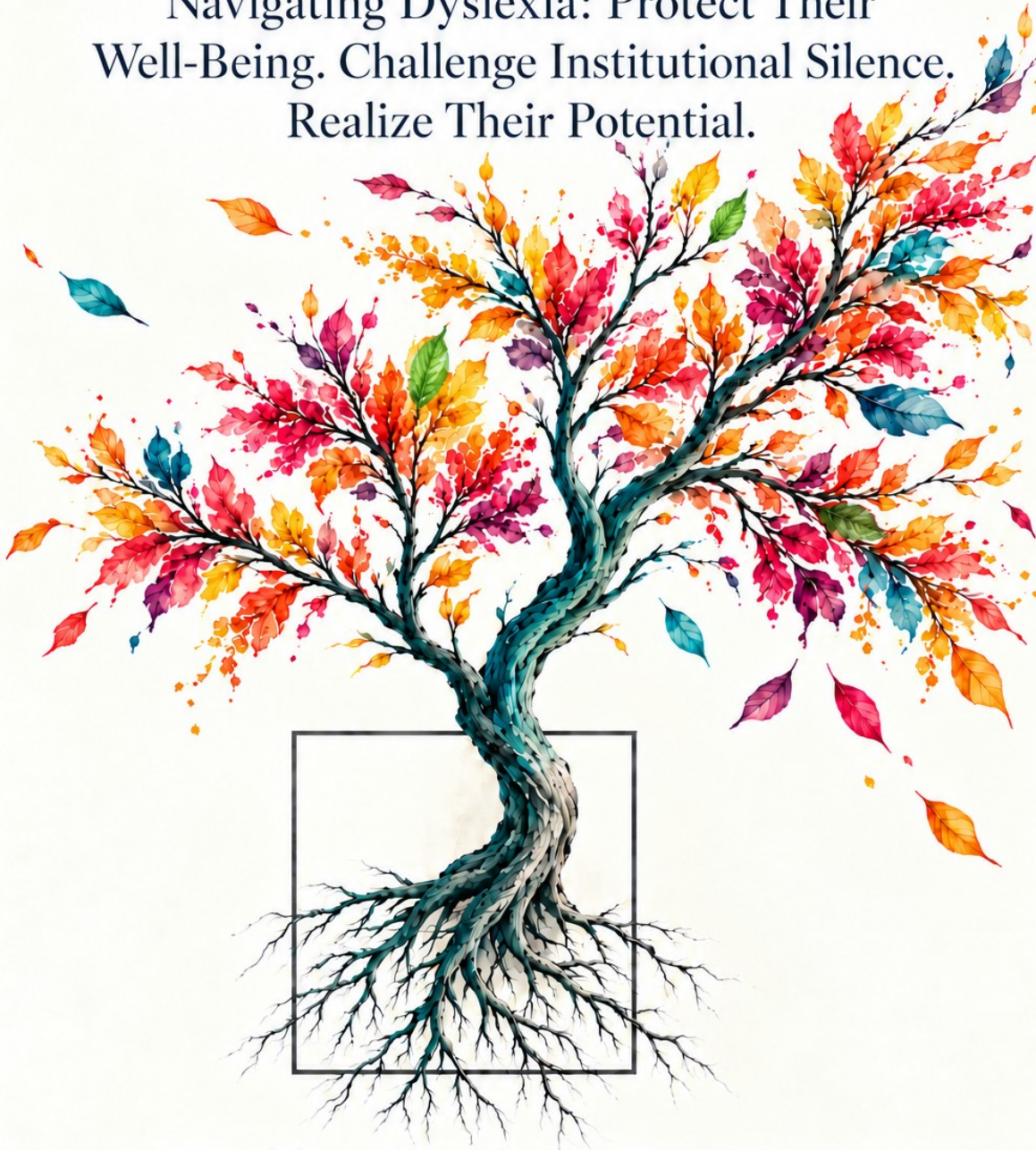


# UNDERESTIMATED

Navigating Dyslexia: Protect Their  
Well-Being. Challenge Institutional Silence.  
Realize Their Potential.



Kelly Fedge DuBose

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The information provided is not a substitute for individualized medical, mental health, educational, or legal advice. Every child and family is different. Readers should consult qualified professionals when making decisions about evaluations, instruction, treatment, supplements, or changes in care.

The author does not guarantee specific outcomes from the strategies or suggestions presented in this book. Readers are encouraged to verify current laws, regulations, and educational policies when making decisions affecting their children.

**Dedication**

This book is dedicated to my sons, Bratton and Hans.

You are the best people I know. My admiration and respect for you and the way you choose to rise and live your big, beautiful lives confidently and conscientiously—with kindness, compassion, curiosity, and passion.

I love you allways, always, forevermore!

XO, Mom

## Testimonials

Kelly is a very strong woman and an incredible champion of children. The time I got to spend with her advocating for dyslexia awareness was a remarkable, treasured memory. -Olivia Hawley, High School Senior

I am beyond grateful for Kelly and the incredible support she has given me and the impact she has had on many lives. As an author writing about confidence and inner strength, Kelly has become an extraordinary advocate for children who struggle with reading disabilities. Her compassion, motivation and dedication to action have been an invaluable resource for me. Kelly doesn't just talk the talk: she walks the walk. She is a true champion of children, especially in the school system that often overlooks or underestimates the challenges faced by students with dyslexia. She knows how to build up a child's confidence, helping them realize their potential when others may have written them off.

Thanks to Kelly, I have seen how much of an impact one compassionate, determined person can have in a child's life and feel so fortunate to have had her knowledge and support over the years.

-Tracy Morse-Dobie RN Parent

Kelly is a champion in every sense of the word. From her days of playing basketball in high school to the amazing work that she has done advocating for children and families in Bozeman and throughout Montana, she is a game changer! Never settling for the status quo, Kelly makes the most out of every relationship...she is truly making the world a better, more accepting, kinder place for everyone! I am blessed to have her as a friend!

Kenny Bies Retired Counselor/ Teacher/ Coach

I met Kelly many years ago when she had just started Decoding Dyslexia Montana and her neurodiverse sons were excited about using Speechify to get through their intense school work load. They thanked me for the best hack ever! Kelly was a guest on my podcast and suggested I participate in the upcoming inaugural Dyslexia Symposium at Montana State University and then contacted Jeffery Conger to connect us. She is always up to something good for kids and connecting people to make a bigger impact. From day one she prioritized the well-being of Montana's kids and lives out her motto: BE YOURSELF! Kelly brings compassion and solutions to the table by taking action and valuing each person around for their unique gifts and talents.

-Cliff Weitzman Founder at Speechify Palo Alto, California

When my daughter was in 3rd grade, we hit a wall. She was struggling in school- not actually academically but emotionally and socially- due in large part to hearing loss and the inability of the school system to see her for the bright, capable child she is.

I was lost, overwhelmed, and unsure of how to advocate for you in a system that didn't seem built for kids who don't fit the mold. That's when Kelly stepped into our lives. Kelly helped me understand what I couldn't yet see: that the problem wasn't with Taylor, but with the system's narrow definition of how children should learn and behave. She gave me the language, tools, and confidence to seek support for my daughter. More importantly, she helped us establish Taylor's IEP- something that became a turning point in her educational journey. With that foundation in place, Taylor not only found her footing- she soared. She went on to graduate high school as co-valedictorian with a 4.0 GPA. That kind of success doesn't just happen. It comes from being seen, supported and empowered. And that started with Kelly.

Kelly's work is deeply personal and profoundly impactful. Her insights into how children develop a sense of self, particularly those who are neurodivergent or outside the 'norm', are not just theories- they are lifelines. She helped me show up for my child in a way that changed the course of her life. I cannot imagine where we would be without her.

-Deni and Taylor Hogan Co-Founder and CEO at SpinQ SpinQ Biophysics, Inc  
Parent

Kelly is the heartbeat of the dyslexia movement in Montana. She has devoted the last two decades of her life to this extremely important work. She collaborates effectively with numerous stakeholders involved from individuals at the government level to school administrators to parents of children with dyslexia to dyslexia tutors to actual children with dyslexia themselves. Kelly has strong interpersonal skills and is able to navigate personalities and setbacks effectively while staying focused on the goal of improving dyslexia services and increasing dyslexia awareness across our state. Her knowledge, relationships, and historical perspective has been invaluable to so many of us. Kelly is a true example of "servant leadership" for the dyslexia movement in the state of Montana and we are so lucky to have her. -Elisabeth Laatsch, M. ED. Learning Specialist/ Owner Intentional Learning Services, LLC

I first met Kelly in the fall of 2018 while serving in the Montana State Legislature as a Montana State Senator. At the time I was working on drafting a bill to address the inadequacies of educating children with Dyslexia in the State of Montana.

I have a granddaughter with Dyslexia and at the start of the 2018 school year it had become apparent to me that Montana was not providing a quality education for children with Dyslexia. Senate Bill 140 was written to correct these problems. Kelly has been aware of the problems in our public education system for years and has been active advocating for our children. When Kelly found out I was working on the problem she immediately contacted me to offer her assistance and collaborate. Kelly played a major role in organizing parents, students, educators, and other concerned individuals to testify in person in support of the legislation. Our efforts were very successful with only 4 out of 150 legislators voting no on the bill. SB140 became law on May 2, 2019. Kelly has continued to be active since the bill was passed working with parents and educators to help them understand and implement SB140.

Montana State Senator (retired)

Cary Smith Billings, Montana(2009-2021)

My biggest testimony from my classroom and state leadership experience is that teachers do not have formal training from the initial preservice at the university level or requested via licensing through statute.

There is little offered to teachers or school leaders for recognition as well as educational support for students or family. Our children deserve to be truly seen and their abilities embraced from the moment they enter the classroom. The time is now! I applaud the courageous awareness, action and advocacy this author brings to unlock the full potential of each child while fiercely protecting their well-being. Collaborating with Kelly 2017-2019 to write and pass literacy legislation that will continue supporting children for generations to come was uplifting, insightful, and inspirational. Her passion for children is powerful. Her knowledge is abundant. Her impact is ever lasting!

Elsie Arntzen- Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Montana (2017-2025)

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to all the people who believed in me—and all the people who didn't! You changed the course of my life. I am better and grateful for it!

A huge shout-out to my sons, Hans and Bratton, for your endless technical support, insights, encouragement, and love. And for always honking twice when we say goodbye.

Thank you to my parents, Hans and Marilyn Fedge, who saw me, loved me, and inspired me to always be myself. My dad taught me to be my own best friend and make as many mistakes as possible so I could learn and grow. My mom taught me grace and that life is fun—to dance every time you can. Thank you for creating an environment where my heart, integrity, and being fully alive mattered more than anyone's approval.

To my husband, thank you for working so we could make ends meet while I gave up my career to become an expert in literacy and ensure our children received the education they deserved. They were given a gift many never receive.

Thank you to Mrs. R., my son's first-grade teacher (for one month), who told me that dyslexia wasn't real. You lit a fire in me that drove me to help my own children and thousands more in every corner of our enlightened state of Montana and across the country.

Thank you to Mrs. Cota for the heads-up and for risking her job to tell me about holistic thinking, giftedness, and dyslexia. Your courage, skills, and training are what make you an exceptional educator.

To Susan Barton, an icon in the world of dyslexia, my friend and respected colleague. Thank you for picking up the phone in my desperation and giving me the courage to become a literacy expert, homeschool my children, and give them the best possible start. Thank you for later traveling across Montana with me to spread awareness about dyslexia and ADHD. You are my hero.

