



The Good, The Bad, & The Ugly

Solving the
Challenging Behavior
Problems of
Children with Autism

Full
Chapter

www.playproject.org

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Autism: THE POTENTIAL WITHIN

The PLAY Project Approach to
Helping Young Children with Autism

Richard Solomon, MD

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VISIT 10

The Good, The Bad & The Ugly (Visit 10)

The Chief Complaint: Misbehavior

From birth to age three Jacob was content to ‘do his own thing’ and just ‘go with the flow’. It was as if he was so much in his own world that nothing *could* bother him. But by age 3 to 3½, as he became more engaged and functional, behavior problems began with the emergence of occasional yelling, protesting and small fits of temper (See *Chapter 10, Visit 5: Moving On Up?*). His behaviors worsened until, at around 4½, he was frequently upset and becoming regularly aggressive (especially toward his brother Charlie) with pushing, pinching and even biting (See *Chapter 11, Visit 6: The Turning Point!*). By age five his behavior has escalated to frequent daily episodes of tantrums and aggression—throwing objects, hitting, kicking, and some self-injurious behaviors like head banging. He was going after Charlie for no apparent reason. I call this the ‘lightning rod’ phenomenon—no matter what made Jacob mad, he went after Charlie to discharge his upset. The phone call notes from Julie Grant went from ‘Mom is worried’, to ‘Mom is upset’ to ‘Please call asap, mom is frantic. Jacob is out of control’.

It was time to talk about ‘*The Good, The Bad, & The Ugly*’ my approach to handling bad behavior.

I walked into the waiting room where Jacob (age five) was sitting on the floor with his brother Charlie (age three), crashing trucks together with loud crashing noises, then laughing. They were pretending together! I said, “Hi Jacob” testing to see if he would respond. I waited. He looked right at me. I waited. And he said “Hi”. I said: “Give me five.” He slapped me five! Charlie too. “You guys ready to play?” As he and his brother got up and headed for the playroom, I thought to myself “Wow, Jacob has come so far!”

Now, at age five, after two years of a comprehensive program that included intensive, play-based intervention (See *Section 2: The PLAY Project Approach*) plus special education preschool (four half days/week) as well as speech/language and occupational therapies (an hour per week each), he was back for another follow up visit. The *potential within* Jacob was great and his program brought out that potential. Now, he was *with us*, easily engaged, able to carry on a natural, back and forth interactions and his receptive language was good. School had helped him begin to socialize with peers and learn pre-academic skills and routines. His SLP and OT therapies helped with his language and with his coordination, and fine/gross motor development, respectively. I was thrilled with his progress.

Jacob’s parents confirmed that he was making ‘amazing progress’. He was talking in short two to five word sentences, answering ‘wh’ type questions like ‘What are you doing?’ ‘What do you want to eat?’ ‘Where do you want to go?’ but still struggling with ‘why’ questions (though he was beginning to understand simple cause and effect, e.g., ‘Bandaid for boo boo!’). He was still significantly behind his peers developmentally (maybe a year or more) but his parents had already decided to wait another year before putting him in kindergarten (See *Chapter 12: Kindergarten: Ready or Not Here We Come*). That wasn’t the issue.

Despite all of Jacob’s gains, Jacob’s parents didn’t look happy.

Mom: “Jacob has become a major behavior problem. He almost got kicked out of preschool for pinching a little girl yesterday and the sibling rivalry is terrible. He goes after Charlie all the time.”

Dr. Rick: “How old is Charlie now?”

Mom: “Almost three. They are getting to be buddies but when Charlie wants to play with one of Jacob’s favorite toys. . .well, Dr. Rick, it’s gotten bad. Plus, he just doesn’t listen until we’re screaming at him. Then he gets mad at *us* and screams back. He hits, pulls my hair, tries to kick me. It’s gotten BAD!”

Dad nodded in total agreement.

Dr. Rick: “Well, if it’s any consolation, this is a sign of Jacob’s developmental progress.”

Dad: “Great! You can take him home, fix him up, and then return him to us like the good boy he used to be. When we discipline Charlie, *he* responds and shapes up.”

Mom: “But when we use the same approach with Jacob he seems to get worse.”

Dr. Rick: “That’s right. Children with autism are often tougher to discipline than typical children. You’ve got to be much more systematic in your approach. I have an approach I’ve developed over the years that will hopefully help us help Jacob get himself under control. Let me spend this visit outlining that approach and then over the next few visits we can deal with specific behaviors. But, first I’d like to talk about what goes on for the two of you when Jacob misbehaves.”

When Children Push Your Buttons

When misbehavior is the chief complaint, I start by exploring how the *parents* experience conflict. Because most children with autism are going to create conflict! When young children start to purposefully misbehave and challenge their parents’ authority, parents react emotionally—*their buttons get pushed*—and they often react out of old feelings that can go way back to the way *they* were parented; to the way their families of origin handled conflict. Or they react emotionally based on their

temperaments. Hotheaded parents get angry. Timid parents withdraw. Everyone wishes the bad behavior would just go away. These reactions are common and completely normal. But they are not necessarily helpful.

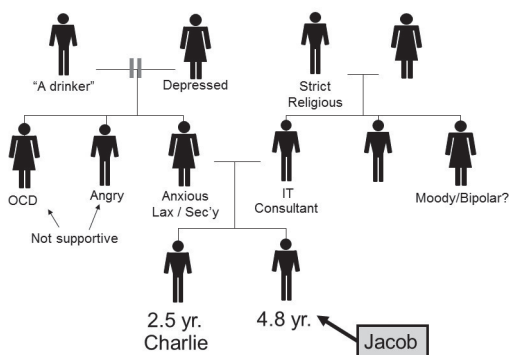
Because children with autism think and feel differently, they challenge parents in new ways and elicit new reactions. The parenting methods that worked with Jacob's younger brother Charlie haven't worked with Jacob. Remember: It is the theme song of children with autism to 'keep the world the same'. This means they want life to be predictable and life is a lot more predictable when you get what you want when you want it. And if you don't get it—watch out!

So I help parents get ready psychologically by exploring how their child with autism pushes their parenting buttons i.e., makes them react emotionally. Then we talk about how to handle misbehavior.

As part of my medical history taking, I collect a three-generation genogram—a family tree (See below)—that looks not only at genetic, neurologic, psychiatric, and developmental disorders, but also personality traits like impulsivity, perfectionism, obsessiveness, shyness, and/or aggression that are also inherited. These family trees can be very revealing about family dynamics too. Here's where many of '*the buttons*' get created. An area of great interest to me is *how the parents' parents resolved conflict*.

In Jacob's family genogram you can see some very revealing information. Jacob's mom confessed that her dad, who was a heavy drinker, got angry when he was drinking. Her mother was depressed and eventually divorced her husband later in life. Julie and her sister often withdrew and hid when their dad went on one of his 'rampages'. Her brother who got the worst of it became very angry himself. None of the siblings are very close.

Jacob's Family Genogram



For her, then, *anger felt dangerous*. Mom wanted Jacob's anger to just 'go away'. She felt anxious and helpless and tended to 'let things go'. She was also very tenderhearted and felt sorry for Jacob. Finally she had a kind, somewhat passive, personality. Her parenting style emboldened Jacob who seemed to know somehow that his anger got him what he wanted from his mom. She backed off when he got angry and didn't really know what to do. In short, he was learning how to *push her buttons*.

