


Good Kids, Bad Habits.

A *(no bs)* Guide for
Raising a child who struggles
with ADD/ADHD

*(Hint: It has to do with **Executive Function**)*

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How to use this guide.

Parents and caregivers, THANK YOU for taking the time to educate yourself about how to support your neurodiverse kid! Raising a child who struggles with Executive Function (EF) can be totally baffling! Please know you are NOT ALONE!

This is by no means a definitive guide to EF or parenting! My hope is that you will have a *good enough* understanding of both so that you can take meaningful steps toward what matters most - creating a high quality relationship with your child and modeling the skills you want them to reflect back to you.

Email me at yulia@mindfulleducation.com to give your feedback, Q&A, or to let me know what you need to make this guide work better for you!

Here's how to get the best results...

1. Read it. More than once.

Will you commit to giving this entire guide at least five reads? What about 15? I do my best to give you concise, practical information so you can start taking action asap (I even did the highlighting for you!). Reading it over as you go will help you layer the info, reflect and learn more quickly from each challenge – there will be a lot of those!

2. Be honest with yourself.

This guide is about taking an honest look in the mirror and developing a keen self-awareness about the habits you are modeling to your child. (Shame, blame, and judgement are not welcome beyond this point!) Accept and be OK with exactly how things are right now. Be kind to yourself. Do your best. Then do a little better.

3. Don't just do it. Be it.

These are NOT tips and tricks to get your kid to act a certain way. This guide is about parenting mindfully and confidently while focusing on the most important thing – **creating a relationship in which your kid feels safe, understood, and supported**. This stuff works if you work it. Never give up. Baby steps work. Go for progress, not perfection. Celebrate every tiny victory along the way.

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***What I really need is to get clear about what I must do,
not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must
precede every act.***



Søren Kierkegaard

Danish Philosopher

Part I: An Overview of Executive Function (EF)

In a Nutshell

In a nutshell, **Executive Function is about our ability to get stuff done.** ADHD is a developmental delay of the brain's Executive Function (EF). When we have problems with EF, we have difficulty regulating emotions, delaying gratification, resisting distractions, managing focus, keeping track of details, and completing tasks. Sometimes, when we're doing something we love, we are able function pretty well! But the skills do not transfer over to activities that we find boring, difficult, or overwhelming (or where the gratification is delayed).

While we cannot cure ADHD, we can help kids practice the skills of self-awareness and self-management until they can function more independently. Because EF continues to develop well into our 20's, **It is important to directly teach and model EF skills to kids as they grow into young adults.**

Three Key Functions

Because EF happens in the brain, it is way more complex than any definition in this guide. To simplify EF, we can look at three main functions that help us **regulate our emotions** and **manage our impulses**:

- **Self-control:** Our ability to set priorities, regulate emotions, resist distractions, and inhibit impulses.
- **Working memory:** Our ability to hold information in mind long enough to apply it to the task at hand.
- **Mental flexibility-** Our ability to see or think about something in more than one way, and to switch from one task to another.

Kids with ADHD **do not have the ability to stop and think through to the consequences of their actions.** Instead, they act on their emotional impulses and get stuck repeating dysfunctional routines and self-defeating habits. Not because they don't care, not because they are willful or defiant, but because they do not have the skills. In the next section, we will look at 12 specific EF skills that kids with ADHD need to practice and how parents can help.

12 EF Skills

Learning EF is similar to learning how to play an instrument – it takes lots of time and practice before it feels fluid and comes more naturally. **How can parents help kids do what they need to do even when they are resistant?** Stay persistent! Challenge your kid to take baby steps outside of their comfort zone while celebrating every victory along the way. These skills are fundamental to helping your kid get stuff done. (Adapted from EF Coach, Seth Perler: <https://sethperler.com/executive-function-holy-grail/>).