Thank you to Liz Barnes, co-founder and inspiration behind the Decoding Dyslexia movement, my respected colleague and dear friend. Liz continues to encourage and support me, overlooking my dyslexic way of doing things that could frustrate a saint. Thank you, Liz, for seeing me and valuing me. You are a true blessing.

To Katie Laslovich, affectionately known as “Mrs. Las,” assistant vice principal at Bozeman High School. Thank you for seeing children for who they are, understanding their individual needs, and taking action. You invited me to bring Dyslexia for a Day training to your counselors, helping them better understand the challenges dyslexic students face. Thank you for everything you did for my children and for the students whose lives you continue to enrich and elevate. xo

Thank you to Pat McCracken, Elsie Arntzen, Cary Smith, and the dedicated Decoding Dyslexia Montana advocates who worked tirelessly to help pass SB 140 into law. Your courage, persistence, and willingness to challenge the status quo helped create opportunities for children whose needs had gone unrecognized and unmet. You demonstrated what determined people can accomplish when they come together to change a system that is failing children.

Thank you to Sinclair Sherrill, founder of Boon Philanthropy, for your generosity, commitment, and collaboration in elevating Montana to a national leader in evidence-based literacy instruction. Together, we developed and supported pilot projects that provided Montana teachers with training in multisensory structured literacy and brought evidence-based reading instruction into K–2 classrooms. Our partnership demonstrated what is possible when philanthropy, educational expertise, and a shared commitment to children come together to create meaningful change.

To Bonnie Sachatello-Sawyer, Executive Director of HOPA Mountain, thank you for decades of friendship and collaboration. Your efforts to build trust and meaningful relationships with Montana's tribal communities made our literacy work on the reservations possible. You are a respected colleague and cherished friend who has enriched both my work and my life.

To my dear friends, thank you for being you and letting me be me—completely. Sharing life with you is so damn fun! xo

Finally, thank you, God, for giving me the strength, wisdom, and guidance to be an instrument of Your peace.

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## A Note from the Author

This book is grounded in decades of advocacy, professional training, research, educational data, and hands-on experience working with children, families, educators, and policymakers.

As an advocate, parent and child coach, and structured literacy tutor, I've worked directly with families while challenging educational systems to better serve children.

I'm also dyslexic and the proud mother of two sons with dyslexia. I've lived this journey personally and professionally.

I've seen what works, what fails, and what happens when children's needs and abilities go unrecognized. I'm sharing what I've learned so you can see the bigger picture, trust your judgment, and take the lead in helping your child flourish.

## Introduction

If you find yourself here, there's a reason.

You have watched your bright, capable child begin to change before your eyes. Their confidence is unraveling. Their enthusiasm is fading. The child who once approached life with curiosity and excitement is shrinking. You are witnessing meltdowns, emotional shutdowns, frustration, and behaviors you never imagined seeing in your child.

You know something is wrong. You have asked questions, raised concerns, attended meetings, and sought help. Yet despite your efforts, nothing meaningful is changing at school. Meanwhile, your child continues to struggle, and precious time is slipping away.

You're not asking for too much. You're not the problem, and neither is your child. You're asking the right questions. You're simply not getting the answers you and your child deserve.

I wrote this book to help you find the answers you deserve and understand what is happening behind the scenes in our educational system. Too many parents are unaware of the gaps in knowledge, teacher preparation, and understanding of dyslexia that directly affect their children's education. Compounding these shortcomings is a lack of transparency that leaves families trusting a system without knowing whether their children's needs are being recognized or appropriately addressed.

When your child's learning needs go unrecognized and unmet, the consequences extend far beyond academics. The unnecessary suffering, shame, and damage to their confidence can change how they see themselves and what they believe they are capable of becoming. A bright, creative, multipotential child should not have to diminish who they are to survive in an educational environment that fails to recognize and support their individuality.

Armed with this understanding, you can advocate with confidence, protect your child's well-being, and create opportunities for them to develop their full potential.

There is no value in softening the truth, so I won't. I am writing this to minimize your child's suffering by exploring ways to enhance their well-being, help them recognize their value, strengths, and self-worth, build their confidence, and embrace who they truly are.

Know thyself.

Entering the lion's den is a daily heroic act of courage. Let's free them.

It is imperative that you understand that when your child experiences repeated stress and daily abuse, without someone they trust to reassure them of their worth, their brains can permanently change. They often experience psychological scarring. Their brains adjust to protect them, triggering their flight, fight, freeze or fawn reaction. This stops learning in its tracks. All their brain power and energy is being used just to survive. Curiosity and learning take a backseat to getting through the day without too much humiliation.

**There is nothing more important than protecting your child's well-being. NOTHING!**

Over the decades, I have experienced this firsthand as a creative thinker and processor myself. I have also witnessed the dismantling of thousands of children across Montana through my work as the founder of Decoding Dyslexia Montana.

Children who are nonlinear thinkers and neurodivergent suffer daily at the hands of teachers and peers who do not understand dyslexia, ADHD, or different ways of thinking and learning.

Your child's life-changing pain is why I am writing this book.

I have written and rewritten many versions of this book over the years, yet none felt like I was addressing the real issue directly enough for parents to understand the importance of taking the lead in their child's journey.

This book has evolved from how to teach reading correctly in the 21st century, to the urgent need for teacher training at the university level, to what I now know—at both a heart and intellectual level—to be the most important aspect of all: your child's well-being and mental health come first. Everything else is a distant second.

There is a dire need to train teachers in the science of reading, restructure university-level teacher preparation, and ensure that children are seen, understood, and supported from the beginning.

To this end, back in 2012, I wandered into the Montana State Capitol as a distraught parent, looking for a way to stop the pain that was harming and dismantling vulnerable children in our local public schools.

Exposing the dirty little secret is not popular. In fact, many resist and deny the truth I am telling, but I am not interested in popularity.

I began this journey to make a positive difference in the lives of children. I am committed to building their confidence, protecting their well-being, and giving a voice to those who are not being heard. I want children to understand their abilities, know their value, and be seen for who they are.

My mission is for children to reach their full potential, as mentally whole as possible, regardless of the chaos that surrounds them daily.

Together with Pad McCracken (state legislative bill writer), Elsie Artzen, (State Superintendent), and Cary Smith, (state Senator), I co-wrote the first and only dyslexia bill which we passed into

law in 2019. This law requires early identification of learning differences and intervention for all children including dyslexic's. This addresses the academic first step which, if executed correctly, keeps a child's confidence and well-being intact. The problem is that only a handful of schools address dyslexia or other neurodivergent learning styles.

This book encourages you, as a devoted parent, to prioritize your child's well-being, inner strength, and growing confidence before a serious problem takes hold.

Begin by identifying and fostering your child's strengths. Help them discover something they can excel at, then continue developing their many abilities.

When your child excels at something their peers value and think is cool, they get a pass on their weaknesses. This buys them the time they need to master reading and other academic challenges so they can demonstrate their intelligence and capabilities.

For more than two decades, I have coached and trained thousands of families, educators, and policymakers in evidence-based literacy practices. I have worked alongside desperate parents, suffering children, and frustrated educators who lacked the training and resources they needed.

Early in my advocacy, I, too, focused primarily on academic struggles. But my years in the trenches changed my understanding of what children need most.

I learned that protecting a child's well-being and developing their confidence must come first. At the same time, we must address their academic challenges, including providing skilled reading instruction for children who learn and process information differently.

These efforts go hand in hand. We must develop the whole child while ensuring they receive the education they deserve.

Children who truly know themselves fare better than most, regardless of how their brains are wired. When you help your child understand their strengths, talents, abilities, and challenges, they can put everything into perspective.

This understanding builds confidence, preserves self-worth, and helps them navigate academic and other challenges. With a strong support system in place, your child is better equipped to roll with the punches of life and eventually thrive, regardless of circumstance.

In contrast, a child without a strong inner compass or sense of self is not equipped to ride the waves of an educational environment designed for other students and their teachers.

Parents need to be keenly aware of the risk neurodivergent kids face of heading down a slippery slope toward frustration, anger, humiliation, depression, and even self-hate when they are not supported with love, understanding, and advocacy, early and often. Self-disparagement is common among struggling students, yet it is too often left unaddressed until they are far down the rabbit hole and reach a point of no return.

The problem is not temporary or limited to attending K–12 school. It shapes who they become as people and how these kids view themselves for their entire lives. The ramifications of ongoing daily abuse can haunt them for the rest of their lives. Instead of reaching their God-given potential, they become a detriment to society as low-functioning adults.

Being aware of the underlying problems and less-understood advantages of being dyslexic and/or having ADHD is a game changer for all involved. Taking action now elevates your child's life to its rightful place and preserves well-being, ensuring that potential is reached.

Let's get started!

Content

## CHAPTER 1 Anxiety Epidemic in Public Schools

“What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.” — Henry Stanley Haskins

Parents need to be keenly aware of the risk neurodivergent kids have of heading down a slippery slope to frustration, anger, humiliation, depression, and even self-hate when not supported with love, understanding, and advocacy, early and often. Disparagement of oneself is common in struggling students, yet it is too often left unaddressed until it is far down the rabbit hole and hits a point of no return. Schools are in crisis, and kids are experiencing stress too severe to navigate.

### **PRIORITIZING WELL-BEING IS KEY TO YOUR CHILD REACHING THEIR POTENTIAL.**

The problem with low self-worth is not temporary or situational while attending K–12 school. There isn't a magic wand that makes everything okay once kids leave school. The results of trauma are lasting.

The ramifications from stressed-out teachers who are burnt out and don't have the bandwidth to see the kids as individuals or give them the quality instruction we are expecting have consequences for us all.

Teachers are throwing in the towel in record numbers. They have had it, and all the kids can absorb their negative energy every day.

Most teachers I know who are still working are exhausted, frustrated, and angry. Many feel stuck or are counting on their pensions. They no longer enjoy teaching, but they continue showing up because they need their jobs.

The teachers who are teaching keep having their workload increased because of the spectacular teacher shortage across the country. No one wants to be a teacher, and the kids are the ones who are paying the price.

This toxic environment creates the perfect storm for all children in public school. A child like yours who doesn't fit into the standardized mold faces even more damage to their psyche than linear children.

### **Happy Meal**

The current school system can be likened to a McDonald's Happy Meal. You go to McDonald's to solve a problem. Get food fast! Get the kids fed when you are in a pinch. Basically, the toy saves the day. There's a moment of silence until they figure out they got the “wrong” toy, and since it doesn't cost an arm and a leg, it works. You are not expecting quality ingredients or a fantastic culinary experience. You aren't even thinking there is much nutritional value. A Happy Meal is a fast solution to an immediate problem. This is not a five-star experience. It is not optimal in any way.

Public education, during these turbulent times, is a lot like a Happy Meal. Teachers are working ridiculously hard under tough conditions. They are doing the very best that they can with limited resources and high demands far beyond their abilities. The result, in spite of how much effort is being put forth, is subpar outcomes.

Schools have had to lower their standards because of the teacher shortage sweeping the nation. Teachers and administrators are celebrating when the majority of kids are earning C's. They are satisfied that they have met their goal—hurray! They are happy with average because academics are so far down the line after basic social services. Schools need to be efficient, and if someone doesn't want pickles, well, that's just too damn bad because there is no “made to order.” Everything is standardized, and that's good enough; it has to be. You get what you get, and you better not throw a fit. The result is mediocrity and the greatest mental health crisis of our lifetime for both children and teachers.