Dr. Rick: "What I say to parents is: If you are getting angry or yelling then you're doing something wrong."

Dad: "We're doing something wrong?"

Dr. Rick: "You'll know you have hidden or removed your buttons when you can discipline Jacob and *feel fairly neutral*. Parents generally fall into 4-5 basic feelings when their child pushes their buttons: overly angry, guilty, sad, helpless, or anxious—about it. You ought to be able to *appreciate* how smart Jacob is in knowing how to push your buttons. Get a little perspective. Have a sense of humor about it."

Mom: "Easier said than done."

Dr. Rick: "True. So, let me ask you a question mom. How does it make you *feel* when Jacob misbehaves on purpose?"

Mom: "I give him a warning and then I start counting to three and. . ."

Dr. Rick: "Sorry to interrupt, mom, but I'm not asking what you do. I'm asking how you feel when he gives you a hard time."

Mom (looking confused): “I feel. . .upset, nervous. I don’t want to get into a big fight. . .”

Dr. Rick: “You feel like backing off?”

Mom: “Kind of. Sometimes. Yes, I keep hoping he’ll listen so I don’t have to yell. But then I have to yell and then I end up screaming sometimes. It’s so confusing.”

Dr. Rick: “Do you see how your buttons show up as *feelings*? In your case you *feel* nervous, confused, and a bit afraid.”

Mom: “And you mentioned helpless. I don’t know what to do sometimes.”

Jim Grant, on the other hand, recalled rarely misbehaving as a child. All his parents had to do was ‘give that look’ and the children in the family ‘toed the line’. *His* dad was strict; his parents were Catholic and religious; and they instilled the ‘fear of God in us’. His sister was moody and was recently evaluated for possible bipolar disorder.

If Jim Grant misbehaved as a child he felt guilty. He was a ‘good boy’ and he expected Jacob to ‘be a good boy’ too without having to say much. When Jacob actively disobeyed him, it felt like *disrespect* and really made dad *angry*. He tended to lash out in a loud booming voice, which upset everybody in the house (including dad!). He yelled a lot but he didn’t really know what to do. Interestingly, Jacob developed a loud booming voice when he got mad and yelled back! He found dad’s buttons.

For mom especially, there was one other ‘button’ that showed up frequently—the ‘sadness button’.

Mom: “It breaks my heart to see him cry.”

Dr. Rick: “I know, he’s suffered so much already. These kids have it so hard!”

It was mom’s turn to cry. I handed her a tissue. Mom was feeling the grief that hangs like a constant cloud over families; a profound sadness about how hard life is for their child with autism.

Later we would have a discussion about challenging Jacob and not babying or underestimating him, about giving him a ‘message of competence’. Later we would talk about how grief and tender heartedness can interfere with discipline. But now was not the time. The process of grieving must be honored one cry at a time.

So Jacob’s parents—who are loving, kind, concerned, and dedicated—have their buttons and Jacob has learned how to push them. I have found that parents, once they know about and can see their ‘buttons’ being pushed, once they know that the old ways of resolving conflict don’t work so well with children on the spectrum—they are usually ready to try something different.

Note: If parents’ buttons are continually being pushed I will often recommend counseling to help them go deeper into their reactions so they can get to that ‘neutral’ feeling.

Dr. Rick: “So, this is not about love. I know you both love Jacob and Charlie unconditionally. But this is not about guilt, anger or fear either. This is about bad behavior *in a child with autism* and how to deal with it.”

Dad: “You’re saying that children with autism are harder to discipline, right?”

Dr. Rick: “Right. In two ways. First, they are often, but not always, naturally stubborn because they want to ‘keep the world the same’. Second, their emotional life is immature. Their brains process feelings differently, often slowly. They are easily overwhelmed by their impulses. So the approach I want to teach you has two benefits. First, it will help Jacob behave. But, more importantly, it will help Jacob to become a more mature thinker and feeler.”

Mom and dad looked at each other, then looked at me as if to say, “OK then, let’s get going!”

Dr. Rick: “What we need is a plan—a set of *parenting protocols*. You cannot fly by the seat of your pants. You need to know what to do ahead of time when Jacob misbehaves so he won’t push your buttons. Your job is to help him get himself under control and learn from the conflicts.

And the first step is to *define* clearly for Jacob and yourselves *what bad behavior is*. In other words we need to talk about *The Good, The Bad, & The Ugly*.”

The Good, The Bad, & The Ugly

Jacob was having at least one to two major meltdowns—crying, hitting, kicking, throwing things—every day; with minor meltdowns—yelling, threatening, swearing (‘You poopy!’)—5-10 times per day! Not to mention whining, pouting, and crying.

Dr. Rick: “He is really struggling! So what triggers all these tantrums.”

Dad: “You name it. He wants what he wants when he wants it; and when he doesn’t get it he throws a fit so fast it makes your head spin. I mean 0-60 in one second.”

Dr. Rick: “So broken expectations trigger him.”

Mom: “And whenever Charlie gets into Jacob’s space.”

Dad: “And when he has to stop doing something he likes.”

Dr. Rick: “Transitions are a trigger.”

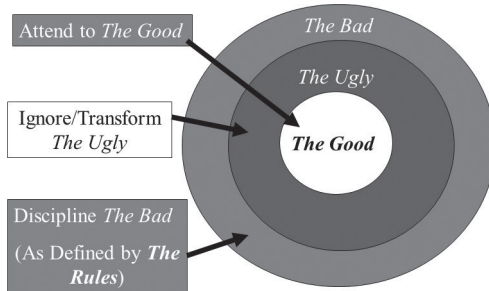
Mom: “Especially when he has to get ready for school or go to bed.”

Dr. Rick: “No wonder you’re freaking out! We’re going help this boy get under control. By the time you leave today we may not get to all the specifics but we are going to have a plan.”

Dad: “Amen.”

The very first step in helping Jacob behave is to define his behaviors as either good, bad, or ugly (see the chart below):

The Good, The Bad & The Ugly



Good behaviors—listening, cooperating, helping, etc.—are easy to define. **Ugly** behaviors—whining, making faces, arguing, minor pushing, etc.—are defined as neither good nor bad. **Bad** behaviors are defined as *behaviors that break rules*.

- We want to increase **good behaviors** by giving those behaviors lots of attention.
- We want to reduce **ugly behaviors** by mostly ignoring them or changing (transforming) them into good behaviors.
- And we want to discipline **bad behaviors**. The word ‘discipline’ comes from the Latin ‘to instruct or teach’. *The main task here is to teach Jacob how to get what he wants in a way that is acceptable.* We don’t want to punish him or fight with him and hurt his feelings on purpose (though our discipline will certainly make him unhappy at times!).

Dr. Rick: “By definition then, *bad behavior breaks rules*. So what are the rules of your house?”

Jacob’s parents looked at me with blank faces.

