are excessive, they make it more likely that a child will perform well. Kids experiencing positive stress know that they ultimately have control over whether or not they perform at all. As it happens, kids are more likely to persevere and to

reach their full potential if they know they don't *have* to do something.

2. Tolerable stress, which occurs for relatively brief periods, can also build resilience. Critically, there must be supportive adults present, and kids must have time to cope and recover. Let's say a child witnesses her parents arguing a lot as they're going through a divorce. But the parents are talking to her, and they're not having blowouts *every* night. She has time to recover. This is tolerable stress. Another example of tolerable stress might be an episode of being bullied, so long as it doesn't last too long, it isn't repeated too often, and the child is supported by caring adults. A tolerable stress might even be a death in the family. In an influential study, graduate students took baby rats away from their mothers and handled them for fifteen minutes per day (which was stressful to the rats) and then returned them to their mothers, who licked and groomed them. The graduate students repeated this for the first two weeks of the rats' lives. The baby rats who were removed and handled for a brief period showed much more resilience as adults than the pups who stayed in the cage with their mother.¹¹ The researchers referred to them as "California laid-back rats," as they were difficult to stress as adults. This is probably because in situations like these the brain becomes *conditioned* to cope, and this conditioning lays the foundation for resilience.¹²
3. Toxic stress is defined as frequent or prolonged activation of the stress system in the absence of support. Toxic stress is either severe, such as witnessing an assault, or recurs day in and day out, in which case it is chronic. Supportive adults—who minimize exposure to things that a child isn't developmentally ready to handle—aren't readily available. The child perceives that he or she has little control over what happens. There seems to be no reprieve, no cavalry coming, no end in sight. This is the space many kids live in today, whether they are obviously