The whole intention of modern-day education is to serve the maximum number of kids as efficiently as possible to meet average standards. The problem is, your child is not a truck on an assembly line, waiting to be assembled to someone else's specifications. Children are individuals who need excellent instruction

to thrive now and later in life. The old saying goes, “A mom is only as happy as her least happy child.” The new saying is, “Children are only as happy and successful as their least happy teacher.”

Bottom line—it’s a serious mess with no solution in sight. This means you must pick up the slack, or your child will be beyond their capacity to manage their dysfunctional learning environment.

When school is not a safe place, fear shapes who they become as people and the way your child will view themselves for their entire life. The ramifications of ongoing daily abuse will haunt them for the rest of their lives. Instead of reaching their God-given potential, they become low-functioning adults. Taking action now elevates your child’s life to its rightful place and will preserve well-being, ensuring potential is reached.

While there are a lot of negatives clouding the current situation, there is always an upside. Children with engaged, confident parents go beyond the confines of their school, supplemented and supported by their parents to reach their potential.

It would be awesome if we could go back sixty or seventy years when there was an abundance of teachers who were thrilled to be teaching. They loved their careers and the students they inspired, and we all felt that love as their students. But we can’t go back, so parents get to be teachers, too. This dire situation might push even more people into homeschooling. As your child’s champion, it is an honor to be the one to step up and fill in where the gaping holes exist, regardless of the reason.

Children who truly know themselves at a soul level are guided to look inward and express their honest emotions and feelings without judgment. They are encouraged to share and are supported in understanding their feelings. They fare better than most in supportive family environments. When you support your child in understanding their strengths, talents, and abilities, as well as their challenges, they can put it all in the proper perspective. It is then possible to build confidence, preserve self-worth, and sort out academic and other possible challenges. Having a support system solidly in place will make it far easier to roll with the punches of life and eventually thrive, regardless of circumstance.

In contrast, if a child has no inner compass or a weak sense of self, they will not be equipped to ride the waves of being in an environment that is designed for the other 80% of students.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines well-being as the state or condition of being well: welfare, happiness, and prosperity. To me, well-being includes all of this and the deeper knowing that I am okay as I am, and there is no need to conform to others, losing oneself in the process.

When your child develops a strong inner strength in knowing that they hold the power and peace in their heart and spirit, regardless of all the chaos and toxic behavior that may go on around them, they are grounded and stable. They are anchored in their wholeness. When children feel in control of their lives, they build up their self-confidence and are able to take on greater and greater challenges without questioning their value and worth. Their ability to be an observer, pause, and respond intentionally instead of letting emotion take over and reacting with knee-jerk behavior preserves their well-being. This is precisely why prioritizing well-being and inner strength is so vital for all children, but especially the empathic and dreadfully misunderstood, nonlinear, dyslexic/ADHD kids. Making well-being the top priority in our current times is wise.

From day one of mandatory schooling, kids who are holistic, out-of-the-box thinkers, like your child, face ridicule. They are immediately under siege. The curriculum focuses on learning to read and sitting still for hours, which immediately highlights their differences for peers and educators alike to see and judge. There is no place for your child to escape to. They are there for seven or eight hours a day demonstrating their differences. Showing off their weaknesses for the whole world to see. Peers don’t understand and almost immediately begin making fun of any difference. Overwhelmed, overworked teachers quickly become annoyed and frustrated, too. Nonlinear children are not going to fit neatly into a box or sit quietly all day listening to how to do X, Y, and Z in a linear way. Your child is smart and intuitive. They will feel the misalignment, see the writing on the wall, and start developing coping methods for their survival.

There is a rippling effect from experiencing shame on a daily basis that is often not noticed until it’s too late. By the time it is on the teacher’s radar, crippling anxiety and depression have set in. The long-term

ramifications of school abuse and poor instruction include a lifetime of low self-esteem, serial toxic relationships, anxiety disorders, PTSD, and depression. Worst-case scenario, if not addressed and adequately supported, kids end up in the pipeline to prison or dead. The consequences of not taking mental health seriously and making well-being the number one priority in your child's life have seriously devastating outcomes.

People don't always talk about the social-emotional and mental health issues that can develop in conjunction with dyslexia and ADHD. There is more to dyslexia and ADHD than the common myths of seeing and writing backward and being a hyperactive nuisance. It is important to understand the weight of the stress these students are experiencing to be able to head off potential problems and build competence and confidence together.

I am a wildly creative-thinking dyslexic, so I “get it” on a very personal level. I have lived life in the minority with this lifelong way of processing life. I compassionately bring my own strategies—those I have learned through trial by fire, as well as through graduate-level specialty training in both wellness and neurodiversity, and by walking alongside many who are figuring their way through the rough patches to a more elevated and awakened state.

Over my lifetime as a child advocate, consultant, coach, and trainer, I have supported, encouraged, and provided strategies for thousands of students, parents, educators, and administrators in learning to read and navigating the system by optimizing learning environments that foster wellness and allow children to flourish.

What has become glaringly clear is this: Nothing matters more than wellness. Without exception, literacy allows a person to demonstrate their intelligence, creativity, and abilities if, and only if, their well-being is intact. A child must feel good enough about themselves to want to risk learning.

Your child's well-being comes first. I will die on that hill.

## Chapter 2 Public Education and Resources Have Changed

“No one can act beyond their state of consciousness.” — Eckhart Tolle

It is important to your efforts in supporting your dyslexic and/or ADHD child to have an awareness and keen understanding of the changes in mandatory education. Schools are not the same as they once were.

Twenty-first-century schools are outdated but trying desperately to hold onto relevance. They serve many functions. The needs and focus have changed so dramatically that they are unrecognizable.

Most parents are unaware of this shift and are still holding onto the image of days gone by. Teachers have far less autonomy and loads more requirements. They must teach to the test to keep their jobs. This leaves little room for creativity and going off script. Students and educators alike suffer from this new model; nevertheless, it is the new normal. Schools serve as safety nets that provide social services, childcare, counseling, nutrition, and finally, basic social and academic learning. Families lean heavily on schools and teachers to pick up the slack. This translates into the need for efficiency at the cost of effective learning and mastery. Everything is diluted.

Schools no longer have the luxury to build mastery of subjects or explore new topics of interest. Everything must fit into the matrix and be checked off for the higher up's approval. Too much administration input has stolen the creativity and confidence from educators. The administrators want the federal funding so they demand their underlinks jump through hoops to make sure all the requirements for funding are met. This process leaves less and less room or time for true connections with teachers and students and is a primary reason for burnout. Schools are mini businesses seeking rubber stamp approval thus transparency of falling short is nonexistent. The 2024 Nation's Report Card revealed that only 31% of fourth graders performed at or above NAEP Proficient in reading, while 40% performed below NAEP Basic. Among eighth graders, 33% performed below NAEP Basic—the largest percentage recorded. The numbers are shocking and frightening. Nation's Report Card, the National Assessment of Educational Progress or NAEP, is the gold standard for measuring U. S. students' knowledge in all core subjects. It lays it out in black and white, our nations failing. We are failing miserably in the United States to develop minds to their potential in spite of spending the most of any country in the world per student.

Creative thinkers and students with dyslexia and ADHD are often visionaries who pick up on patterns and can see the bigger picture almost instinctively. They have honed their intuition and can come to bottom-line solutions quickly, saving time and energy for more complex aspects of a problem.

Their capacity to think holistically makes them steps ahead, sometimes light-years ahead, of their more linear peers and teachers. This ability is often misunderstood and chastised by linear-processing kids. Intelligent, capable kids are wrongly diminished in a system that doesn't understand differences in processing. Linear children and most teachers process in a way that is a world apart from their nonlinear classmates and students.

When bright and bushy-tailed five- and six-year-olds start school, they are usually well-adjusted, super curious, and happy. They do not display any signs of emotional or mental health anguish. Feelings of not being good enough, broken, stupid, and less capable than others take days—not years—to internalize. It is remarkable how quickly it can all unravel and go south. Entering the lion's den is a daily heroic act of courage.

Tragically, by the time these kids reach third or fourth grade, at the tender age of nine and ten, they have been consistently failed by the system every school day for many years. They spiral into an abyss of self-doubt and diminished self-worth if you don't pay close enough attention. Teachers don't have time to notice the changes in a timely manner. Your child will have a lot of confusion and frustration because they can't figure out why they are struggling, in spite of knowing in their heart that they are bright and capable. They suffer greatly—in silence.

There is no time to explore and wander into the weeds... rushing to nowhere is the new normal. The limitation of ample time to teach to mastery and learn past regurgitation is the new reality. There are so many barriers to exploring any subject. The issue of no time is a top issue for quality education.

Schools are not accustomed to taking their time to distribute information, provide instruction, or work toward mastery of subjects. This is an epic frustration for inquisitive minds who are hungry to understand all life has to offer.

Educators tend to rush everything to be able to get through their never-ending checklist of topics and lessons they need to teach so their students can be tested on them. Teachers teach quickly, and students regurgitate quickly before they forget everything they just heard. This strategy allows little time for reflection, critical thinking, innovation, and true understanding, let alone mastery. It is also the reason so many kids are bored to death at school. They find the whole process to be obsolete. It feels more like walking into a prison than a place of enlightenment. They are not engaged students; they are puppets, and they feel it. This process contributes to a lack of well-being and perpetual stress.

Children in our current school system are not rewarded for being thoughtful or critical thinkers. Speed, efficiency, and loudness are the most desired traits and the reason our levels of literacy in all subjects are spiraling out of control year after year. Many well-meaning but linear people—teachers, peers, even parents and grandparents—equate speed with accuracy and intelligence, when that is rarely the case. Intentionally considering things takes time, and the results produced are far superior to knee-jerk, surface, quick responses.

When children take their time to contemplate the question and respond in a thoughtful way, they are mislabeled “slow.” Not thoughtful, creative, reflective, or deep thinkers—just slow, as if they are impaired or disabled in some way. Nothing could be farther from the truth. These divergent kids are brilliant. They are the innovators and inventors among us. Their brains are entertaining many options and arriving at the best solutions to the problem presented. Conversely, these kids

are faster thinkers who refrain from blurting out the first thought that comes to their mind, preferring to critically and intentionally think about the plethora of possibilities. Even Albert Einstein struggled with the rigidity of traditional schooling. A teacher suggested he leave school because his presence undermined the teacher's authority. Oops!

This is not to say quick decision-making doesn't have its place and value. My goodness, it certainly does. It is one of the most desirable abilities, but one needs a strong foundation in place to draw from. Having the ability to make quick decisions is a critical and honed skill in life. It is key to think before reacting to avoid major fallout. Taking time in the learning process to explore options, entertain ideas, consider an array of solutions, and change one's mind after proper consideration is all what develops the thinking muscle.

Schools no longer have the luxury to build mastery of subjects or explore new topics of interest. Everything must fit into the matrix and be checked off. Schools are mini businesses seeking rubber stamp approval thus transparency of falling short is nonexistent. The Nation's Report Card lays it out in black and white.

Life is vastly different for your child than it was for you growing up. It is light-years different. Times have changed, and we didn't see what was happening because it was a slow, convenient creep. We all understand how handheld devices like smartphones and laptop computers have hijacked our attention, but it is far more insidious than we could imagine.