Visit Overview

My plan for this visit was to give an overview of *The Good, The Bad, & The Ugly* approach to misbehavior. I also wanted to make sure that we discussed the three most common mistakes parents make (besides letting their buttons get pushed!) in handling problem behaviors of children on the spectrum, namely:

- 1.) Paying attention to ‘ugly’ behavior that should be ignored;
- 2.) Not being clear about the rules that define bad behavior; and
- 3.) Not paying enough attention to their children’s *feelings*.

Do NOT Give Attention to ‘Ugly’ Behaviors

Perhaps the most common mistake parents make is giving attention to ‘ugly’ behaviors. One of the fundamental rules of behavioral psychology is: *The more attention you pay to any behavior, the more it will increase.* After listening carefully to Jacob’s parent’s complaints I made a tentative list of what I saw as Jacob’s ugly behaviors. Would any parent look at this list and want these behaviors to increase?

Jacob’s ‘Ugly’ Behaviors

- Whining
- Crying
- Pouting
- Tantrums
- Threatening (‘Hit mommy.’)
- Potty mouth/‘swearing’ (‘Poopy daddy.’)
- Minor teasing (being mean is ‘bad’ behavior)
- Minor sibling arguing
- Minor sibling roughhousing
- Running around wildly
- Being silly (making fart noises, wiggling butt)

No? Then don’t give them too much of your attention!

And yet Jacob's mom and dad admitted that they paid a lot of attention to these behaviors. Just in the short time they were in the office I heard them say:

- Jacob, please stop whining.
- Don't tease your brother!
- Jacob, don't run around! You'll get hurt.
- Mommy doesn't like it when you say 'You're a poopy.'
- You're going to hurt each other wrestling like that. Stop it, now!
- We cannot go yet, stop asking please.
- Young man, do NOT threaten me!

Dr. Rick: "Here's a list I made of Jacob's behaviors that we could consider 'ugly' (See the list above). *Ugly behaviors are behaviors that don't break rules but are not good behaviors.* They are the kind of behaviors nobody likes yet in most families (who don't know the secret of ignoring) they are the most common of the three types of behaviors. Would you like to get rid of any of these?"

Mom: "I would love it. These behaviors are so constant they're driving me crazy."

Dr. Rick: "I'm warning you. If you withdraw attention from ugly behavior I'm worried you won't know what to do with all your free time!"

Dad: "We'll take the risk." (We all laugh.)

Dr. Rick: "Reducing ugly behaviors is not easy. They're designed to get your attention and push your buttons. But remember, this is not about you. It's not about love. It's not about Jacob being a 'bad boy'. It's about Jacob's behavior. Ugly behaviors are, well, *ugly* but, by definition, they do not break any rules because they are not truly harmful or destructive or disobedient. If you ignore them, they lose energy and they *will* go away. I promise."

Mom: "I think I could ignore whining and crying and even tantrums but what about threatening and disrespectful language?"

Dr. Rick: "You've heard the phrase 'pick your battles'? Well, pick your battles."

Mom: “I can tell you that threatening *my* mother or calling *my* dad ‘poopy’ would *never* have been tolerated by my parents! This would have been called ‘disrespectful’.”

Dr. Rick: “That’s a hard one for many parents. It pushes their buttons. But, in fact, this is not really about respect. The boys respect you. They just get angry at you and then they say things which they think will make you angry.”

Dad: “Well, it works. I think it’s mean and it makes me very angry.”

Dr. Rick: “We’ll put disrespectful behavior on our list of ‘bad behaviors’ that break the rules. (I add it to the list.) And we’ll talk about what to do about that later.”

Dad (smiling): “Good.”

Dr. Rick: “The important point here is to make sure the boys don’t get a lot of your attention or energy for *ugly behavior*. Here’s how I recommend handling ugly behavior:

- **Acknowledge** what Jacob wants, e.g., ‘You want to go to K-Mart *right now*.’
- **Explain** why he can’t have what he wants, e.g., ‘But it’s too late, Jacob. We can’t go.’
- Tell him: ‘**I don’t like your** (whining, yelling, crying, tantrumming) **behavior**. It will not help you get what you want.’
- **Offer them a better way** to get what they want (See below: *Transforming Ugly Behavior*).
- **Say these words:** ‘If you keep (whining, yelling, crying, tantrumming) I am going to ignore you.’ Then **walk away** to another room, and finally
- Make sure they **never get what they want** for this type of behavior.
- Note: You do not have to go through all these steps if you’ve gone through them already. Just say: ‘**I’m done talking to you about this.**’ Then walk away. Talking too much is a form of attention!

Crossing the Line: Pestering.

Mom: “But what if Jacob’s pestering is constant and he comes after me and whines at me wherever I go?”

Dr. Rick: “That’s a great question and, in my home, that kind of pestering would be called ‘bad’ behavior. It’s intrusive and aggressive. So let’s call that kind of aggressive pestering ‘bad’ behavior. (I add it to the list of rules for the Grants.) Call it ‘The No Pestering Rule’ and say: ‘Jacob you may not pester me. I will count to three and it better stop.’ If he pesters *one more time*, that’s it. He put his *toe over the line*. You decide the consequence *beforehand* and the consequence should *fit the crime and be fair*.”

Mom: “What do you recommend?”

Dr. Rick: “If he can’t be nice around me I’d send him to his room until he is ready to stop the behavior. I just want you to have a plan for every bad behavior.”

Dad: “Not five minutes? One minute for each year?”

Dr. Rick: “You could do five minutes. That’s popular right now in parenting circles but I just want his behavior to change.”

Dad: “I’m starting to see how this works. ‘Ugly’ behavior you can ignore. Jacob might get mad but it won’t really hurt anything. ‘Bad’ behavior we have to turn into a rule and *do* something about.”

Dr. Rick: “Exactly right, dad! But we’re not doing this to hurt his feelings or ‘punish’ him. We just want the pestering to stop.”

Mom: “What if he won’t go to his room?”

Dr. Rick: “You’ll win that battle. Can we put that discussion off until later in the visit?”

Transforming Ugly Behavior: Good negative behavior. What’s also interesting about ‘ugly’ behavior is that, while it can cross over into ‘bad’ behavior, it can also be changed into ‘good’ behavior. While I knew we would be discussing Jacob’s many challenging behavior at the next few visits, talking about *pestering* would be a good place to start.

Behind all of these ugly and bad behaviors are upsets, frustration, and/or angers. We want our children to be able to express these feelings in

a mature way. *I call this 'good negative' behavior. It means expressing your negative feelings in a good, acceptable way*, which is what we do (hopefully) as mature adults. We don't want to repress Jacob's feelings but we don't want him screaming (ugly) and stomping (ugly) and slamming doors (ugly) either. *Our goal then is to teach our children to 'use their words' to express upset and anger in a better way:* 'If you are mad at mommy, just say: "Mommy I'm mad at you. I want to go to K-Mart now and you said No!"' It is 'good' behavior for your children to be able to express negative feelings toward you in a way that is direct and not disrespectful (i.e., good negative behavior). Give Jacob permission to be mad at you in an acceptable way. It's OK for him to be angry with you, isn't it?"

Mom: "Yes."

Dad: "I guess."

Dr. Rick: "So dad, let me guess. You couldn't be angry with your folks."

Dad: "Good guess. But I don't want my kids to feel the way I did."