EF skill	What it looks like
inhibit	To have self-restraint. To hold back, pause, think before you act. Inhibit thoughts, emotions, behaviors that are inappropriate or go against long term goals/well-being.
regulate emotions	To have tools to truly regulate and work through challenging emotions. To self-soothe.
working memory	Verbal and visual strategies that help us keep things in mind and apply it to what we're doing. Like juggling balls, tracking important details during a process. Includes self-talk and visual imagery.
plan	A realistic perception of the steps necessary to accomplish a goal or task.
manage time	A realistic perception of how long things take. (ADHD causes "time blindness")
organize	To have systems of doing things or keeping track of things that are organized enough so goals can be met effectively.
prioritize	To know and do what is most important at any given time.
focus	To manage and sustain attention. Concentrate, be "on task", stick to it. To resist temptation, shift when trying to focus, avoid distractions, redirect thoughts.
initiate tasks	To self-start or activate. To get the ball rolling, get the train moving.
persist	To continue to try until finished, work to completion.
transition	To shift from activity to activity effectively. To start and stop when needed.
reflect	To step back and learn from mistakes in order to problem solve. To connect the dots, recognize self-defeating behaviors. To have self-awareness.

How parents can help kids develop EF

wellness/ self-care	Help your child get enough sleep, nutritious food, exercise and quality time with you by setting reasonable limits. Limit processed foods and screen time at night. Practice your own self care and model it to your child.
emotional regulation	Model healthy self-soothing habits (breathing, counting to 10, taking a walk, talking to a friend, therapy...etc.). Practice emotional self-regulation to help your child co-regulate with you (more on this later).
connection	Assume the best in your child. Be present, make eye contact, listen without judgment and without trying to “fix” things. Resist shaming, blaming, arguing, lecturing or nagging. <u>Validate your child’s feelings</u> . Offer compassionate guidance. Set limits lovingly. Strive to have more positive interactions than negative.
ownership	Get buy in. Help your kid take ownership – this is critical if your child is to be engaged. Too often we just tell kids what to do and don’t give them any say in the process. Get to know what’s meaningful to your child and what they are willing to sacrifice for it. Help them set small goals and hold them accountable.
plan	Plan your day ahead of time. Talk it out, write it down, model this important skill daily (even when you don’t feel like it). Help your child plan ahead and write down, or draw their plan. Even if they don’t follow it, they are still building EF!
chunk	Break things down into bite-sized pieces. Chunk by task or time. Use timers & set alarms throughout the day. Talk about how long stuff takes <i>realistically</i> .
visuals	If it’s out of sight, it’s out of mind. Set reminders, have lists or notes clearly posted in easy-to-see places. Have clearly labeled “homes” for important everyday items.
routines	Set aside time to help your kid design effective routines for morning and evening, homework, studying, transitions, waking up, bedtime, fitness, etc. to make things more predictable, and to reinforce positive habits.
systems	Help your kid design personalized, reliable systems to effectively manage belongings, tasks, and time. (Do not do this for your kid, do it <i>with</i> them. Help them design their own system that’s unique to their brain. The more fun, creative, and simple, the better.)
victories	Look for and celebrate even the tiniest victories. Every step counts. Make goals reachable, positively reinforce effort instead of outcome. Focus on your child’s strengths. Be your child’s biggest cheerleader.
mindfulness	Practice a growth mindset. Reflect often, notice your own emotional triggers and subconscious patterns. Journal your victories, fears, feelings, challenges, strengths, and gratitude. Practice meditation or a physical activity that helps you quiet your mind and drop into your body (yoga, climbing, dancing, biking, etc.).

Part II: Focus on What's Most Important

Unconditional Love

What does it mean to love unconditionally? To quote Marriage and Family Therapist, Dr. John Amodeo:

"Children need to be loved without conditions. As they struggle through life, we need to be unendingly patient — taking many deep breaths, and offering guidance repeatedly. Embodying a consistently loving, accepting presence, we create a climate for safe attachment." - Psychology Today

The more effectively you can **respond** to your child's needs, the safer they feel and the more secure their attachment is to you. A securely attached child is more likely to feel comforted by your presence, to follow your lead, to look up to you, and to be influenced by you.

A securely attached child is also free to wander, to explore, to make mistakes, and to come back to you for guidance and comfort as they navigate the unknown. This combination of freedom and safety is the essence of a secure bond. This is your priority as a parent.