Everything is different, and in a way that affects our nervous system and sense of control negatively. The shift from creating to consuming is making our kids sad and lonely. On top of that, life is changing so quickly that everything and everyone is becoming obsolete. Society itself is attempting to erase us.

We really can't catch our breath. So much so, we have had to relearn the most basic act of all—how to breathe. There is a whole industry teaching us how to breathe deeply and correctly. It is a bit surreal; it seems impossible that there could be classes on breathing. I know I have taught many children and their

teachers and parents how to breathe again. The point is that something that was as natural as breathing has been trashed by high anxiety and the rigors of our fast-paced world.

Back in the day, school was a tiny part of our lives. A sliver in the bigger piece of life's pie. Important to do one's best, but in no way did it dictate the majority of one's time or define us. School was a means to an end. It gave us a way to further our lives and go on to hopefully being stand-up citizens, but it was just a slice of life. The funny thing is, the mandatory number of school hours is the same as it always was, but now the societal pressure of spending time at school has flipped in priority to the rest of our children's lives.

Life used to focus on core values of family, faith, friends, exploration, chores, recreation, and unstructured time to eat a snack or play hoops. Most of the time was unstructured, yet there were high expectations for personal responsibility. Kids were expected to pull their load, and then they were given a long leash to do what they felt like doing. There was time and freedom of thought. During this time, children were capable of taking care of themselves. They were able to figure out their own values and life as a whole.

They made thousands of decisions entirely on their own. Kids got to be kids. Sometimes they ended up getting in a bit of trouble, maybe making a questionable choice here and there, but that was all a part of learning. Mistake-making was a part of growing up. This means that, as children, we had nearly 18–19 years to make all kinds of decisions, and because we were making a lot of our own decisions, we eventually got better at it. Trial through fire was real, and it prepared us for even more independence and built our self-esteem and confidence. We knew we had been there before, and whether it turned out in our favor or was not so perfect, we made it through, and we knew we could do it again.

Young people were engaged in constant problem-solving for nearly twenty years. Learning all about ourselves, life's mysteries, the opposite sex, how to negotiate with parents, siblings, and friends, how to compromise if it was deemed appropriate, and how to refine our interpersonal relationship skills. We rode our bikes. We drove before it was even legal. We were on a permanent expedition all over town, and no one was hovering over us or piling us into a car and hauling us around from dusk to dawn to the next structured skill-building activity.

This might sound like I am a dinosaur. I might be, but that doesn't negate the concept of learning by having the freedom to take risks and make mistakes, with our parents' encouragement and sincere blessing. They were the ones pushing us out the door, away from screens and into the fresh air and neighborhood streets to PLAY! I am not sure why exactly parents abandoned their own wisdom, but I do know the children suffered from being within arm's reach 99% of the time. For God's sake, quit tracking your child on your phone. Let them live. Walk the talk, and they will make the best decisions for themselves.

I am sharing truths to help people who are not in schools or working with schools daily understand how times have dramatically changed, why anxiety is on the rise, and what your role is in all of it. The problem with this huge shift from experimenting to performance is a lack of time and experience to build confidence or find hope in what could seem like a hopeless situation.

Ironically, school, the place we send our children for 7–9 hours a day, has stolen our children's ability to think for themselves and replaced it with the need to memorize and regurgitate information for performance and awards. PowerSchool and Google replaced the attendance lady and teachers. Khan Academy, Purplemath, peers—anything is demanded before approaching one's teacher. It is considered wasting a teacher's time not to consult all these other resources before asking a teacher for help. This is a complete flip. Before, teachers anticipated their children's needs. They would call you up to their desk and say, "Hey, Kelly, I noticed you might be confused about our last math lesson. Come in today after school, and let's go over it." Teachers were saints. They knew their students and went out of their way to make sure each child thrived and reached their potential.

That kind of teacher is the exception, not the rule, in the 21st century. Times and expectations have changed.

Coaches have changed, too. They once filled in as role models and even surrogate dads, sharing wisdom, building character, teaching hard work, and offering a shoulder when necessary. Now coaches are mostly facilitators and managers. Kids start training with private trainers in elementary school and are on travel teams, in addition to their school teams, usually prioritizing their travel team. Coaches expect kids to hit the ground running, ready to perform at the highest levels. They don't have time to coach them while trying to win at all costs. The coach is rarely imparting technique or teaching skills; instead, they are demanding performance. More pressure without connection.

There is no value in dwelling in victim mode. This is a monstrous misstep for your child's wellness and your ability to get to the best outcome for your family. Blaming teachers or the school for what they are not able to do because of their own restraints is a waste of precious time and energy. The way forward is to be crystal clear about WHAT IS and take action accordingly. Within a school, you will find allies and those who can do or be something that contributes to the positive wellness of your child. Those are the only people to allow into the inner circle of your child's journey. There will be enough challenge without adding negativity or limiting beliefs of those who do not understand your child. Be mindful and aware that the goal here is not to bubble-wrap your child but to hold space for them to maintain their well-being so they can continue to face challenges with confidence, believe in their value, and know that they absolutely do belong.

### **KNOW YOURSELF...BE YOURSELF**

Every day since my children can remember, I sent them into the world reminding them:

BE YOURSELF! There is power in knowing your worth and being yourself above all. It might sound easy, but it's one of the hardest things to do in our current culture. Being yourself consists of knowing yourself, which means understanding one's worth and core inner beliefs. This is difficult enough for an adult to master who has already survived a lot of life's twists and turns and built up a tough skin. Your child, on the other hand, who once was more open to their authentic self, closer to the veil, if you will, quickly loses their innocent optimism and curiosity spark once exposed to systemic domestication. It is your role and responsibility to keep that fire lit and support your child's individuality and uniqueness so they don't lose their optimism and feeling of self-worth.

Children are under a lot of pressure these days. Many children are trapped in a pressure cooker, breaking down slowly on their way to complete elimination. Their downtime has been seriously compromised, if not entirely stolen, by technology, TikTok, porn, and performance demands. The reality is that your child will believe society if you are not around to personally guide them to the road less traveled. That is the road to inner knowing and self-awareness. There is a monster predator out there, and it's called APATHY.

Sometimes, with all of life's demands, you can get sucked into the vacuum of conformity, too. It happens between work, making dinner, doing chores, taking care of parents, paying bills, and driving here, there, and everywhere. Luckily, part of the beauty of having and taking a hands-on approach to raising children is that you also get to feel the magic all over again. You become childlike with fresh, gentle eyes, and if you are blessed, you, too, will wander back into the days of just being yourself.

### **GROWTH IS A JOURNEY**

At this point in life, most people are familiar with the dark night of the soul. You have either experienced it personally or know someone close who has. What may surprise you, however, is that your child can also go through this life-altering experience, too. Many young children are so overwhelmed with anxiety, depression, sadness, loneliness, fear, and hopelessness that they are going off the deep end. They are experiencing the dark night of the soul in elementary school. It's time to say HELL NO! We want our children to be children, to play with other kids face-to-face, get outside, and not have hours of homework so they can have family time and free time, etc. Limiting social media and expanding time outside, art, or any other creative activity that rewards the whole process, not only the outcome.

## Trusting Your Gut

After decades of championing children on their literacy and empowerment journeys, I have come to the conclusion that the best advice I can give a parent is: TRUST YOUR INTUITION.

Intuition needs to be exercised just like any other muscle. We all feel stirring sensations in our gut or a pain in our heart that are trying to guide us in a better direction. When you notice the guidance, you begin to avoid long detours and scary cliffs. The more you notice, listen, and act on your intuition, the stronger it gets, and the easier life becomes. It might seem like this is a silly strategy, or you might question if it is a strategy at all when your child is struggling with school. But trust me, it is the most powerful skill for you as a parent to master. You know your child better than anyone ever will. You can see joy in their eyes and feel the pain in their heart as if it were your own. When push comes to shove, you are the expert in your child's life; everyone else is just noise.

## Finding and Fostering Strengths Stops Anxiety in its Tracks

The key to preserving a child's self-worth and growing their confidence is finding their passion early and developing it to a level of competence as soon as possible. When a child has a place to excel, they will tolerate the other areas that may need some extra work and be less concerned about not being the best reader in their class immediately. If they can do a standing backflip, they have instant respect. Suddenly, no one gives a rip if they are not the best or fastest reader in the class. Consider yourself on a mission to help your child find something that is worthy of respect and will help establish them as a cool kid. The trepidation will ease, and social anxiety will be at a normal, manageable level.

All children need their place to shine in the world. It is, however, critical for dyslexics and those struggling with ADHD to find a path early on in their journey because of all the misunderstandings and mistakes that will happen as a nonlinear person operating in a linear world. It is undeniably a rocky road that demands inner strength, lots of humility, and a superior support system.

The bottom line is that your child is enough as they are right now.

Their worth is not attached to how they perform or what grade they earn. I encourage you not to fix what is not broken or suck the creative life force and joy out of your children by allowing a system to define them. Our traditional education system is designed to provide basic information in a linear way to develop standardized thinking. But life rewards individual thinking and innovation. With AI coming on board, we have ways to get the grunt work done with robots and computers. We need the out-of-the-box thinking of creative thinkers in the 21st century. When you, as their parent, the person they trust most in this life, hold this belief 100%, your child feels it and also begins to believe it and embody it. They gain confidence and self-worth as their authenticity is encouraged and rewarded.

They need to be supported, loved, and develop their skills, abilities, and talents so people long to mimic them, not mock them. Reframe everything into the positive because whatever they focus on, they will attract. Focus on what your child can do and what they are naturally good at. Get outside daily. Exercise. Skip school for wellness days and go skiing. Get sunshine. Go on a drive and blare the music. Take a cold plunge. Utilize tapping. Dance. Take a road trip. Do whatever it takes to maintain and expand well-being and confidence. Your child is counting on you to notice their strengths and struggles and be there for them through all of it. By being present for your child through thick and thin, you will develop an unbreakable spirit in them and strengthen your bond with them.

## I HATE SCHOOL

Neurodiverse, dyslexic, and ADHD kids hate school. Listen to them when they tell you they don't want to go to school. Pay attention when they start having stomachaches, headaches, and meltdowns. Happy kids who feel safe at school want to be at school with their friends. If you notice any changes in your child's desire to be at school, there is a reason—ask questions and observe until you figure it out.

When school is an unsafe place that doesn't align with who they are or how they experience the world around them, children hate school. They will try harder and harder to make you happy and proud of them

until one day—they break. It is not that you are putting any pressure on them; it is self-inflicted pressure. Don't let it get that far.

Every day you drop off your child at school, they are entering the lion's den. They are already wondering what kind of shame, pain, and humiliation will come their way during the day. The hallways are full of landmines, and there's no way of predicting where they will be each day. Every cell in their body is on red alert for danger. Their nervous system is maxed out and releasing stress hormones that play havoc with their sleep, gut, and every part of their body. Just imagine if, in your adult life, you were forced to go into the same environment that produced fear, angst, anxiety, and suffering daily, knowing you could not escape for the next twelve years. You would consider it a prison sentence. That is how kids feel. It is a living hell for them. A prison sentence to be endured, never escaped. They are remarkable for continuing to show up and giving the powers that be new chances to be the people they need them to be. And every day, they are met with more disappointment and frustration.