In this way, most of the ugly behaviors can be transformed to more mature, good behaviors. Of course, it doesn't mean Jacob will always get what he wants for 'using his words', but he will get what he wants more often. And he should *never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever* get what he wants for ugly behavior.

Finally, when you, as parents, have faith that 'ugly' behaviors *will* go away you will transmit strength to your child. The child gets the *message of competence*: 'We expect you to act in a mature way.' There is a sense of humor and perspective that your children will sense. They will know that ugly behavior doesn't push your buttons and if 'ugly' behavior turns 'bad' you *will* deal with it by enforcing the rules. But you must be very clear about the rules. . .

Being Clear About the Rules

The second most common mistake parents make is not being clear about the rules. It's not that Jacob's parents didn't have rules; they just couldn't

list them off the top of their heads. You can't be clear about the rules if you can't list them!

Most families have about 10-15 rules whether they know it or not. (See *Family Rules: The Top 5* below; we'll discuss the other rules later.) *I highly recommend that families write down their rules, with reasons and consequences and place them on the refrigerator* for all to see. I call this the Rules, Reasons and Consequences Chart. This is especially helpful for children with ASD.

In listening to Jim and Julie I hear at least five rules emerging from the discussion:

Family Rules: The Top Five

- 1.) No hitting or aggression.
- 2.) No throwing things on purpose. No being destructive.
- 3.) No ignoring. We listen to each other.
- 4.) No disrespect.
- 5.) No pestering.

Note: I will talk about how to *enforce* these rules after we have a discussion about 'Rules, Reasons, and Consequences'.

Rules Have Reasons. . . All rules must have *reasons* and everybody follows the same rules (including mommy and daddy) for the same reasons. *Remember, our ultimate goal is to help the children become more mature in their thinking and feeling.* They should not follow rules simply because we 'said so'.

Reasoning and talking, rather than yelling, threatening and/or spanking, are better at improving children's behavior in the long run. But *too* much talking and not enough action can lead to misbehavior and 'spoiled' children. We want to steer a middle ground between being too hard or too soft. I call it the '*iron fist in the velvet glove*' approach. We want to be attentive, sensitive, understanding, and nurturing. Our ultimate goal is for our children to *internalize* the rules, reasons, and consequences

so we do not have to tell them what to do all the time. This may take dozens of repeated opportunities and lots of practice. Some children, like Jacob, have to learn the hard way by suffering repeated negative (iron fist) consequences. So it goes.

Here's how I explain the reasons for the top three rules to the children. I tend to deepen my voice an octave, make it louder by 10 decibels, and make sure my face is stern so that *gesturally* the message is clear:

- There is 'No Hitting' because it *hurts* people. My mantra is: "When you hit you *never* get!" There are better ways to be angry than hitting.
- There is 'No Throwing'. It breaks things and can hurt people. There are better ways to be angry than throwing.
- You are not listening to me. 'We listen to each other' so we can talk. You don't have to do what I say but you *may not ignore me*. I listen to you. I want you to listen to me.

Of course, *when children are in the fury of a meltdown* there is no point in reasoning at all. Even when children are not tantrumming and can hear you, simply explaining the reasons is usually not enough to help children internalize the rules. They need to suffer, I mean experience, the iron fisted *consequences* of their behaviors. This approach is tried and true. While it may take a while to work (i.e., a few weeks to a few months) it *will* work but parents must be consistent. Rules may have reasons but that is rarely enough; they also need consequences.

. . . *And Consequences*. Consequences are of two types: positive and negative.

Positive:

- If you follow the rules life gets better (this is the whole point!). People are happier; they get along; you get what you want more often; you may get prizes, etc.

Negative:

- If you don't follow the rules it causes the people in your family to be unhappy. You don't get what you want, you will lose privileges that you like (loss of computer time, your freedom, etc.) and you won't get the rewards and prizes that you would have gotten if you had behaved. If you can't be nice to others you will have to spend time away from them.

There are dozens of specific consequences that include a wide range of positive rewards, prizes, and benefits on the one hand, to time outs/time away, natural negative consequences and loss of privileges on the other hand depending on the nature of the specific rules that are followed or broken (See *Resources & Websites: '1,2,3 Magic'*).

We will discuss these in the coming visits as we address Jacob's specific behavioral problems in the rest of Section Three.

The most severe consequence—the one we save for the worst behaviors like hitting and throwing—is the *use of force*.

The Use of Force

As I explained the *Good, Bad, & Ugly* approach Jim Grant jumped in:

Dad: "This is all very good but are you going to tell us what to *do* when Jacob *won't* listen, and starts throwing things at us and then *won't* go to his room?"

Dr. Rick: "The quick answer is you help him get himself under control immediately. What is your alternative? Let him ignore you, hit you, destroy the house? He has broken the rules. He does not have a choice. Let me give you a few quick examples."

- *From the Mini Time Out to Longer Time Outs.* Let's take *not listening* (Rule 3: *We listen to each other*) as an example. Let's say it was time to clean up. You have given Jacob fair notice; you have asked him to clean up twice and he ignores you. You go over to

him, get down at face level and say (not yell) in a calm neutral but firm clear voice: "Excuse me Jacob, you are not listening. Please stand up, stop what you are doing, and have a seat here (a mini time out). Thank you. When you get up from the chair I want you to clean up or you will go to your room (or time out chair) for five minutes." If he is does not clean up immediately then he gets a five minute time out. (Afterward he will still have to clean up.)

Dad: "What if he still doesn't clean up?"

Dr. Rick: "You repeat the procedure and double the time in time out. You do that for three times (total of half an hour). Then you warn Jacob. If I have to clean up your mess then I will put the toys away. Your toys will be gone for the rest of the day. No more toys. All gone!"

Mom: "That's pretty harsh."

Dad: "Sounds fair to me. He should clean up after himself."

Dr. Rick: "You can try different consequences. That's how I would do it. Just remember. The consequences should be enough to make him *think twice* the next time. 'Do I want to lose half an hour of my life and lose my toys for a day?' The consequences should fit the crime and be effective.

- For *aggression and throwing* you will stop him immediately by force, i.e., hold him, if necessary. We'll talk about how to do this next.
- For *resisting going to his room* you may have to physically take him to his room and you might double the time he spends there for resisting.

The point here is to have a plan, a *parenting protocol*, so you don't have to think about it too much. *The child should be completely aware of the plan. There should be no sudden surprises or arbitrary punishments, i.e., "That's it you're grounded for a month!!"* We'll go over *exactly* how to do this later but when it comes to discipline *your main job as parents is to enforce the rules*. You must win all battles related to the rules. Generally it takes about one to two weeks of consistent battle winning for the child to realize

that he is not going to get what he wants by misbehaving. It can take months, however, before mature behavior is completely internalized.”

Mom: “I don’t think I could stop him when he gets violent.”

Dr. Rick: “I truly hope that the the two of you do not have to physically restrain Jacob. Physical consequences are a last resort. We’re going to do everything we can to be loving, kind, gentle, and fair (use the velvet glove!). We are going to reason with Jacob. But if he doesn’t follow the rules after you’ve reasoned with him, you must strictly enforce the rules and may have to physically guide him to a chair or physically take him to his room or even hold him. I even say to the children: ‘I don’t want to do this but you have made a bad choice so now we have to help you get under control.’”