Your most important goal is a secure attachment

Your **Attachment style** is the way you relate to others based on how you perceive yourself and the people around you. **Your ultimate goal is to create a healthy/secure attachment with your child, so they feel safe to come to you when they need guidance, comfort, or a safe space to express themselves.**

Below are the three main attachment styles. As you read through, notice what resonates with you. You may find that you identify with more than one style or that your style has shifted overtime. Most of us have a dominant style of attachment that is our “default” or “autopilot” mode.

AVOIDANT	SECURE	ANXIOUS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Think highly of yourself and less of others.- Solitary, emotionally withdrawn.- Uncomfortable being close with others.- Seek freedom: don't trust others with their true feelings, do not come to others for help.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Have a positive view of yourself, other people, and relationships.- Love and trust come easily.- Comfortable & safe in relationships.- Honest and open.- Balance of freedom and safety: enjoy spending time together and apart.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Have a negative self view/ low self-esteem.- Preoccupied with emotions.- Fearful of being abandoned/not loved.- Seek safety: worry about giving more to relationships than you get back. Do not feel valued.

Transformation: Do This Now

Whichever one of these buckets you fall into is unimportant. **What matters is that you recognize your own impulses and commit to changing that ingrained pattern when you see it come up.**

Just as carefully as science has divided us into different categories, it has also carefully observed that they are not pre-determined. That means you were not born with the attachment style you have today—you developed it over time.

That's important because it means it can be *changed*. It won't be easy and it won't be fast, but it is possible and totally worth it. How? With persistent work. Here's what works:

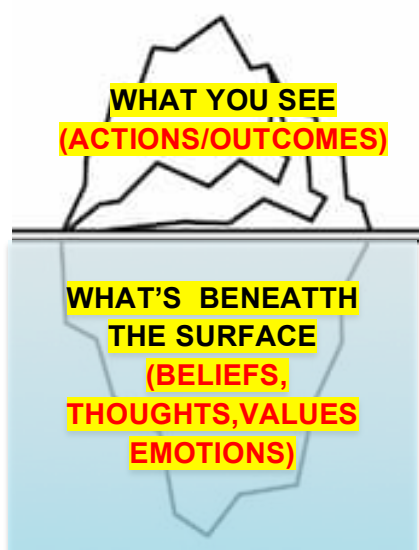
Each time you catch your brain chattering either about yourself or someone you know, force yourself to slow down and answer two questions:

1. Am I thinking the way a secure person with secure relationships would? If not, then...
2. How would that person think about this?

With your answers, there's only one thing left to do: be that person!

Emotional Iceberg

It is important to understand that your child's actions are just the "tip of the iceberg." **They are an indicator of what your child is experiencing beneath the surface.** Instead of focusing on what you see, do your best to uncover the beliefs, thoughts, and emotions that are hidden from view beneath the surface. Use the emotional iceberg as a model to help you shift your perspective and become more consistent in responding to your child's needs instead of reacting to their surface actions. Take a few minutes here to reflect and journal some ideas for how you will respond the next time you see some of these dysfunctional behaviors.



WHAT YOU SEE:

- Attitude
- Back-talking
- Defiance
- Opposition
- Hitting/ Biting
- Lying
- Throwing a tantrum
- Whining
- Stomach ache

WHAT MAY BE CAUSING IT:

- Needs contact
- Tired
- Hungry
- Overwhelmed
- New / scary environment
- Sad
- Angry
- Misunderstood
- Overstimulated
- Feeling inferior

Part III: Debunking Three BS MYTHS about “Bad” Behavior

BS MYTH #1: My child is overly emotional and dramatic.

TRUTH: Big emotions are OK!

Emotions don't need to be fixed. They are not scary or forever. They indicate when your child needs guidance. Kids act out irrationally & intensely because you are a safe person/space to work out their emotions. The more they can do this in your nonjudgmental presence, the faster you will feel a shift, and the more emotionally intelligent your child will grow up to be!

BS MYTH #2: My child is acting out on purpose to anger me and is hard-wired to be oppositional.

TRUTH: Your child wants to be “good”

Kids are wired with the potential for empathy, kindness, to learn from their experiences, and to get along. They are NOT doing things to anger you on purpose. Remember that your *good kid* is always there underneath those “*bad*” habits. They need your unconditional love, empathy, and patience as they navigate the world and learn slowly and painfully from their mistakes - just like the rest of us!