In an effort to please their parents and fit into society, your child will acquiesce. They will serve their sentence until it becomes unbearable—or they become a Jedi and are able to master inner peace. Your child craves the feeling of belonging that usually eludes nonlinear kids, but every once in a while, a friend appears, or a teacher or coach sees their value, and your child will keep going back, hoping the tide will turn. Ever the optimist, in spite of it all. Your child is remarkable! They stick it out for those breadcrumbs of belonging and feeling okay. Sometimes this lasts the full twelve-year sentence, and sometimes they move on to preserve their well-being by leaving school as soon as they can.

In a panic, many parents who see their intelligent child out of character, struggling with the mechanics of reading, will focus solely on the issue of poor reading instruction and their child's reading struggle.

The reality is that not much progress is made academically until the well-being of a child is addressed.

Nothing else matters until and unless well-being is firmly in place.

No real learning can happen when cortisol is at its peak, throwing your child into a perpetual state of flight, fight, fawn, or freeze.

The first red flag is observing your child's well-being and confidence begin to deteriorate at Mach speed.

The child who does not pick up reading by osmosis or pure exposure, but requires systematic instruction, starts to become agitated almost immediately, feeling the pressure to perform without being provided with the tools to do so.

Society, and certainly teachers and schools, focus on academics since that is their wheelhouse.

In a way, they have academic blinders on.

So much so, they usually miss the early signs of kids who are not resonating with what they are putting down.

Teachers may use some different modalities in their teaching, trying to reach different learning styles, but it's superficial because of time restraints, and they quickly default into their comfort zone.

They don't notice that their lessons, being taught in predominantly a linear way and expecting linear processing of material and linear answers, don't land with nonlinear kids.

This disconnect is what makes school miserable for nonlinear children.

You can be the bridge and keep your child's focus on their strengths, not the way a system wants them to be all neat and tidy, but in the beautiful, messy way of your nonlinear child.

They, in fact, can BE THEMSELVES when you make it the norm.

When you encourage and inspire authenticity as a family value, your child blossoms.

They are not broken. They are not in need of being fixed.

You, as their parent, advocate, and champion, need to hold this space so completely that your child believes 100% they are okay.

They are enough, and “This too shall pass.”

Dealing With Dismissal and Underestimating

Creative thinkers, dyslexic students, and ADHD students are often visionaries who pick up on patterns and can see the bigger picture almost instinctively.

They have honed their intuition and can come to bottom-line solutions quickly, saving time and energy for more complex aspects of a problem.

There's no doubt you have noticed the way they come to solutions almost magically.

Their capacity to think holistically makes them steps ahead, sometimes light-years ahead, of their more linear peers and teachers.

This ability is often misunderstood and chastised by linear-processing kids.

Intelligent, capable kids are wrongly diminished in a system that doesn't understand differences in processing.

Linear children and most teachers process one way that is a world apart from their nonlinear counterparts.

When bright and bushy-tailed five- and six-year-olds start school, they are usually well-adjusted, super curious, and happy.

They do not display any signs of emotional or mental health anguish.

Feelings of not being good enough, broken, stupid, and less capable than others take days—not years—to realize.

It is remarkable how quickly it can all unravel and go south.

Entering the lion's den becomes a daily heroic act for your child.

Tragically, by the time these kids reach third or fourth grade, at the tender age of nine and ten years old, they have been consistently failed by the system every school day for many years.

They spiral into an abyss of self-doubt and diminished self-worth if you don't pay close enough attention.

Teachers don't have time to notice the changes in a timely manner.

Your child, who is frustrated and sad, can't figure out why they are struggling, in spite of knowing in their heart they are bright and capable.

They suffer greatly because of the misfit at school.

They spiral into an abyss of self-doubt and severely diminished self-worth, believing they are stupid and incapable of the success other kids enjoy easily.

Teachers don't have time to notice the changes in a timely manner.

Seeing and processing the world differently, like dyslexics and ADHD children do, is a huge advantage in the twenty-first century.

AI and other robots are consistently taking over lots of current jobs and professions.

The neurodivergents have a notable advantage during this transition.

According to a study, *The Value of Dyslexia: Dyslexic Capabilities and Organizations of the Future*, produced by Made By Dyslexia, a global charity whose mission is to help the world properly understand, value, and support dyslexia, universities like MIT and sought-after employers like Microsoft and Virgin Air are vying for dyslexic individuals to be part of their programs.

The catch is that their abilities, though sought after in the workplace, are not as apparent until they get out of school and into the workplace.

While kids are attending mandatory public school, they are part of a system that underestimates and dismisses them as being damaged and incapable of learning like the smart kids.

Of course, this couldn't be farther from the truth, yet it is the prevailing myth.

These kids do not have a problem learning. In fact, it is the opposite.

They are quick learners and possess outstanding critical-thinking and logic skills.

They learn well and are forced to rely on their superior thought processes to come up with their own creative strategies to survive and thrive!

Their strengths take many forms—spatial, visual, mathematical, kinesthetic, and verbal. When schools fail to recognize and develop these abilities, the disconnect creates frustration and anxiety. Dyslexic and ADHD kids suffer constant humiliation leading to angst. They are three to four times more prone to experience anxiety and depression because of the constant pressure and stress they endure daily. Anxiety is an epidemic in our

country for all ages of kids starting as early as 5 when they enter the school system. For many children, anxiety begins or intensifies when they enter formal schooling. That connection matters.

School failure is usually due to being misaligned and unidentified as dyslexic or having ADHD.

It is the untrained teachers who are the problem, not the kids, in spite of that being the popular and easier narrative.

The evidence is overwhelming: Children need explicit, systematic, evidence-based reading instruction delivered by teachers who know how to teach reading. Yet nearly half of the teacher-preparation programs reviewed by the National Council on Teacher Quality still fall short of covering all five essential components of reading instruction.

Meanwhile, the 2024 Nation's Report Card shows that only 31% of fourth graders reached the NAEP Proficient benchmark in reading.

We know how to teach reading. We have the research. We have the evidence. What we lack is consistent implementation and adequate teacher preparation.

NO GUILT! This is not your child's fault or your fault.

Consider the easy-to-visualize analogy of learning to swim.

Being surrounded by books and splashing in the water does not lead your child to magically become an excellent swimmer.

People need specific, hands-on instruction to understand how to swim and how to read.

We can and must do better.

We must train our teachers while they are at the university before they are allowed to enter any classroom and start harming children out of ignorance.

UGLY TRUTHS

I LOVE EXCELLENT TEACHERS. And I love my children—and all children—even more.

The current state of education is shocking, surprising to the point of disbelief.

Shining a light on the situation meets with a lot of resistance, especially from people who are in education or have a family member who is or was a teacher. But nonetheless, truth is truth, regardless of how ugly it is.

So here it is... school is not what it once was.

It is nearly unrecognizable in so many ways.

School is not like it was when you were a kid. Teachers are not what they were like when you were in school.

The days of a teacher staying after school, or at lunch, to help their student are long gone.

They have been replaced with a procedure put in place by teachers to marshal their time.

They ask the student to first ask a friend for help, then go to Google and watch a lesson on Google. If that doesn't work, look it up on an app, then reread any of the information they currently have before coming to them for help.

It's ludicrous.

The kids feel the disconnect and feel like a burden.

This doesn't create an environment conducive to creativity and joy.

Just as life has changed, so too has education right along with it.

Unfortunately, the change is not for the better.

Teachers are overworked and undertrained for their positions.

Because it is an entry-level, low-paying position, teachers do not find it within their capacity to invest in themselves to keep up with the latest standards of instruction or mental health indicators.

It is almost impossible to be a teacher in this modern world, where technology has taken over and created the most anxious generation ever.

The long-term ramifications of school abuse for children who don't fit neatly into the standard linear system can be far-reaching. By school abuse, I mean repeated experiences that humiliate, shame, dismiss, diminish, or psychologically harm a child within the school environment.

Repeated experiences of being dismissed, diminished, shamed, or made to feel unworthy can shape what a child comes to accept as normal. When unhealthy treatment becomes familiar in childhood, they may be more likely to tolerate that same kind of toxic treatment in relationships later in life.

The consequences of not making mental health and well-being the number-one priority in your child's life can be devastating, both now and later. There is a ripple effect that often goes unnoticed until anxiety and depression affect not only the child, but the entire family.

Children know when they feel unwanted, dismissed, or like a burden. They know when they believe their teacher does not see their value or consider them worthy of their time and effort.

Kids will do well if they can.

**EVERYONE IS ALWAYS DOING THEIR BEST!**

## Chapter 3

### Stressed Out Kids

#### Signs, Symptoms and Strategies

“The key is to keep company with only with people who uplift you, whose presence calls forth your best”- Epictetus

### STUMBLING BLOCKS

Coping mechanisms are a means to deal with the daily pressure and stress of being a right-brained child in a left-brained system.

Coping mechanisms and focused strategies are vital for survival.

Be mindful that strategies and coping mechanisms will pop up suddenly or over time as kids experience the trauma of being perceived as stupid, difficult, or both.

Your child will escape in some way, so it is in everyone's best interest for you to teach them the best ways to protect themselves, utilizing healthy coping mechanisms and positive stress-relieving strategies.

There are unhealthy traits that emerge when your neurodiverse learner can't cope with the pain and suffering they are enduring at school.

They are the negative side effects that come from never getting a moment to catch their breath or feel truly understood.

Once these ways of dealing with trauma take root, they create serious challenges for your child.

Here are a few that rear their ugly heads:

#### Perfectionism:

Surprisingly, perfectionism is not the need to do everything correctly.

Perfectionism is a trauma-driven response to doing everything correctly and still being dismissed and cast aside as less than.

Shame drives perfectionism.

The internal thinking is: I will just push this assignment, commitment, or conversation out a little further—another hour, another day, another month, another year—so I don't have to feel that pain again.

The irony is that the more things are avoided, the greater the likelihood that a domino effect of disaster will follow.

Even knowing this logically, and promising oneself not to let it happen again, escaping the pain, even temporarily, is worth the consequence... until it isn't.

Crash and burn, over and over, because most likely whatever I do won't be good enough, because I am not good enough.

#### People Pleasing

Another predominant trait of people who are repeatedly misunderstood, underestimated, and diminished is to people please.

Dyslexics and people who have ADHD are masters of the game of people pleasing.

It is subconscious.

It is a survival strategy that is put into place based on what worked in the past to get people in authority, like teachers, parents, and coaches, to “like” them.

The thinking is: If I get this person to “like” me or be entertained by me, maybe they will cut me some slack. They will give me a second chance. Maybe they will be more forgiving of me forgetting my assignment at home or missing a deadline.

“The organism does what makes the organism successful.” - Greg Hartley, The Behavior Panel

Procrastination is a coping mechanism. It is not laziness; it is paralyzing fear.

The fear of making another mistake and being shamed again is too much to bear.

Not getting started is the sure way to avoid being embarrassed or humiliated.

It is a vicious cycle that eats away at the person until the proverbial “shit hits the fan,” and action must be taken.

The situation has progressed to the point where the pain of doing the task and the risk of doing it wrong are less frightening than the alternative.

It is a living hell.

Procrastination is avoidance of failure and pain. It starts with the fear of failure and then becomes a limiting belief, then self-fulfilling behavior.

This is similar to the issue of poor executive functioning, which is neurological in nature.

The mind is busy with too many stress hormones flooding through it to remember to check the list, check the email, start the assignment, clean the bedroom, or stop hitting the snooze button.

Procrastination stems from always living in a state of anxiety caused by school-created trauma and the deep fear of failing to meet the teacher's standards and requirements.