Dad: “I guess it’s better to do this now when he’s five than later when he’s fifteen.”

Dr. Rick: “Absolutely. Mom, you are physically much stronger than he is, for now. . .but I really want you to understand that *we are not doing this to punish Jacob*. We are doing this so he will learn to control his impulses, get his behavior under control, and become a more mature thinker and feeler.”

Mom: “I don’t think I could do that.”

Dr. Rick: “You’re worried about getting physical with Jacob.”

Mom: “My husband is much better at this.”

Dr. Rick: “But when dad’s not home what is your alternative? Let him hit you or Charlie? What if he is out of control breaking things? You really must know how to get him under control.”

Mom: (looking doubtful).

Dr. Rick: “Mom, let me just tell you that when you establish the rules, Jacob hopefully will only test you for a short time and then you won’t have to resort to physical control. I’ll show you how to control him in a way that is safe.”

Mom: (still looking doubtful).

Dr. Rick: “Let’s not worry about this now. Let’s get back to some do’s and don’ts for making sure the ‘Rules, Reasons, and Consequences’ approach works with the least amount of arguing and battling.”

Mom: (temporarily relieved) “Sounds good to me.”

Rules: The Do's and Don'ts

The most potent force for reducing misbehavior is to create a loving, nurturing family environment with a positive love-charge.

Rules: Do's and Don'ts

- Nurture, nurture, nurture
- The 'mirror' technique*:
 - Feeling reflections
 - Behavior reflections
 - Language reflections
- The 'never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever rule'
- Rule by the rules, not emotions
- Toe over the line rule
- Message of competence
- GOYA

*Mirroring: Do not ask questions. Make statements: "You are mad because your brother took your toy!!!"

Nurture, nurture, nurture. Everyone in the family should *feel* loved, supported, and cared for. That's why *Nurture, nurture, nurture* is first on the list. When parents *pay attention to good behavior* by giving lots of time, doing things together as a family, appreciating cooperation, complimenting kindness, and acknowledging accomplishments then the children will want to please their parents. Too often we take good behavior for granted. Give your full, undivided, loving attention to each of your children and do what they want. Attention is a basic need. We all love it, crave it, and need it. (See *Section 2: The PLAY Project Approach*)

Yet, these days the demands on parents are greater than ever which can make it hard to 'nurture, nurture, nurture'. Two working parent families, single parent families, families who are distant from grandparents, and lack of the traditional social supports from neighbors, churches and community agencies have, I'm afraid, become the norm. Families are more isolated and vulnerable than ever before.

Dad: “I have been working a lot lately.”

Mom: “But honey you are *such* a good dad.”

Dr. Rick: “You are a wonderful family but it’s easy to slip into routines. Just don’t let nurturing take a back seat! Make time for each other too. Mom, let the laundry go. Dad, take mom out for a romantic dinner at least once a month. Forget the email, turn off the TV, and don’t answer the phone. Place the highest value on *people* not things, on play and having fun times together. Time slips away and, before you know it, the children are older.”

“For typical children, the lack of nurturing shows up in resentment, neediness, and often misbehavior. For children with autism, the lack of nurturing shows up in isolation, repetitiveness, poor development, poor impulse control and. . .misbehavior.”

Dad: “Julie’s amazing but the stress is tough and there is a lot of yelling going on.”

Mom: “We have some big differences what to do when it comes to discipline.”

Dr. Rick: “But still it sounds like you guys are doing OK together?”

Dad: “We did go to the minister at our church a couple times and that helped but we still haven’t figured out this behavior thing.”

Dr. Rick: “One of the most important weapons to help you deal with ‘this behavior thing’ and maybe the best way to ‘nurture, nurture, nurture’, is to recognize Jacob’s feelings.”

Not Paying Attention to Feelings

In my discussion with Jacob’s parents, though, I could see that there was one source of nurturing that was missing. Now we come to the third most common mistake parents make in handling problem behaviors of children on the spectrum.

Jacob’s parents were not consistently acknowledging Jacob’s feelings.

For example, Jacob's parents reported that almost every time Jacob was told to turn the TV off because it was time for dinner, he would get mad and throw a 15-minute fit (See *Chapter 18, Visit 11: Dr. Rick's 20 Transition Tricks*).

Dr. Rick: "So tell me exactly what happens."

Mom: "I say: 'Jacob, it's time for dinner. Turn off the TV.' Then Jacob screams 'No-o-o-o-o!' and I know we're in for it."

Dr. Rick: "Then what do you do?"

Mom: "I start counting. I tell him: 'Jacob I'm going to count to three. If you don't turn off the TV, I will.' Then I count to three and turn the TV off (because *he* never does) and then he attacks me. He actually hits me and he's getting big."

Dr. Rick: "OK. So you skip how he's feeling and move right on to discipline."

Mom: "What do you mean, 'skipping his feelings'?"

Dr. Rick: "I mean you don't talk about how he feels. He's upset that he has to stop. He feels upset and you don't say anything about that."

Mom: "I never even thought about it."

Dr. Rick: "You should '*mirror his feelings*'. So when Jacob says 'No-o-o-o!' you could say:

- 'You're mad! You don't want to stop.' OR
- 'Jacob, you don't want to stop TV right now. You love that show.' OR
- 'No-o-o-o mommy! Watch TV. No dinner-r-r-r!'

Dad: "We *could* say that but how is that going to change anything?"

Dr. Rick: "Mirroring feelings does three things:

- First, it helps him *recognize* his feelings, which is the first thing mature thinkers and feelers do. They are *aware* of their feelings.

- Second, it lets him know that *you* know how he feels. And it feels good to be understood.
- And, most importantly when it comes to behavior, simply mirroring back to a child what he is feeling can stop a tantrum in its tracks.”

Dad: “I’ll believe that when I see it. When Jacob hits my wife all I want to do is give him a good spanking, not ‘mirror his feelings.’”

Dr. Rick: “You sound skeptical. And when Jacob hits mom you think that’s just not right and he deserves something more than just talking.”

Dad: “You got that right.”

Dr. Rick: “I was just mirroring your feelings.”

Dad: “H-m-m. Very tricky.”

Dr. Rick: “I wasn’t trying to be tricky. For me it’s second nature. It’s probably the technique I use the most with children. I mirror or reflect back to the children their *feelings, their behaviors, and their language*. I learned this from a wise education professor back in my fellowship days. It gives the children important feedback about what they are feeling, doing, and saying. I’m always listening for how people feel because it works to help them feel understood. It will really help Jacob to calm down *before* he throws a fit. In fact I’ll show you right now.”

Settling an Argument. Just as we were talking about this, I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Jacob and his brother were starting to argue over one of the toys in my office. Jacob took Charlie’s toy—a *Thomas the Tank Engine*—without asking. Charlie was yelling and starting to climb on top of Jacob to get it back.

Dr. Rick (quickly removing Charlie from climbing on Jacob): “Whoa, whoa, Charlie, *we’ll get your train back*. We’ll get your toy back.”

Jacob pulled the train to his chest as if to say, ‘The heck he will get this toy back.’