BS MYTH #3: My child is defiant, has an attitude problem and is disrespectful.

TRUTH: Difficult behavior is just the “tip of the iceberg”

The behavior you can see is your kid's *impulsive reaction* to their subconscious beliefs and emotions. When you see self-defeating behavior, take it as a sign that your child is struggling. Set aside your own fears, resentments, and regulate your own emotions first. Then connect **without needing to fix anything**. Listen without judgment & let them know that you hear them, and understand how they feel. Set limits lovingly and firmly. Be consistent, follow through, and always seek to *reach* before you *teach*.

Positive Affirmations

Say them out loud, write them down, or think about these positive affirmations to help you stay calm while your child is acting out. Can you come up with more?

MY CHILD WANTS TO GET ALONG.

THEY ARE DOING THE BEST THEY CAN AT ALL TIMES.

MY CHILD NEEDS MY GUIDANCE.

DON'T GIVE UP. BABY STEPS WORK.

***Children require guidance and sympathy
far more than instruction.***



Anne Sullivan

Instructor and lifelong companion of Helen Keller.

Part IV: Being an Alpha Parent

Why Alpha?

Alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet, just like 'A' is the first letter of the English alphabet. **To be an alpha means to go first or to take the lead.** An alpha parent is one who takes the lead and who models the behavior that they would like their child to learn. The next part of this guide will help you envision what it means to be a secure parent through my Alpha Parent Model.

But first...this fascinating bit of neuroscience will help you appreciate just *how much of you* your child reflects. Italian neurophysiologist, Giacomo Rizzolatti, and his colleagues at the University of Parma were the first to identify the mirror neuron in the brains of primates.

These special neurons fire in our brains when we observe another person's behavior as if we were engaging in the same behavior. This brain function is what allows us to interpret the intentions, actions, and emotions of other people.

When your child observes your behavior, their brain activity literally mirrors your brain activity, which is how they develop the same habits overtime. **This is called co-regulation.**

Co-regulation with an adult who has functional and healthy habits is one of the biggest keys in helping your child develop their ability to regulate their own emotions and habits.

Your child subconsciously co-regulates with your mood and picks up on your habits (whether functional or dysfunctional). Alpha parents take the lead by modeling emotional regulation, impulse-control, and problem-solving skills to their child. This is the key to helping your child develop their self-control (aka Executive Function).

Three Types of Parents

I've identified three types of parents that make up the parenting spectrum. These three distinct types are: **Alpha**, **Controlling Alpha**, and **Beta**. Understanding where you fall along this spectrum will help you become aware of your "autopilot" patterns so you can parent more intentionally and mindfully moving forward.

The Alpha Parent is **confident and outcome independent**. Relaxed and at ease in most situations, the alpha parent is a pillar of strength. The alpha parent acknowledges their child's emotions, creates a safe space for them to be vulnerable, and communicates without judgment. The alpha parent leads by example, confident in the fact that their child will inevitably follow their lead. When the child of an alpha parent is distressed, the alpha parent's calm demeanor and confidence in their child helps their child to calm down and feel reassured.

The Controlling Alpha Parent is **confident and outcome dependent**. Relaxed and at ease as long as everything is going according to their agenda, the controlling alpha parent tends to have a short fuse. Their need to be in control may be well-intentioned, but they may come across as bossy or micromanaging. Controlling alpha parents try to manipulate their child into achieving a certain outcome. They may be perceived by their child as aggressive and dominating. They often put their child on a pedestal or unknowingly shame their child for falling short of their unreasonable expectations.

The Beta Parent is **unconfident and outcome dependent**. Anxious and lacking confidence in their ability to lead, beta parents act out of fear of failure. Their behavior may fluctuate from acting very sweet and too flexible to acting out of anger or neediness. This may come across as yelling, nagging, bribing, or pleading with their child when they do not get a desired outcome. Beta parents often say one thing and do another. They have low expectations of their child, and in turn their child has low expectations of themselves. Because of their uncertainty, beta parents (unknowingly) step back and let their child take a leadership role. In doing so, they reflect their child's emotions and behavior.