The feeling of being out of control in every aspect of their life is a dominating feeling for holistic thinkers.

Any way you can come up with to help your child feel in control of their life will transfer into greater confidence and inner strength.

Executive Functioning

Poor executive functioning, which is neurological in nature, can be improved with a lot of designed structure and practiced strategies.

The mind is busy with too many stress hormones flooding through it to remember to check the list, check the email, start the assignment, clean the bedroom, or stop hitting the snooze button.

Executive functioning and hyperfocus are two that wreak havoc.

The ability to stay focused on one task is either nearly impossible or the only thing possible.

Hyperfocusing can be a superpower because it allows for intense spurts of creativity and productivity.

Sometimes hyperfocusing can take over and mimic OCD.

It's not OCD; it is a coping mechanism to desperately try to grab for some control.

Executive functioning weakness is often a huge stumbling block for creative-thinking kids.

It can significantly diminish their gifts and natural talents if not addressed.

Executive functioning has to be taught repetitively to build muscle memory.

Executive functioning is the way a child's brain organizes information in a systematic and logical way.

It is the natural ability to prioritize quickly and accurately what matters most, how much time it will take to finish a task, and letting go of habits or activities that distract from keeping responsibilities.

When a child is exposed to constant trauma, a physical change occurs. The body becomes dysregulated, causing cortisol levels to go way up and other hormones, like serotonin, melatonin, and dopamine, to get out of whack.

Once the hormones get so disrupted, everything starts to go south—and quickly.

Sleep is elusive. Nutritional eating turns into binge eating of sugar and carbs to get a hit of dopamine.

The mind is busy with too many stress hormones flooding through it to remember to check the list, check the email, start the assignment, or clean the bedroom, so hitting the snooze button is a damn good option.

Hyperfocus is a double-edged sword.

Hyperfocus is a superpower because it allows for intense spurts of creativity and productivity, yet it can also take over and mimic an obsession.

Hyperfocusing can be a superpower because it allows for intense spurts of creativity and productivity, yet it can also take over and mimic an obsession.

Your child can produce unbelievable amounts of work, which is impressive.

The flip side is the house burns down because they forgot they had tea boiling on the stove.

The ability to stay focused on one task is either nearly impossible or the only thing possible, depending on the day and the task.

This inconsistency in effort is extremely frustrating for your child and for their teachers and coaches.

It can appear like your child just doesn't care enough to take care of their responsibilities because their work is usually far beyond their peers, and then, for no apparent reason, they don't turn in their term paper.

Survival Tactics and Coping Mechanisms

These include:

Humor, excessive people pleasing, silence, shrinking, dimming, and losing the ability to take risks and try new things.

The danger is that your beautiful child's world becomes smaller and smaller as they try to fit into the assigned pigeonhole.

When people in positions of authority repeatedly misunderstand and dismiss your child, they learn to play small to survive.

They lose their spirit and zest for life.

It is crushing to witness a slow, silent death of a soul.

Your once-outgoing child starts presenting as a stranger who is now dimmed, shy, and awkward.

It is their way of trying not to say or do the wrong thing and be humiliated again.

If self-worth is destroyed, nothing else will matter!

It is extremely difficult to rebuild out of self-hate.

Those scars are still surfacing for me at sixty-one when I am tired or experiencing a crisis.

Being able to read proficiently is fundamental to all learning and ultimate ease in life.

It is the doorway to learning and expanding that curious mind of your creative child.

The Character Profiles of Nonlinear Kids Seeking Ways to Cope

Overachievers

Overachievers are not trying to show off or one-up others.

They overwork because they are trying to prove their understanding of a subject in an assignment.

These people have no idea how much work they have to do to complete an assignment.

They end up getting into the layers of complexity, and some would say overachieving, but it is how their brain works.

It sees the connections, and everything seems important to full understanding.

They don't have any concept of what level of work constitutes earning an A, B, C, D, or F, so they are "all in."

Believe me, as a dyslexic-wired person, I would give anything to understand how not to overwork, as it is a proven recipe for burnout.

The Class Clown

When a child is rewarded by their peers for making life more fun, they are accepted.

They don't have to be perfect at reading. By bringing the sunshine, they are enough.

This continues to be a strategy throughout life for many.

People are always mentioning how fun and funny I am. I don't try to be funny. It is my nature.

It has moved from a conscious effort to divert attention that I used to survive in uncomfortable situations to an unconscious—and, I must say, handy—skill.

#### The Dismissed

The dismissed are bound and determined to prove their worth.

They know at a heart level that they are capable of high achievement, and through superhuman tenacity, they go above and beyond to demonstrate those abilities.

#### The Overworkers

No idea how much work they have to do to complete an assignment.

They will then overachieve.

They don't have any idea what level of work constitutes earning an A, B, C, or D.

#### The Underachiever

The underachiever is not incapable of achieving; they have been humiliated, misunderstood, and dismissed so frequently that they have shrunk.

They dim themselves after being dimmed by others in their life.

They have given up because all hope is gone.

There is no winning, just enormous effort for terrible outcomes.

#### The Druggie

Drugs become a quick fix to what is experienced as a lifetime battle.

Of course, drugs are not the best choice, but they are a way to escape the harsh reality, even if temporarily.

#### The Nice Guy

The nice guy is another strategy used to survive.

It is being the most accommodating and easygoing to avoid any conflict or misunderstanding.

Becoming likable by morphing into less than is a common strategy.

#### The Good Girl

The good girl is similar to the nice guy.

She is almost invisible except to show up to help everyone.

She believes if she does enough, she will prove her worth to others and, sadly, to herself.

## The Rebel

The rebel says, "Screw it. YOLO." So let's forget about the status quo and fight all authority.

If I am an outlier, maybe I will survive.

## The Adrenaline Junkie

The adrenaline junkie chases dopamine hits by getting adrenaline pumping as often as possible.

It works for a while, but the crash is always a setback.

## Survival Strategies and Tactics Your Child Leans On

There are common and predictable survival tactics employed by divergent thinkers and those affected by ADHD.

They find ways to survive in similar situations and use those strategies again and again to avoid worse pain.

It is common to observe your child using various tactics that I mentioned before, like humor, excessive people pleasing, silencing, shrinking, dimming, and losing the ability to take risks and try new things.

The grave danger for your child is that their world becomes smaller and smaller as they try to fit into the assigned pigeonhole.

When people in positions of authority repeatedly misunderstand and dismiss your child, they learn to play small to survive.

They lose their spirit and zest for life.

They shrink.

A person observing these behaviors may wrongly assume the child is seeking attention or is incapable of performing a task or understanding the assignment.

People who process the world differently often present as shy and awkward.

Your child is using a behavioral language. They are trying not to say or do the wrong thing and be misunderstood and ridiculed again.

It is exhausting to avoid or recover from being hit by landmines at every step.

Fear makes your child's life smaller.

Your child is capable and often will be one of the most creative problem-solvers in the room, yet they are always second-guessing themselves.

They never really relax at school, where the whole point is to perform.

If self-worth is destroyed, nothing else matters.

There is a rabbit hole that can take a lifetime to escape if the inner strength foundation is not solid.

Being able to read proficiently is fundamental to all learning and ultimate ease in life.

There is no doubt the illiterate person suffers on every level in society. They are vulnerable and an easy mark for scam artists and scoundrels to take advantage of them.

However, many illiterate people do thrive in life in spite of their initial challenge with learning to master reading.

They thrive because they understand how to play to their strengths, not taking things personally or being offended by people who simply do not understand their plethora of abilities.

They figure out what they are good at and do more of it.

This builds their confidence and keeps their well-being in check.

They find others and surround themselves with others who can round out their rough spots.

They develop emotional and relational literacy.

There is always a way, and your guidance is the path to well-being and learning.

### Signs of a Spiral

Being an aware parent who is able to anticipate distress with ease will be a comfort to your child and your heart.

The sooner you notice the signs, the sooner you can support your child and ward off issues before they become serious problems.

The first sign of the start of a possible spiral is seeing less joy in the eyes of your child.

This is startling enough to capture the attention of a lot of parents and catapult them into action. But sometimes life is crazier than usual, you are putting out other fires, and you are juggling so much that the subtle signs escape you.

Fortunately, you can't mess up too badly because your child will be relentless.

They will keep ramping things up until you notice—or someone, ANYONE, notices—their silent cries for help.

After-school meltdowns and nightmares are early signs of problems at school.

Your child feels most comfortable at home with you, so he feels safe enough to fall apart.

All day long at school, your child is “holding it together” to save face and keep up appearances.

They need to release all that pain and angst.

It is a good sign they trust you when they melt down with you.

The whole family is now disrupted and out of harmony because your child cannot take any more abuse.

She is showing you her pain and asking for your help through her behavior.

Moodiness is the next guidepost, and then school refusal starts.

Your child, who has always looked forward to going to school to be with friends and learn, now begs you to let him stay home.

Stomachaches will also become a common occurrence.

All kinds of digestive issues are rooted in anxiety.

Your child is holding everything inside, and the pain is real.

There will be stomachaches.

Headaches, usually migraines, take over, and panic sets in for many parents.

In fact, the development of sudden migraines lands many parents (me included) in the emergency room for further evaluation.

Stronger school refusal ramps up.

At the end of your rope, you might even lose it and start yelling, or bribing, or both, trying to find any way to get your child to go to school and not have to make up another excuse as to why they are unable to get to school.

When it gets this far, usually there is no mistaking that there is a situation your child is struggling with, and your wisdom is required.

Isolation is another way to escape the reality of having to “happy up” or have difficult conversations with you.

Your child has a deep desire to make you proud and not be the source of your worry, concern, and sadness.

If your child spends more time alone, there is a reason, and usually it is not good.

Anger rears its ugly head when all the previous signs have been missed.

Anger is a turning point that will make the school wake up and give you a call, demanding you take serious action.

Anxiety

Depression

Suicidal ideation

When all the behavior doesn't get results, your child will start seeking out ways to change their state. Finding ways to cope with the ongoing pain and struggle, they can turn to dangerous outlets.

- Drugs
- Alcohol
- Promiscuous behavior
- Trouble with authority as their defiance grows
- Arrests
- Deeper depression leading to possible suicidal ideation
- Isolation
- Shutdown

At this point, your child has completely changed into an unrecognizable person.

They are a desperate human being trying to stay out of trouble and stay alive.

Your child is struggling to have relevance and be loved for who they are and can't figure it out, no matter how hard they try.

They are adrift, and it is your responsibility to get them to a place of peace and do your best to support them to stay there.

## **DO NOT WAIT TO TAKE ACTION**

Most psychological damage to our children is done during the first five formative years.

At two, three, even four years old, children are still free. They live in the present, unconcerned about the past or future. They are living their lives free to be completely themselves.

They freely express their emotions, needs, wants, and desires. They are free to be themselves.

Then a thing called school begins, and they lose that sense of wonder and exploration. Their carefree, joyful spirit is dulled.

They begin to feel that being themselves is not safe and start doing everything they can to fit in and be what others want them to be.

Being in school demands conformity to be accepted.

Everything is standardized, including your child.

School lays the next level of critical scaffolding at this formative time.

If a fixed, rigid mindset, steeped in performance and social conditioning, is the prevalent mode of operation, children start to be conditioned and lose their authenticity and inner guidance.

They begin to care more about what others think, want, and deem appropriate instead of trusting that they know best for themselves.