Dr. Rick (reflecting Jacob’s feeling): “You want that train so bad!”

Jacob: “My train.”

Dr. Rick: “You think that’s *your* train.”

Jacob: “My train.”

Dr. Rick: “You really want that train.”

Jacob: (smiles)

Charlie: (getting mad)

Dr. Rick: “Oh, Charlie, you want that train too! You were playing with it and Jacob took it away! Oh no. Jacob took your train!”

At this point both boys are calm but Charlie is still angry and Jacob is hopeful that he can have the train (I’ve been reflecting their feelings throughout).

Dr. Rick: “Jacob, I know you want that train and you can have it when Charlie is done playing. We have a rule: ‘No taking toys without asking.’ Charlie had it first.”

Dad: “Give the toy back to Charlie, now.”

Jacob: (clinging tighter to the toy)

Dr. Rick: “OK. Dad, jump in here. Mirror Jacob’s feeling. Use a statement, don’t ask a question.”

Dad: “He should just give it back.”

Dr. Rick: “I agree but I want to work this through by *mirroring feelings* so Jacob truly understands how to behave. *Tell* him, don’t ask him, how he feels.”

Dad: “He doesn’t want to give it back.”

Dr. Rick: “That’s the feeling. Make it a statement.”

Dad: “Jacob. You don’t want to give the toy back.”

Dr. Rick: “Perfect, dad. We have reflected back to him his feelings. Now, let’s tell him the rule, the reason, and the consequences.”

Dad: “You can’t take Charlie’s toy. You have to ask. Charlie had it first. If you don’t give it back. . . (dad looks at me).”

Dr. Rick: “. . . we’ll take it back and if you hit or throw you’ll have to sit in the time out chair. Jacob, please give the Thomas back to Charlie! You can play with it in five minutes. You can have a turn. So, Jacob, what’ll it be? Give Charlie his toy back or we will take it from you.”

We waited. Jacob, after what seemed like a long pause and a long silence, finally resentfully gives the toy to Charlie.

Dr. Rick: “Thank you Jacob. You’ll get a chance to play with the toy soon.”

Mom: “That was amazing. That would have been a meltdown for sure.”

Dr. Rick: “It took us a while but so what? Look at everything we accomplished by reflecting the boys’ feelings:

- Jacob understood his own feelings.
- He understood Charlie’s feelings.
- He seemed to understand the rule—*No taking without asking*—and the reason: ‘It made Charlie unhappy.’
- He made the choice to behave *on his own!* (Even though he was a little reluctant).
- He understood the consequences. Now he will get to play with the toy later instead of having to sit in the chair.”

I said all this loudly in front of Jacob to let him know how well he did.

Note: In *Chapter 24, Visit 14: Siblings With Rivalry!* we’ll go over the ‘rules for sharing’ that guided me in this interaction.

So, just to summarize the ‘Mirror Technique’:

1. **Recognize** the feelings of the child.
2. **Mirror** or reflect those feelings (or behavior or language) back to the child in a way that really joins the child and shows that you understand his feelings. (Pause. Don’t rush past the feelings by using the ‘I know, but’ method: ‘I know you feel mad but you have to give the toy back.’)
3. **Use statements** not questions. Children’s feelings are not in the form of questions, i.e., ‘Am I mad?’ No. Their feeling are in the form of statements, i.e., ‘I’m mad!’
4. Then go back to the ‘**rules, reasons, and consequences**’ approach.

Parents are amazed at how effective this simple method is in improving misbehavior. (See *Resources & Websites: How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*). Of course, *feeling reflections* don’t always

work. As we saw with Jacob and Charlie, they must be combined with the *rules, reasons and consequences* approach.

The Never, Ever, Ever, Ever, Ever, Ever, Ever Rule. While it may be most important to ‘nurture, nurture, nurture’, reflect feelings, pay attention to good behavior, etc, it also very important to be clear about the rules and to discipline consistently. Children with autism will get confused if you are not clear, predictable, and consistent.

So, let’s return to the Do’s and Don’ts and focus on one of the most important *don’ts*.

Don’t give the child what they want for misbehavior. I call this the *Never, Ever, Ever, Ever, Ever, Ever, Ever Rule*. You must say all seven ‘never evers’. Children will remember it and it will become a mantra. ‘Jacob, you will never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever get what you want for hitting (bad behavior), tantrums, threatening, yelling, whining, or pestering’ (all ugly behaviors).”

And yet we give in all the time.

We give the crying child some candy so they will be quiet in the store. We let them play their video after they’ve pestered us and whined for half an hour. “Here. Now stop your darn pestering.” We are unfair to sibs: “Just let him have the toy. I can’t stand his whining.” We cave in. We break rules. We do what’s easy. We just want them to be quiet!

In the behavioral sciences this is called ‘*intermittent reinforcement*’—giving the child what they want sometimes, i.e., reinforcing them every once in a while (i.e., intermittently). And according to behavioral studies—even with animals!—this is the most powerful way to keep the bad behavior going! If a child cries for an hour and then you give in, you have just reinforced (rewarded) crying for an hour. You can be sure the next time they want something they will cry for an hour (and one minute!) to get it.

Sometimes, especially when you are in public, it's the better choice to give them what they want even for ugly behavior. *If you are going to give in though, give in right away.* Do not give in after long periods of whining, crying, or tantrumming.

Note: In the next few visits I am going to provide the Grants a parenting protocol about how to handle public misbehavior, car misbehavior, and other forms of embarrassing behaviors.

A corollary to the 'never ever' rule is 'an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure'. Practice prevention. Prevent ugly or bad behavior by reasoning with your child early in their upsets or better yet *before* they get upset and *teach them (give them permission to use) the best way to get things from you:*

"So Jacob, if you want to keep watching TV, no yelling. You will never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever get what you want for yelling at me. But you can *make a deal*. Say: 'Mommy, please, five more minutes. Please?' Maybe I will let you watch until the next commercial. But if you yell or especially if you hit, no TV. Remember: *When you hit you NEVER get.*"

If Jacob does this type of if-then negotiating I probably would reward his good behavior—making a deal—by letting him watch TV. But I'd make sure the TV is off in five minutes or at the next commercial! (There's more of this in the next visit: *Dr. Rick's 20 Transition Tricks*).

Of course the child must be high functioning enough to reason with him in this way. I felt that Jacob, who is functioning at Greenspan FDL V-VI (See *Chapter 15, Visit 8: Rich Pretend Play*) could understand this. For children who have lower functioning capacities, parents will have to simplify their message and/or limit explanations but the major rules—no hitting, no throwing, listening, etc.—apply to everyone no matter how high or low functioning they are.

The take home lesson is that you should teach your child appropriate ways to get what they want but they should 'never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever' get what they want for misbehavior.

Rule by the Rules!

Mom: “But what if he doesn’t stop watching TV after five minutes.”

Dr. Rick: “You tell me. What if he doesn’t?”

Mom: “I tell him and I tell him and I tell him until I’m blue in the face and he still won’t listen to me until I start yelling and warning and threatening. Then he *might* get off and finally come to dinner.”

