Dr. Becky Kennedy

Good Inside

A GUIDE TO BECOMING
THE PARENT YOU WANT TO BE

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Dedication

To my husband, who is the grounding force in my life, and my kids, who have taught me more than I will ever teach them.

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Dedication

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Introduction

"Dr. Becky, my five-year-old is in a stage where she's mean to her sister, rude to us, and melting down at school. We feel totally stuck. Can you help?"

"Dr. Becky, why is my potty-trained child suddenly peeing all over the house? We've tried using rewards and punishments and nothing is changing. Can you help?"

"Dr. Becky, my twelve-year-old never listens to me! It's infuriating. Can you help?"

Yes. I can help. We can figure this out.

As a clinical psychologist with a long-standing private practice, I work with parents who seek me out to problem-solve through the tricky situations that leave them feeling frustrated, depleted, and hopeless. Though on the surface the situations are unique—the smart-mouthed five-year-old, the regressing potty-trained toddler, the defiant preteen—the underlying desire is the same: all parents want to do better. I am essentially told and retold: *"I know the parent I want to be. I don't know how to get there. Please help me fill the gap."*

During our sessions, parents and I start by unpacking a problem behavior together. Behavior is a clue to what a child—and, often, an entire family system—is struggling with. As we investigate behaviors, we get to know the child better, we learn about what this child needs and what skills they're missing, we uncover a parent's triggers and areas for growth, and we move

from a place of *"What's wrong with my child and can you fix them?"* to *"What is my child struggling with and what's my role in helping them?"* And hopefully also, *"What's coming up for ME about this situation?"*

My work with parents centers on helping them move from a place of despair and frustration to one of hope, empowerment, and even self-reflection—all without leaning on many of the most commonly promoted parenting strategies. You will not see me recommend time-outs, sticker charts, punishments, rewards, or ignoring as a response to challenging behaviors. What *do* I recommend? First and foremost, an understanding that behaviors are only the tip of the iceberg, and that below the surface is a child's entire internal world, just begging to be understood.

Let's Do Something *Different*

When I was in my clinical psychology PhD program at Columbia and working in the clinic, I did play therapy with kids. While I loved treating children, I quickly grew frustrated by the limited contact I had with parents, often wishing I was also working with the parents rather than working directly with the child and talking to the parent adjunctively. Simultaneously, I was also counseling adult clients, and I became fascinated by an undeniable connection: with the adults it was so clear where, in childhood, things went awry—where a child's needs weren't met or behaviors were a cry for help that was never answered. I realized that if I looked at what adults needed and never received, I could use that knowledge to inform my work with children and families.

When I opened my private practice, I worked solely with adults for therapy or parent guidance. After I became a mother myself, I increased my parent guidance work—both in one-on-one consultations and in ongoing monthly parenting groups. Eventually I enrolled in a training program for clinicians that proclaimed it offered an "evidence-based" and "gold-standard" approach to discipline and troubling behavior in children. The methods it taught felt logical and "clean," and I walked away having learned about the same interventions that are regularly promoted by parenting experts today. I felt like I had learned a perfect system to extinguish undesirable behavior and encourage more prosocial behavior—basically, behavior that was more compliant and more convenient to parents. Except, a few weeks later, something struck me: this *felt* awful. Every time I heard myself give this "evidence-based" guidance, I felt sick to my stomach. I couldn't shake the nagging suspicion that these interventions—which certainly wouldn't feel good if someone used them on me—couldn't be the right approach to use with kids.

Yes, these systems made logical sense, but they focused on eradicating "bad" behaviors and enforcing compliance at the expense of the parent-child relationship. Time-outs, for example, were encouraged to change behavior . . . but what about the fact that they sent kids away at the exact moments they needed their parents the most? Where was . . . well . . . the humanity?

Here's the thing I realized: these "evidence-based" approaches were built on principles of *behaviorism*, a theory of learning that focuses on observable

actions rather than non-observable mental states like feelings and thoughts and urges. Behaviorism privileges *shaping* behavior above *understanding* behavior. It sees behavior as the whole picture rather than an expression of underlying unmet needs. This is why, I realized, these “evidence-based” approaches felt so bad to me—they confused the signal (what was really going on for a child) with the noise (behavior). After all, our goal is not to shape behavior. Our goal is to raise humans.