They are what Don Miguel Ruiz explains in his book *The Four Agreements* as domesticated.

This tragic phenomenon begins with the expectations and shaming of parents, peers, coaches, and teachers.

Our children are domesticated through a series of punishments and rewards, just like a cat or dog.

There is nothing more frightening and confusing to experience.

As parents, we elevate or poison our children's minds and spirits. We always have a choice.

We can step back and look through a wider lens, see down the road a ways, and provide a calm demeanor full of acceptance, or we can criticize, condemn, and shut down little souls.

Recognizing that K–12 is a blink of an eye in the lives of our children, we can support their curiosity and creativity first and foremost.

While experiencing the ups and downs in school, it seems hopeless, as though this will never end. But we know it does, and better is around the corner.

Nonlinear kids work four times as hard as their peers on fitting in and figuring out what exactly their linear teacher wants from them.

The system is set up for linear processors, not creative kids.

### **Public schools are the masters of Happy Meals.**

They are not trying to create a culinary experience. They are trying to make sure everyone gets enough to get through life as a steady workforce and no more.

Being linear means one takes the most direct route to one most likely answer.

It is efficient but not always the most thoughtful or powerful route or solution.

### **DON'T Bubble Wrap Your Child**

This is meant to empower you as a parent and to build your confidence first and foremost, so you are able to do the same for your child.

A lot of parents are so confused about how to intimately connect with their children that they have lost some confidence and are not quite sure what action to take.

Often, when things go spinning off, there is an element of not holding the space for your child in a way that projects faith and confidence, but instead falls into a lower vibration filled with fear.

The key is to feel into your child's beauty and ability.

By doing so, you will build the optimal environment around them.

An environment that welcomes mistakes, sees adversity as growth opportunities, and is loving and in alignment with who they are.

They thrive.

They take life in stride, and it is a wonderland of joy, creativity, and excitement—not a place of shame and pain.

Failure is a part of learning. Failure is the path to success.

It is the way to greater success than living a small, careful, failure-free life.

We can stay in our tight bubble, but that will not build your child's capacity to the degree necessary to be their best and highest self.

### **Being afraid to fail or considering failure as a negative mark against our child or others is unconscious thinking. It is a small mindset.**

Every incredible thing comes from a series of mistakes that lead to adjustments, pivots, and then, eventually, success.

Adversity is an unmatched gift.

One we don't wish for but are usually grateful for later.

Your child doesn't want to sit in the mud forever, so guess what?

They figure it out.

They figure out how to carry on and that life is not fair, but anything is possible.

The power of allowing your child to live their journey is underrated.

Yes, it is painful to watch your child struggle as they fumble through situations, make mistakes, fall flat on their face, and fail.

Finally, after what seems like a lifetime, they emerge on the other side of their struggle with a new ability to think for themselves, expanded confidence, and knowing their worth.

Of course, sometimes the struggle and suffering go beyond what is character-building and turn into trauma and scarring.

At this point, when you step in and offer a hand up out of the mud or off a ledge, they are ready to grab it, and you've built a closer bond.

They know you will always be there in their corner whenever they truly need you.

There is strength in the struggle.

Do not rob your child of opportunities to expand and be all they are meant to be because you are not strong enough to let them have their journey.

The story I have included here hangs in my house, and I read it every day.

I see it multiple times a day when I am home because it is in my entryway.

After 41 years, it still has the same effect—trembling and tears.

It has taught me to let things in life play out.

Trust that God has a better plan than I could possibly ever have imagined.

Don't interfere with your child's journey, ever.

The Butterfly I remember one morning when I discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree, just as a butterfly was making a hole in its case in preparing to come out. I waited awhile, but it was too long in appearing and I was impatient. I bent over it and breathed on it to warm it. I warmed it as quickly as I could and the miracle began to happen before my eyes,

faster than life. The case opened, the butterfly started slowly crawling out, and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled; the wretched butterfly tried with all its whole trembling body to unfold them. Bending over it, I tried to help it with my breath. In vain.

It needed to be hatched out patiently and the unfolding of the wings should be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear, all crumpled, before its time. It struggled desperately and, a few minutes later, died in the palm of my hand.

That little body is, I do believe, the greatest weight I have on my conscience. For I realize today that it is a sin to violate the great law of nature. We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently flow with the eternal rhythm.

—Nikos Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek*

## OFF THE RAILS

The signs of a spiral are predictable.

## BETWEEN A ROCK AND THE HARD PLACE

Your child will never tell you the magnitude of what they are experiencing because of their love for you and not wanting you to be upset.

## THEY PROTECT YOU.

This is upsetting news when you are thinking you are aware and you know your child and what is happening in their hearts and minds.

The scales fall from your eyes when your child starts school and the bullying begins.

What people don't understand, they often judge. What they judge, they may ridicule, exclude, or try to change.

And sadly, sometimes people are just mean.

You will see so much when you are able to pause, observe, process, and respond.

They appear unscathed. They do not realize the toll until... they fall apart and start coping in unhealthy ways.

This is where masking begins.

There is no Jim Carrey. That is not who I am.

I made that guy up because that's what people were entertained by and attracted to. They loved that character, so I gave them what they wanted.

It was exhausting.

That is what masking costs. All the energy it took for me to pretend to be... JIM CARREY took away from everything else in my life.

I did it to survive.

— Jim Carrey

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## Chapter 4

### A Peek Behind the Curtain

**“If a child is to keep alive in his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult to share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in.”**

**—Rachel Carson**

Taboo Topics That Are Begging to Be Unveiled

The end game is a capable, curious, and joyful person.

This is the same desire for all the players: mostly the child, almost equally the parent, and certainly the teacher.

How efficiently and effectively we get to the end game of raising a person who is able to regulate their emotions, make solid decisions, preserve and prioritize their mental health and well-being, grow in confidence and curiosity, remain a lifelong learner capable of thinking for themselves, and live a full life is up to you, the parent, to orchestrate.

Once you provide a safe and loving learning environment, it is up to your child to keep building their skills. Teachers are placeholders, but the majority of the responsibility for your child's well-being and academic success is yours.

The reason I am laying it out this way is to not risk the idea that someone else is in charge.

**The buck stops with you.**

This is a very good thing—to be in charge—because schools are not the same as they were when you were a kid.

Time has sped up so much that no one can keep up. Something has to give, and what gives is personal connection.

You intuitively know everything is different since the smartphone was introduced.

Families are not the same as they were decades ago. They have lost so much face time that many families don't even know how to talk with each other.

Truth-telling is not meant to be an exercise in teacher bashing. Quite the contrary.

Shining a light on truths, in the most gentle and accurate way, sometimes can still feel prickly to the overworked, underpaid, underappreciated teacher.

I have been falsely accused of teacher bashing often, as are all truth-telling disruptors.

It doesn't faze me because my mission is to raise every child and every student to their rightful place, where they know their worth.

There is a lot of raw emotion to manage when the ugly truths are uncovered, and the only time the child

wins is when adults can own their part in the positive and negative impact they and their actions have on those sweet souls showing up to learn.

I work with teachers, administrators, superintendents, and even state agencies to effect positive change in the world of learning.

I am generous with praise and always give credit when credit is due.

I have lived through decades and watched the steady deterioration of the public school system happening right before my eyes.

The thing is, parents believe their reference point is when they were in school, before all the mess started.

Parents are not welcomed into schools as much as they once were back in the day.

It is vastly different.

Parents don't have frequent opportunities to be behind closed classroom doors and observe what's going on at school.

Very few parents and grandparents know what their child is up against these days.

Your child will never tell you the depths of what they are experiencing. They will only tell you the very surface of the situation and the abuse they are experiencing because they love you.

They don't want you to feel their pain and your pain.

### **They protect you.**

This discovery is heart-wrenching when you believe you are on top of things and are aware of what is happening in your child's heart and mind.

When your child shares anything about what they are feeling or the events they are experiencing at school, no matter how small or outlandish, pay close attention and, with as much calm as you can muster, investigate immediately.

You are not going to help your child by making enemies of hard-working educators. No one is suggesting that warrior energy in any way.

The most compassionate and respectful approach is collaboration and utilizing the skill sets of all involved.

But collaboration does not mean avoiding the truth.

Regardless of how it lands with the school or the individual teacher, the truth must be told. And that, my friend, is a hard pill to swallow for many.

There is overwhelming parental guilt at play when kids are struggling for no good reason.

The reality is that skirting the issue of "invisible abuse" prolongs suffering, and I am unavailable for one more child experiencing crippling shame because I was afraid to ruffle a few feathers by revealing the truth of the situation to ill-informed parents.

It is not easy for anyone, including teachers, to come to terms with the harsh reality of the pain they have caused children while simultaneously giving one hundred percent and putting forth their best effort.

It is hard to come to terms with epic failure when you know you gave your best.

Few teachers are open to hearing that, despite their superhuman efforts, serious problems in the school system are on the rise.

No one wants to admit that children are suffering more from anxiety, depression, and suicide than at any other time in history.

Educators become defensive and shut down communication, and parents become enraged, which is a perfect storm.

So, let's anticipate the situation and avoid pitfalls.

Both kids and teachers want to be appreciated, understood, and valued.

One of the primary reasons I was compelled to write this book was to shift your out-of-date perception of what is happening at school in the twenty-first century.

It is not the same as when you were going through school.

Teachers are pseudo-social workers in schools that have become social-service agencies.

Teaching is what they do when everything else is handled, thus the exhaustion, burnout, and bitterness.

Teachers kind of got a bum deal. The bait and switch, if you will.

They thought they were going to be able to be creative and apply their individual spin on inspiring young minds. Instead, they have to wear a lot of hats that simply don't fit.

Just because it is uncomfortable doesn't mean we should avoid difficult conversations. In fact, that is precisely why we must have them.

As their parent, you need to know you are playing Russian roulette with their lives.

Knowledge is power.

But knowledge also brings peace—the peace of knowing you are protecting your child's self-worth and well-being rather than contributing to its destruction.

The peace of knowing you are not contributing to the shattering of your child's self-worth and well-being.

You want to hate on me? Hate on me!

I welcome it because I know I am literally saving lives. I am making the difference I set out to make 25 years ago.

I know that by helping you understand the reality of the situation your child is facing, I am giving you the chance to do something that will protect them from ongoing abuse.

I know the truth will give them the best opportunity to reach their potential and not shrink or lose their joy.

I know that by pulling back the curtain and exposing what is happening behind closed doors, more children will feel loved, feel their worth, find their voice, be able to trust themselves and adults, and know

with certainty—

### **They belong.**

#### Two Things Can Be True

Two things can be true, and usually are, when things get a bit muddy.

Everyone sees from their perspective but isn't always aware enough to move around to the perspective of others.

As a liaison for Prevent Child Abuse Inc., I grew fond of all “sides.” I witnessed goodness and beauty, as well as frustration and struggle, in the families, educators, social agencies, and administrators I was responsible for helping find middle ground.

Back to our motto:

### **Everyone is always doing their best!**

It was true that a teacher could literally be busting her back to teach to the best of her ability, the likes of a superhero, and true that no meaningful learning or progress was being made.

It is not easy to be in a situation where the status quo needs to be repeatedly challenged because the objective has been outgrown. Yet that is the situation you are in and wholeheartedly believe in.

And when change may also threaten your livelihood, even more defenses shoot up.

Superficial status quo solutions do not work, yet they are held onto tightly because change is too scary.