Dr. Rick: “That’s because you are not *ruling by the rules*. Jacob was ignoring and broke the ‘We listen to each other’ rule. He was not following the ‘We eat dinner together rule.’ He was breaking at least two rules. You should *rule by the rules*. After he ignores you once or twice you go over to him and tell him which rules he has broken and have him sit in a chair like we talked about earlier until he is ready to sit at the kitchen table. Use the mini time out method.”

Mom: “But he won’t listen; he won’t go to the kitchen table.”

Dr. Rick: “But you said he does eventually. You have to get furious with him first, right?”

Mom: “Actually that’s true. He does finally listen after I get really upset.”

Dr. Rick: This is what I call *ruling by emotions*. Here’s how Jacob understands the rule: ‘When mom gets really upset I will stop what I’m doing and listen.’ This is a very bad rule because it means that you have to get angry before the children will listen. This means that there is going to be a lot of yelling going on.”

Dad: “You got that right. I can’t stand the yelling.”

Dr. Rick: “And once you are upset and ruling by emotions it’s easy to get carried away and say things you regret. For instance, you might get so angry that you make up rules or consequences that you can’t enforce.”

Dad: “You mean like getting so mad you tell him he’s grounded from the iPad for weeks?”

Dr. Rick: “Exactly. Part of ruling by the rules is not making rules up on the spot. Each rule has its consequences that are *determined ahead of time and shared with the boys*. You can even have the kids help you. They should know what’s going to happen to them.”

Toe Over the Line. Children with autism especially need to know clearly and precisely where the rules start. The best way to be clear about the rules is to enforce the ‘Toe over the Line Rule’. As soon as Jacob has put even a toe over the line, that’s it. He suffers the consequences and learns that you are going to rule by the rules.

The ‘toe over the line rule’ applies to bad behavior—hitting, throwing things on purpose, not listening—and usually provokes the most response from the child because ‘toe over the line’ is the bottom line. It is the final ‘No’. The child has broken the rule and will now suffer the (pre-determined) consequences.

Dr. Rick: “So you count to three, creating the line, and Jacob has to stop watching TV. No more discussions, no more reasoning or talking, no more deals. You tell him to get up and if he doesn’t get up then you firmly take his arm and lift him up. . .”

Mom (interrupting, clearly anxious): “OK. I admit I yell. I make deals until I’m blue in the face but eventually I turn off the TV and he will just sit there and scream and call me names and threaten me. I go to take him to his room. . .”

Dad: “. . . But when I’m not home, Jacob will resist. He’ll flop to the floor. He’ll have a fit. He hits her!”

Mom (turning to me): “What if he attacks me?”

Dr. Rick: “Has he?”

Mom: “Yes. It’s happening more and more.”

Dr. Rick: “What do you do?”

Mom: “I go to *my* room and lock the door. And he pounds on the door and kicks it to the point where there are holes in the door and it’s getting loose on its hinges.”

Dr. Rick: “Mom, I’m starting to see why all this is so hard for you. . .”

Mom: “The idea of having to fight with my own son really upsets me.”

Dr. Rick: “You feel sorry that it has to come to this.”

Mom (nodding through tears.): “I just wish he would behave!”

At this point, the whole room feels sad. Even the boys have noticed mom crying and Charlie (not Jacob) comes to her side to make her feel better.

Charlie: “Mommy, stop crying.”

Dr. Rick: “Yes mom’s crying because she feels sad when Jacob hits her.”

Jacob meanwhile continues to play but he is paying attention and seems to be affected by his mom’s feelings.

A Message of Competence.

Dr. Rick: “The problem with putting *yourself* in time out is that it empowers Jacob. He senses that you are sad and afraid of a physical confrontation with him. And, perhaps most importantly, it doesn’t give him a message of competence.”

Mom: “A message of competence?”

Dr. Rick: “What message is Jacob getting when you avoid discipline? When you feel sad for him? When you let him dominate and misbehave?”

Mom: “That he is stronger?”

Dad: “That being a brat is OK?”

Dr. Rick: “No, worse than that. Actually the subliminal message you are sending him is that he is ‘a poor little boy with autism who doesn’t have to behave himself’. You are telling him (even though you don’t mean to) that you don’t believe in him.”

Mom: “I never thought of it that way. We expect Charlie to behave. It’s like we don’t expect Jacob to.”

Dr. Rick: “And can I tell you that giving Jacob the power to *not* listen and *not* follow the rules that everyone else follows is actually scary for Jacob. It’s too much power and of course it’s not real power. It’s really immature behavior.”

Mom: “I’m really getting this. I’ve been a terrible mom.”

Dr. Rick: “Stop. You’re a great mom. I am not going to reflect your feelings! (Everyone laughs.) You’ve got a kid with high functioning autism who knows how to push your buttons, who is stubborn, and who

is going to push you to the max. As soon as you are ready to assert your parental power you will get him under control. You ready?

Mom: "I still don't understand what to *do* when Jacob comes after me."

Dr. Rick: "There are only two choices. Take him to his room or hold him. We're getting back to that bottom line of discipline. You must win these battles. You have been kind and loving and fair (and a bit of a wimp!) but now it's time to *rule by the rules* and *not let him put his toe over the line*. Give him a *message of competence*: Jacob I believe in you so much that I'm going to expect you to follow the rules. Are you ready to learn how to hold him?"

Mom (reluctantly): "I guess I don't have a choice."

Dr. Rick: "You do. You can let him run the house and hit and destroy."

Mom: "I don't want that."

Dr. Rick: "OK. Here's exactly how you do it."

Safe Holding Methods. Breaking rules has consequences. The most severe consequence is to physically stop the child from doing a destructive behavior. We have been heading here the whole time with Jacob's family and it's time to teach them '*Safe Holding Methods*'.

There are two basic methods. One involves a so-called 'basket hold' where the parents hold the child in their lap with the child's back to the parent's chest. The child's arms are crossed in front with the parent holding the child's hands from behind. The parent then wraps his or her legs around the child's legs. The danger of this hold is head butting and often the child can squirm out of this hold.

The other method is described below and involves having the parent calmly but firmly holding the child safely on the floor. These methods are officially approved by government agencies to help out-of-control children and adolescents get under control.

I walk over to Jacob and ask him to lie on the floor on his back. He looks a little confused but he does it. I tell him I just want to show mommy a trick. I straddle him, putting my legs on either side of his legs and hold his arms out so I am looking him in the face. My bottom is gently

sitting on his thighs. I ask Jacob if I am hurting him and he shakes his head no. I tell him to try to get out and he can't. He's immobilized and stuck. He even says, "I stuck."

Dr. Rick (turning to mom): "Here are the words I want you to say to Jacob: 'Jacob, I love you very much but I will not tolerate this behavior. You may not hit! (or throw, or destroy, etc.)' I want you to state the rule firmly and clearly. Then you are to hold him like this for three minutes by the clock or until he is calm enough to let him go whichever comes first. This will seem like a long time for both of you. During this time do NOT talk to Jacob at all except every once in a while repeat the rule 'No hitting!' OK, mom your turn. I want to show you that you are stronger than he is."

Mom, with an embarrassed smile, gets off her chair and assumes the same position on top of Jacob who is being a very good sport. We ask him to try to get out and he can't of course. Mom IS stronger.