As soon as this realization crept in, I couldn’t shake it. I knew there had to be a way of working with families that was effective without sacrificing the connection between parent and child. And so I got to work, taking everything I knew about attachment, mindfulness, and internal family systems—all theoretical approaches that have informed my private practice—and translating these ideas into a method for working with parents that was concrete, accessible, and easy to understand.

It turns out, switching our parenting mindset from “consequences” to “connection” does not have to mean ceding family control to our children. While I resist time-outs, punishments, consequences, and ignoring, there’s nothing about my parenting style that’s permissive or fragile. My approach promotes firm boundaries, parental authority, and sturdy leadership, all while maintaining positive relationships, trust, and respect.

Deep Thoughts, Practical Strategies (and How to Use This Book)

In my work with patients, I often say that two things are true: *practical, solution-based strategies* can also promote *deeper healing*. Many parenting philosophies compel parents to make a choice: they can improve a child's behavior at the cost of their relationship, or they can prioritize the relationship while sacrificing a clear path to better behavior. With the approach offered in this book, parents can do better on the outside *and* feel better on the inside. They can strengthen their relationship with their child *and* see improved behavior and cooperation.

This underlying message, that these two things are true, is at the core of so much of what you're about to read. The information is theory driven *and* strategy rich; it is evidence based *and* creatively intuitive; it prioritizes the self-care of a parent *and* the well-being of a child. A client may come to my office looking for a set of strategies to fix their kid's behavior, but they leave with so much more: a nuanced understanding of the child underneath the behavior and a set of tools that puts this understanding into practice. My hope is that after reading this book you will walk away with the same. I hope you emerge with renewed self-compassion, self-regulation, and self-confidence, and feel equipped to wire your children for these important qualities as well.

This book is an initiation into a parenting model that is as much about self-development as it is about child development. The first ten chapters consist of the parenting principles I live by—at home with my own three kids, in my office with clients and their families, and on social media, with the many parents I've connected with over the years. My intention with these principles is to promote healing in children *and* parents, and offer practical strategies for a more peaceful family experience. And at the heart of these principles is the idea that by understanding the emotional needs of a child, parents can not only improve behavior but transform how the entire family operates and relates to one another.

In the second half of this book, you will find, first, tactics for what I call *building connection capital*. These are tried-and-true strategies for increasing connection and closeness in a parent-child relationship. No matter the issue—even if the mood just feels bad at home and you can't figure out why—you can implement one of these interventions to start

turning things around. After that, we'll move into tackling specific childhood behavior issues that often drive parents to seek out my help: everything from sibling rivalry, tantrums, and lying to anxiety, lack of confidence, and shyness. Not every single tactic will be applicable to every single kid—only you know your child's individual needs—but these strategies will help you think differently when challenges arise, and empower you to tackle these moments in ways that feel good to you, and safe to your child.

* * *

It probably comes as no surprise that I've never been one for trade-offs. I believe you can be firm and warm, boundaried and validating, focused on connection while acting as a sturdy authority. And I believe that, in the end, this approach also "feels right" to parents—not just logically, but deep in their souls. Because we all want to see our children as good kids, see ourselves as good parents, and work toward a more peaceful home. And every one of those things is possible. We don't have to choose. We can have it all.

Part I
Dr. Becky's Parenting Principles

Chapter 1
Good Inside

Let me share an assumption I have about you and your kids: you are all good inside. When you call your child "a spoiled brat," you are still good inside. When your child denies knocking down his sister's block tower (even though you watched it happen), he is still good inside. And when I say "good inside," I mean that we all, at our core, are compassionate, loving, and generous. The principle of *internal goodness* drives all of my work—I hold the belief that kids and parents are good inside, which allows me to be curious about the "why" of their bad behaviors. This curiosity enables me to develop frameworks and strategies that are effective in creating change. There is nothing in this book as important as this principle—it is the foundation for all that's to come, because as soon as we tell ourselves, "Okay, slow down . . . I'm good inside . . . my kid is good inside too . . . ," we intervene differently than we would if we allowed our frustration and anger to dictate our decisions.

The tricky part here is that it's remarkably easy to put frustration and anger in the driver's seat. While no parent wants to think of herself as cynical or negative or assuming the worst of her kids, when we're in the throes of a tough parenting moment, it's common to operate with the (largely unconscious) assumption of *internal badness*. We ask, "Does he really think he can get away with that?" because we assume our child is purposefully trying to take advantage of us. We say, "What is wrong with you?" because we assume there's a flaw inside our kid. We yell, "You know better!" because we assume our child is purposely defying or provoking us. And we berate ourselves in the same way, wondering, "What is my problem? I know better!" before spiraling into a puddle of despair, self-loathing, and shame.