Progress, Not Perfection

Because relationships and life-circumstances are too complex to fit neatly into any box, no real parent falls into any single category or type above. I encourage parents to use this model as a guide to help you become keenly aware of how your emotions and actions influence your child's.

When you have a clear and compelling vision for the type of parent you want to be, and you can recognize which actions bring you closer to that vision, you can take small steps everyday to make progress toward it. The goal is to think, talk, walk and act like an alpha as consistently as you can. Use every challenge as an opportunity to take the lead and practice the habits you want to teach your child. To help you get there, here are 14 behaviors alpha parents consistently practice and five that they avoid.

Alpha Parents Do:

1. Stay calm in hectic or emotional situations.
2. Think flexibly and go with the flow.
3. Assertively set limits and boundaries.
4. Create a safe space for your child to express their feelings, feel validated, act irrational or silly.
5. Set reasonable limits and expectations.
6. Encourage your child to express themselves through open-ended questions. Listen openly.
7. Understand that mistakes are inevitable and also good learning experiences.
8. Encourage your child to come up with creative solutions in challenging situations.

Alpha Parents Do: (continued)

9. Express confidence that your child will be able to handle any situation.
10. Spend quality one-on-one time doing what you both enjoy.
11. Share stories of your victories and challenges.
12. Make sure your words match your actions.
13. Understand that your child has not yet developed emotional and impulse control and that you must model this behavior.
14. Connect with like-minded individuals and communities, ask for help.

Alpha Parents DO NOT:

- Assume something is easy for your child because it is easy for you
- Lecture or nag your child.
- React with frustration to your child's emotions.
- Argue with your child or with a co-parent in front of your child.
- Hit, shame, or verbally abuse your child.

Your Turn

Grab a journal and write a *detailed vision* for your family. Then write how *you will show up* in this vision. What are your core values? Finally, write what steps you will take *starting now* to be that person. Use this journal for the problem solving activities in the next section of this guide and to keep a log of your goals, victories, and challenges (again, expect a lot of those! AND never give up!).

Believe this difficult truth. Showing respect in the face of disrespect, love in the face of hate, trust in the face of betrayal, and serenity in the face of turmoil, will teach your children more than all the moral lectures by all the preachers since the dawn of time.



William Martin

Author of The Parent's Tao Te Ching: Ancient Advice for Modern Parents

Part V: Identifying Problems and Solutions

Dysfunctional VS Functional Problem Solving (WORKSHEETS)

Now that you have a vision for the type of parent you want to be for your child, you can practice using the same Problem-Solving Model I use to outline and address your toughest parenting challenges.

Print pages 14-17 to use as your worksheets. They key to this model is progress, not perfection.

What you want to do is practice the process (POP!) of mindfully RESPONDING to problems instead of impulsively REACTING to them.

Remember to approach your child with compassion, understanding, and to include them in the creative solution process. Let it be messy, uncomfortable, and not perfect. Let them know you hear them and that you are here to help - not punish. Focus on the process and don't be too attached to any particular outcome.

To get started, make a list of problems and rank them in order of priority. You can't work on everything at once, so focus on what's most important first—relationship, emotional regulation, wellness—before you get into lower priority stuff like homework, cleaning the bedroom, or brushing their teeth. Once you've made your list, focus on your top priorities as you answer the questions below.

PROBLEM: What is something that you wish were different, or a problem that you would like to solve?

ANTECEDENT: Explain what happens immediately before this behavior. What is the context of the situation, or the trigger for it?

UNDERLYING EMOTIONS & BELIEFS: What may be going on below the surface that you cannot see? What is your child feeling when they act this way? What do they believe about themselves, about you?

REWARD: What does your child gain or benefit from this action? Note: it may not seem that there is a benefit, but every behavior has a function. Functions include: GETTING ATTENTION, ACCESS, ESCAPE, PLEASURE OR RELIEF.

CONSEQUENCES: What are the *natural* consequences of this behavior? Consequences can be positive or negative.

REACTION: How do you typically react when your child does this?