Dr. Rick: "I just wanted you to see that you *are* stronger. In the heat of battle, though, Jacob is not going to cooperate like this. You are going to have to quickly wrestle him down in order to sit on him. The first time you do this I want dad to be there."

Mom: "I'm starting to understand the whole idea behind the good, the bad, and the ugly. We're really teaching Jacob the reasons for rules but if he's not ready yet to truly understand we use consequences to help him understand and that means using force if we need to."

Dr. Rick: "By George I think she's got it."

Dad: "Yeah, for good behavior they're rewarded and for bad and ugly behaviors they never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever get what they want." (We all laugh.)

Dr. Rick: "By George I think *he's* got it."

GOYA

Dad: "But what is this GOYA listed here on the Do's and Don'ts?"

Dr. Rick: "It stands for 'Get Off Your As. . . Butt.'"

Dad: “Very funny.”

Dr. Rick: “It’s my dramatic way of saying that disciplining is not a spectator sport. I don’t really have to tell you guys to GOYA. You know already that you can’t sit on your *La-Z-Boy* and shout from across the room when the boys are fighting. You have to be there, enforcing the rules, reasoning with the boys, carrying out consequences. (Looking at mom) You have to be ready, willing, and able to take Jacob to his room.”

Mom: “OK, OK. I get it. I have to win the battles.”

Dr. Rick: “Not against Jacob but *for* Jacob.”

Conclusion: The Impulse Sandwich

It is a fact: Jacob, due to his autism, has an under-connected brain (See *Chapter 1, Visit 1—Part 1: Jacob has autism*), which causes him to act immaturely. This is not an excuse for him but an explanation. While we should be sympathetic—it is much harder for Jacob—and patient, we must also expect Jacob to become more mature. This means we have to be *persistent* in using all the parenting protocols we’ve discussed in this visit.

Neurologically speaking when an impulse—to hit or throw or get upset—reaches Jacob’s brain, he acts—hits or throws or gets upset—without thinking. Impulse—action. Impulse—action. His impulses never make it to the frontal lobe.

For those of us who are (relatively) mature thinkers and feelers, when an impulse arises in our emotional brain we control that impulse because our frontal lobes *process* (i.e., recognize and reason through the consequences of) our impulses and feelings.

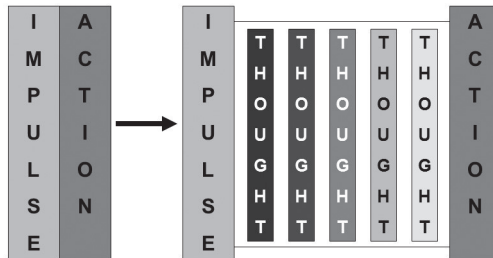
In short we have in our brain an impulse sandwich made up of an *impulse* and an *action* (See Figure below).

Recent brain research locates emotional control in the *cingulate gyrus*. It’s the part of the brain that ‘decides’ whether the impulse will go to

the action cortex (where bad and ugly behavior happen) or whether it will go to the frontal lobe (where mature thinking happens).

An intriguing possibility is that the cingulate gyrus may do this by 'recognizing' (i.e., labeling, and being aware of) feelings as they arise. Sound familiar? Yep, the 'The Mirror Technique'. When we reflect Jacob's feelings back to him we are helping him send his feeling impulses to the frontal lobe.

The *Impulse* Sandwich



The Impulse Sandwich: Sibling Rivalry

- ***Impulse:*** Smack your brother now! He is taking your toy!!!
- ***Thought 1:*** I'm so mad that he took my toy, I feel like smacking him.
- ***Thought 2:*** If I hit him though, mom and dad will be angry.
- ***Thought 3:*** They'll take the toy away and I'll have to go to time out.
- ***Thought 4:*** If I just call them to get him out of here they'll come and I can play.
- **Action:** Hey mom, Charlie's taking my toy would you please get him out of here now?!

This (above) is an example of a mature impulse sandwich. It's a variation on the argument that Charlie and Jacob had earlier. The first thought in an impulse sandwich is *awareness* of the feelings. The next set of

thoughts help us cool our feelings down (notice the shades in the impulse sandwich going from dark to light?).

The ultimate goal of *The Good, The Bad & The Ugly* approach is to help Jacob develop a mature ‘impulse sandwich’ for all kinds of impulses. Over time—and sometimes the process can take months!—he will internalize the rules, reasons, and consequences. He will behave without our having to tell him to. He will learn that rules are designed to keep us safe, take care of ourselves, and be considerate of others. Mature behavior leads, hopefully, to empathy and better social skills. This would be quite an accomplishment for a child with autism! This is an achievement at Functional Developmental Level VI. When parents are battling bad behaviors, it’s hard to see the light (i.e., maturity) at the end of the tunnel. But it is not only possible; I have seen it many, many times.

Dr. Rick: “If you stick to the plan, I feel very optimistic that Jacob will grow up to be a thoughtful, considerate, well behaved, and *competent* boy.”

Dad (tongue in cheek): “I’ll believe that when I see it.”

Dr. Rick: “I have a lot of faith in Jacob and you. You are both wonderful parents.”

Dad: “Well, Jacob’s got so many ‘bad’ behaviors. . .”

Mom: “. . . we’ll need help with the specifics.”

Dr. Rick: “Funny you should mention that. What I’d like you to do for the next time is have you do two things: make a list of your family rules and make a detailed list of all of Jacob’s behavior problems, starting with waking up and ending up with going to sleep.”

Mom: “I want to work on his tantrums over TV.”

Dr. Rick: “Done. Who wants a sucker?”

The boys run out to get a sucker from Amy. I get a warm good-bye with a hug from both Jim and Julie. I feel good about Jacob’s prognosis. With these parents, he’s going to become a robust emotional thinker. Now it’s a matter of working on specifics. We set up a meeting for the next available time to talk about ‘transition tricks’.

Summary

- Jacob is becoming a ‘little stinker’, breaking the rules, and pushing his parents’ buttons.
- Jim and Julie Grant each have their own buttons from their families of origins. Jim gets angry and Julie feels sad when faced with conflict.
- Charlie is suffering because of all of Jacob’s aggression. The whole family is stressed.
- I introduce ‘The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly’ approach to parenting.
- We have a long discussion about ‘Rules, Reasons, and Consequences’, and the parenting rules that will guide Jacob to learn to control his aggressive impulses.
- Through the process of using misbehavior Jacob will become a more mature emotional thinker—we hope!

Resources & Websites

Websites

- University of Michigan Your Child Website, Parenting Resources: <http://www.med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/parent.htm>

Books

- *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk* (1980) Adele Faber, Elaine Mazlish.
- *1,2,3 Magic* (5th Edition, 2014), Thomas Phelan
- *Autism Solutions* (2011) Ricki Robinson MD
- *Engaging Autism*, Stanley Greenspan MD and Serena Weider PhD, Da Capo Press (2006)

Coming up

- Jacob's parents bring in their house rules and a long list of behavioral difficulties. We focus on how to manage transitions, sleep issues, morning routines, public misbehavior, toileting resistance, sibling rivalry, and how to most effectively use consequences like 'time out/time away' and loss of privileges.