Plenty of parenting advice relies on perpetuating this assumption of badness, focusing on controlling kids rather than trusting them, sending them to their rooms instead of embracing them, labeling them as manipulative rather than in need. But I truly do believe that *we are all good inside*. And let me be clear: seeing your child as good inside does not excuse bad behavior or lead to permissive parenting. There's a misconception that parenting from a "good inside" perspective leads to an "anything goes" approach that creates entitled or out-of-control kids, but I don't know anyone who would say, "Oh well, my kid is good inside, so it doesn't matter that he spit at his friend," or "My kid is good inside, so who cares that she calls her sister names." In fact, the opposite is true. Understanding that we're all good inside is what allows you to distinguish *a person* (your child) from *a behavior* (rudeness, hitting, saying, "I hate you"). Differentiating who someone is from what they do is key to creating interventions that preserve your relationship while also leading to impactful change.

Assuming goodness enables you to be the sturdy leader of your family, because when you're confident in your child's goodness, you believe in their ability to behave "well" and do the right thing. And as long as you believe they are capable, you can show them the way. This type of leadership is what every child craves—someone they can trust to steer them down the right path. It's what makes them feel safe, what allows them to find calm, and what leads to the development of emotion regulation and resilience. Providing a safe space to try and fail without worrying they'll be seen as "bad" is what will allow your children to learn and grow, and to ultimately feel more connected to you.

Perhaps this sounds like an obvious idea. Of course your kids are good inside! After all, you love your children—you wouldn't be reading this book if you didn't want to encourage their goodness. But operating from a "good inside" perspective can be harder than it seems, especially in difficult or highly charged moments. It's easy—reflexive, even—to default to a less generous view, for two main reasons: First, we are evolutionarily wired with a negativity bias, meaning we pay closer attention to what's difficult with our kids (or with ourselves, our partners, even the world at large) than to what is working well. Second, our experiences of our own childhoods influence how we perceive and respond to our kids' behavior. So many of us had parents who led with judgment rather than curiosity, criticism instead of understanding, punishment instead of discussion. (I'd guess they had parents who treated them the same way.) And, in the absence of intentional effort to course correct, history repeats itself. As a result, many parents see behavior as the *measure of who our kids are*, rather than using behavior as a

clue to what our kids might need. What if we saw behavior as an expression of needs, not identity? Then, rather than shaming our kids for their shortcomings, making them feel unseen and alone, we could help them access their internal goodness, improving their behavior along the way. Shifting our perspective isn't easy, but it's absolutely worth it.

Rewiring the Circuit

I want you to reflect on your childhood and imagine how your parents would have responded in a few scenarios:

- You're three years old, with a new baby sister everyone is oohing and aahing over. You're struggling in this transition to siblinghood, even though your family says you should be happy about it. You're having lots of tantrums, grabbing toys from your sister, and you finally let it all out: "Send my baby sister back to the hospital! I hate her!" What happens next? How do your parents respond?

- You're seven years old and you really want an Oreo that your dad explicitly said you couldn't have. You're sick of being dictated to and being constantly met with no, so when you're alone in the kitchen, you grab the cookie. Your dad sees you with the Oreo in hand. What happens next? What does he do?

- You're thirteen years old and you're struggling with a writing assignment. You tell your parents it's done, but later they get a call from the teacher saying you never handed it in. What happens next? What do your parents say when you get home?

Now let's consider this: We all mess up. We all, at every age, have difficult moments when we behave in ways that are less than ideal. But our early years are especially powerful, because our bodies are beginning to wire how we think about and respond to difficult moments, based on how our parents think about and respond *to us* in our difficult moments. Let me say that another way: how we talk to ourselves when we are struggling inside—the self-talk of "Don't be so sensitive" or "I'm overreacting" or "I'm so dumb," or, alternatively, "I'm trying my best" or "I simply want to feel seen"—is based on how our parents spoke to or treated us in our times of struggle. This means that thinking through our answers to those "What happens next?" questions is critical to understanding *our body's circuitry*.

What do I mean by "circuitry"? Well, in our early years, our body is learning under what conditions we receive love and attention and understanding and affection, and under what conditions we get rejected, punished, and left alone; the "data" it collects along those lines is critical to our survival, because maximizing attachment with our caregivers is the primary goal for young, helpless children. These learnings impact our development, because we quickly begin to embrace whatever gets us love and attention, and shut down and label as "bad" any parts that get rejected, criticized, or invalidated.