CYCLE: Recognize the pattern of this behavior and the pattern of your reaction. How often does your child do this? Is it getting worse over time? Have you changed your approach over time, or is your reaction automatic and reactive?

Dysfunctional VS Functional Problem Solving (SAMPLE)

SAMPLE PROBLEM: Child is lying or exaggerating.

Underlying cause: Child feels like he's not good enough and needs to exaggerate to gain social acceptance. Child gets into the habit of lying, it becomes an impulse.

Reward: Child receives attention, gains status, momentarily feels a confidence boost.

Consequence: Friends and adults figure out he is lying/exaggerating and he loses trust, status, and friends. Feels inadequate, low on self-esteem, shame, loneliness.

Reaction: Confrontation, arguing, punishment.

Cycle: Continues to lie and exaggerate to gain attention, repair reputation and regain social status. I punish.

(SCENARIO)	DYSFUNCTIONAL	FUNCTIONAL	(SCENARIO)
Exaggeration/Lying	PROBLEM	PROBLEM	Exaggeration/Lying
<i>"You're making that up."</i>	BLAME	ACKNOWLEDGMENT	<i>"I'm listening to what you're saying but I'm not sure that's the whole story/ I heard something different from ___."</i>
<i>"No I'm not!"</i>	DEFENSE	UNDERSTANDING	<i>"Help me understand how you feel, what happened [LISTEN] tell me more." I understand, you felt embarrassed because..."</i>
<i>"Yes you are, the neighbor told me what really happened./ What you said."</i>	ARGUING	ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION (Expectation or limit)	<i>"I want you to feel safe to be honest with me. When you don't tell the truth, I feel that I can't trust you, and I want to trust you. We do not lie, lying breaks trust."</i>
<i>"Nobody wants to be friends with a liar./ How are you not ashamed of yourself?/ You're grounded for two weeks this time so you can really learn your lesson."</i>	SHAME/ PUNISHMENT	CREATIVE SOLUTION (system or routine)	<i>"How big is this problem? What are some solutions?/ What can you do next time this happens/ next time you have the same feeling/reaction?" "What would that look like?/ What can I do to help?/ May I give you a gentle reminder?"</i>
<i>"Go to your room, I can't deal with this right now."</i>	AVOIDANCE	CHECK-IN	<i>"What are you proud of today?/ What was a challenge?/ What will you do differently next time so that things go more smoothly? / What did you learn?"</i>
<i>"Just don't do it again."</i>	DENIAL	CELEBRATION	<i>"I noticed you took some extra time to think before answering 😊 / Thank you for being honest. / Thank you for apologizing I really appreciate that."</i>

Dysfunctional VS Functional Problem Solving (WORKSHEET)

(SCENARIO)	DYSFUNCTIONAL	FUNCTIONAL	(SCENARIO)
	PROBLEM	PROBLEM	
	BLAME	ACKNOWLEDGMENT	
	DEFENSE	UNDERSTANDING	
	ARGUING	ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION (Expectation or limit)	
	SHAME/PUNISH	CREATIVE SOLUTION (system or routine)	
	AVOIDANCE	CHECK-IN	
	DENIAL	CELEBRATION	

Alpha Mindsets

Alpha: (n.) One who takes the lead, goes *first*.

(adj.) **Confident *and* outcome independent.**

I am responsible for my emotions.

I assume the best in myself and others.

I am curious; I learn from every mistake.

I challenge myself to take baby steps outside of my comfort zone.

I look for and celebrate every small victory.

I do my best, then do a little better.

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Alpha Parent and **Dysfunctional VS Functional Problem-Solving** models developed by Yulia Rafailova © MindFull Education 2017.

About the Author:

Hi! I'm Yulia,



Executive Function Coach for individuals and families, based in Los Angeles, California. I am a passionate advocate for misunderstood kids, because I was one too! Having grown up with undiagnosed ADHD & anxiety, I can relate deeply to the children and families I serve. Aside from running my small coaching biz, I give and attend workshops, publish a weekly blog, and volunteer for two non-profit boards: **San Fernando Valley-CHADD** (Children and Adults with AD/HD); and the Free Verse Board at **Get Lit–Words Ignite**. I love being with nature, exploring, and daydreaming!