Now, here's the thing: no parts of us are *actually* bad. Underneath "Send my baby sister back to the hospital! I hate her!" is a child in pain, with massive abandonment fears and a sense of threat looming in the family; underneath the defiance of taking that cookie is probably a child who feels unseen and controlled in other parts of her life; and underneath that incomplete school assignment is a child who is struggling and likely feels insecure. Underneath "bad behavior" is always a good child. And yet, when parents chronically shut down a behavior harshly *without recognizing the good kid underneath*, a child internalizes that *they are bad*. And badness has to be shut down at all costs, so a child develops methods, including harsh self-talk, to chastise himself, as a way of killing off the "bad kid" parts and instead finding the "good kid" ones—meaning the parts that get approval and connection.

So what did you, as a child, learn comes after "bad" behavior? Did your body learn to wire for judgment, punishment, and aloneness . . . or boundaries, empathy, and connection? Or, put more simply, now that we know a person's "bad behavior" is really a sign that they're struggling on the inside: Did you learn to approach your struggles with criticism . . . or compassion? With blame or curiosity?

How our caregivers responded to us becomes how we in turn respond to ourselves, and this sets the stage for how we respond to our children. This is why it's so easy to create an intergenerational legacy of "internal badness": my parents reacted to my struggles with harshness and criticism → I learned to doubt my goodness when I am having a hard time → I now, as an adult, meet my own struggles with self-blame and self-criticism → my child, when he acts out, activates this same circuitry in my body → I am compelled to react with harshness to my child's struggles → I build the same circuitry in my child's body, so my child learns to doubt his goodness when he struggles → and so on and so forth.

Okay, let's pause. Place your hand on your heart and deliver yourself this important message: "I am here because I want to change. I want to be the pivot point in my intergenerational family patterns. I want to start something different: I want my children to feel good inside, to feel valuable and lovable and worthy, even when they struggle. And this starts . . . with re-accessing my own goodness. My goodness has always been there." You are not at fault for your intergenerational patterns. Quite the opposite—if you're reading this book, that tells me that you're taking on the role of cycle-breaker, the person who says that certain damaging patterns STOP with you. You are willing to take on the weight of the generations before you and change the direction for the generations to come. *Wow*. You are far from at fault—you are brave and bold and you love your kid more than anything. Being a cycle-breaker is an epic battle, and you are amazing for taking it on.

The Most Generous Interpretation (MGI)

Finding the good inside can often come from asking ourselves one simple question: "What is my *most generous interpretation* of what just happened?" I ask myself this often with my kids and my friends, and I'm working on asking it more in my marriage and with myself. Whenever I utter these words, even internally, I notice my body soften and I find myself interacting with people in a way that feels much better.

Let's walk through an example: You're planning to take your older son out to lunch, solo, for his birthday, and you decide to gently prepare your younger son a few days ahead of time. "I wanted to let you know about Saturday's plan," you say. "Daddy and I are going to take Nico out to lunch for his birthday. Grandma will come over and stay with you while we're out for an hour or so." Your younger son responds: "You *and* Daddy are going out with Nico without me? I hate you! You're the worst mom in the world!"

Wow, what just happened? And how do you respond? Here are some options: 1) "The worst mom? I just bought you a new toy! You're so ungrateful!" 2) "When you say that, it makes Mommy sad." 3) Ignore. Walk away. 4) "Wow, those are *big* words, let me take a breath . . . I hear how upset you are. Tell me more."

I like option 4, because it's the intervention that makes sense after considering the most generous interpretation of my child's behavior. The first option interprets my son's response as simply spoiled and ungrateful. The second teaches my son that his feelings are too powerful and scary to be managed, that they harm others and threaten attachment security with a caregiver. (We'll get into more detail about attachment in chapter 4, but the short of it is this: focusing on a child's *impact on us* sets the stage for codependence, not regulation or empathy.) The third option sends the message that I believe my son is unreasonable, and his concerns are unimportant to me. But my MGI of my child's response is this: "Hmm. My son really wishes he was included in this special lunch. I can understand that. He's sad. And jealous. Those feelings are so big in his small body that they explode out of him in the form of big hurtful words, but what's underneath is a raw, painful set of feelings." The intervention that comes next—the empathetic statements based on seeing my child as *good inside*—acknowledges his words as a sign of overwhelming pain, not as a sign of his being a bad kid.