The problem is that not evolving as a school system by staying current steals precious time from your child's progress and unintentionally extends pain and suffering.

There is a sweet spot where things flow in harmony.

Don't stop short of that place where true teaching and learning occur.

The goal is to have the hard work of educators translate into more literate and innovative students who think clearly and act compassionately.

There is a greenhouse effect, and it is not what you might be thinking.

When flowers and trees are raised indoors, inside a greenhouse, without being exposed to the elements, they do not flourish once they are taken outside because they didn't have the opportunity to benefit from weather that would require them to dig deeper and grow a healthy root system.

Children need some wind, too.

Just like trees, your child needs adversity alongside big wins to be able to reach their potential.

If you swoop your child up too soon and protect them from every hurt and challenge that comes their way, they, too, will be blown by a breeze and struggle significantly in all areas of their life, including academics.

It is ideal for your child to experience these beneficial challenges early in their development, and quite often, to reap the full benefits.

They will rise to higher heights and learn in deeper ways than classmates, and even teachers, when there is a support system that is aware of the balance your child is seeking.

The value of daily challenges combined with daily care, compassion, acceptance, and true understanding is the secret sauce.

When you and those who interact with your child see them, and they **FEEL** seen and heard, they feel safe and will blossom.

No one is advocating for an environment where there is no challenge or the benefit of adversity to learn from and evolve. Quite the opposite!

There is, however, a key distinction that affects nonlinear mavericks facing an opposing linear school system.

**Children need some wind—but your child may already be living in a hurricane.**

Your child is already experiencing challenges 24/7. Their nervous system is constantly stressed, which plays havoc with their immune system.

Everything is connected invisibly.

Your nonlinear, holistic-thinking child is, disturbingly, well beyond their quota to become a confident and capable, deeply rooted, thriving person.

They are approaching the tipping point every day.

A point when things go from the sweet spot to the danger zone, when well-meaning yet untrained teachers assume all kids are experiencing the same level of stress from simply being at school.

Your child is not experiencing things like their linear classmates.

Their peers are already aligned with their linear teacher and system. Your child's peers are not expending a fraction of the energy to do the same work as your child.

This gives the nondivergent kids a colossal advantage: having a reserve of energy they can use on learning.

That energy and brainpower are not accessible to your child because they are exhausted from using up all their energy surviving in an unhealthy, unfriendly learning environment.

**The playing field is not level. Not by any stretch.**

To build self-worth, you need to level the playing field enough so your child will be able to raise their hand and participate.

Anxiety and depression set in when your child is never able to fully demonstrate their knowledge, intelligence, and abilities.

It is up to you to keep close tabs on your child's mental health as they navigate school as a nonlinear, creative thinker.

## Chapter 5

### The Role of Parents Parents as Leaders

I sincerely believe that for the child and the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to “know” as to “feel” - Rachel Carson

A parent's most important role is to keep their child safe, loved, and their well-being intact. Parents are responsible for creating healthy learning and living environments for their children. Sometimes, in the rush of it all, we defer to those we believe are in a position to support the goals of our children. We have all done this with the best of intentions, but that is no longer a viable option or wise course of action. The idea that your child's teacher or the school has the time, energy, or even the ability to create an optimal environment is a myth. I am here to make parents aware of the situation at hand. It is essential that parents understand things have changed dramatically since they were in school. Parents who are aware of the unhealthy environment their child is going to day after day are able to take the lead in optimizing their child's environment and avoiding lifelong problems with well-being and mental health deterioration.

Young children, new to the public school system, are particularly vulnerable because they are still so open to life, untarnished by disappointment and domestication. They are sometimes too trusting in others' opinions because they don't know what's right for themselves yet.

As the champion of your child, you are instrumental in helping your child build their confidence and know what is best for them and the specific way they learn best. What a privilege it is for you to explore lots of things with your child until something stands out as their strength and passion.

As a parent taking personal responsibility, it is up to you to support your child in developing the skills necessary to achieve competence in their gifts and talents while simultaneously lifting them up and intervening on their behalf to diminish any weaknesses they may have. The importance of balance is what we are exploring here. Knowing when to take action, make changes, and when to let things ride a bit until they eventually find their flow. This action will ensure your child stays on the right trajectory to reach their potential.

“This too shall pass” and “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven,” from Ecclesiastes 3:1, remind me that both the light and darkness of life are fleeting and of the importance of being 100% present to experience all of life: the “good,” “bad,” and “ugly” of your child's journey.

The time they are little is insanely short and so incredibly precious. It is a wonderful blessing to have no regrets. By being present for this blink of an eye, you will have peace and joy knowing you did the absolute best by your child and won't be tormented with regrets of the should-have, would-have, could-have sinking feeling if tragedy strikes.

Again, let me clarify: it is key for you to understand that there is no one in the school system who is going to help your child to the degree they need to be helped. There are different options, but none of them involve the school solving or working to make sure your child reaches their potential. Disturbingly, the longer you allow others who are not equipped to teach your child using evidence-based instruction to be involved, the more harm will be done to your child. They will end up hurting them more than they are helping them. Until you have experts in place, you are wasting precious time that your child can't get back, and it makes it much more difficult to recover.

**Please hear this and let it sink in:**

### **DO NOT WAIT FOR FAILURE BEFORE YOU ACT.**

Trust what you are seeing. Trust what your child is telling you. Ask questions. Get the right experts in place. And when something clearly is not working, do not surrender your judgment simply because someone within the system tells you to wait.

### **The buck stops with you. That is power, not blame.**

Even if you do all you can to facilitate the optimal learning environment, your child will still have a lot of pain, disappointments, and struggles along the way. It is unavoidable because that's life, and life is not fair. Life is really hard, no matter what, for a nonlinear person in a world that is linear and more auditory than visual. The occurrence of PTSD is high for both parent and child. Even with the best support, it's not an easy path, but it is what it is. In the end, every effort you make is well worth your child's well-being and ability to demonstrate their intelligence.

Some of the trauma is unavoidable and even character-building, but for God's sake, avoid what is destructive and avoidable.

The encouraging upside? The creativity your child develops to survive at school and in life is off the charts.

Let me clarify the options for you and your child given their divergence and the schools' academic and child development capabilities:

1. Failure. Do nothing = watch them shrink and spiral and not reach their full potential.
2. Get into a pilot program—a school trained in multisensory structured literacy and using it from kindergarten through second grade, while teaching and learning to read is the focus of school. Or find a hands-on school that uses an Independent Study model.
3. Take your child out of the unhealthy environment that does not have the staff to help your child reach their potential. Get private instruction with an expert in literacy and child development, and be in awe as you watch them work their tail off and move from survival to thriving, preserving their well-being to the greatest degree possible.
4. Become a dyslexia/ADHD expert yourself, take your kid out of school, and homeschool using the correct instruction. Supplement by enlisting other experts, and strengthen the development of your child's strengths and passions. Preserve and protect well-being, raise confidence and self-worth, and reach their potential with less lasting trauma.
5. Be independently wealthy, buy your child a business/franchise, or live off their trust.

### **PRIORITIZING WELLBEING IS KEY TO YOUR CHILD REACHING THEIR POTENTIAL**

Dyslexic and ADHD children cannot save themselves, and the schools won't. Most parents are under the impression that the school is the expert and has the same goal as you do: to ensure your child reaches their potential. This is not what happens. The school does not have the answers, properly allocated resources, or personnel to come alongside your child and see them through to the finish line. Your child needs you to step up and navigate the situation for them! You must take personal responsibility for your child. If you choose not to provide what is necessary for them to learn, you will regret it your whole life. The guilt of not doing all you could do for this beautiful life you brought into the world could eat you alive.

There are grown children who never reached their potential because their parent was not willing to make the necessary sacrifices. They couldn't figure out a way to help their child in spite of guidance from me and other professionals. They had all the same excuses: it costs too much; I have other children to take care of; we want to go on vacation, and we can't afford a private teacher; I have to work; I trust the teachers—it will work out...

I have worked with families where parents knew their child needed something different, had guidance and options available, and still chose not to act.

No blame for what you didn't know. Responsibility for what you do once you know.

Don't let limiting beliefs keep you playing small. The better option for everyone is to take the reins and watch your child soar!

Identifying and fostering your child's strengths builds self-esteem from the inside out. Your child is a unique individual, and when you support them in discovering and developing what they do well, confidence grows. Being really good at something matters. Continue creating opportunities for your child to hone their strengths and explore their many abilities.

When your child excels at something their peers value and think is cool, something shifts. Their weaknesses no longer have to define them. The pressure lifts a little. They have a place to shine. That gives them some breathing room and the time they need to do the work required to master reading or tackle another challenge so they can more fully demonstrate their intelligence.

## Chapter 6

### Your Child's Life Behind Closed Doors

#### **The rejection of your child cuts DEEP!**

There is a particular kind of heartbreak that comes from watching your child be rejected. You see who they are. You know their heart. You know how hard they are trying. And then you watch other people misunderstand them, dismiss them, underestimate them, or simply leave them out. It cuts DEEP.

You want to step in and make the world see what you see. You find yourself explaining their worth, championing them, and trying to create opportunities where others have closed doors. And sometimes, no matter how hard your child tries or how fiercely you advocate, they still don't receive the respect, opportunity, and basic kindness they deserve. Their heart breaks. And yours breaks right alongside it.

I am sharing these truths to ease the pain for both you and your child—to help you get ahead of the situation before the damage deepens.

There is a special place in hell for people who harm our children. I believe this wholeheartedly. I have to, or I would be serving a life sentence for what I might have done to protect my children. The pain my children have endured at the hands of people one would think were on their side is staggering and inconceivable.

It is chronic pain, the kind you think will eventually end, but it keeps coming like waves in the ocean. We are all waiting for a break, just a moment to catch our breath. Sometimes that moment does not come. So you create it.

You don't need permission to find a better way. You are the TRAILBLAZER.

Trust your intuition. Trusting your gut gets easier when experience keeps proving it right. It often means going against the status quo because what is standard for others is not necessarily right for your child, you, or your family.

You are constantly being forced to find a better way, knowing that if you don't, none of you will thrive. Talk about pressure. This pressure is precisely why your child becomes a diamond, and someday they will be seen in all their glory. Every facet will catch the light, and "This too shall pass."

The goal is to allow enough struggle for growth without allowing your child to become so suppressed and distressed that they begin to give up. You must be strong and let them lean on you while they learn to hold onto their own worth when the world keeps denying it.

There is no way to explain to someone who does not live with neurodiversity the daily suffering your child may endure.

Abuse does not require visible bruises or cuts. It can be death by a thousand cuts that no one else sees while your child experiences them in silence.

One of the most important realities to keep at the forefront of your mind is this: We are all doing our best all the time.

That belief does not mean harmful impact should be ignored. An adult may be doing the best they know how to do, and your child may still be harmed by what is happening. Intent does not erase impact.

When you can see the source of your child's pain, your instinct is to change the source. You may assume that if you simply explain the suffering your child is experiencing, any kind person will gladly shift their behavior. Sometimes that happens. Sometimes the person is already doing their best with the understanding, training, and capacity they have. This is where discernment matters. You need clarity about who in your child's circle strengthens their well-being and who undermines it.

A teacher may sincerely tell you everything is fine. They may care deeply about every student and believe they are on top of what is happening. Yet the litmus test is the change you see in your child. The teacher may be doing everything right according to their understanding and still be missing what is happening between classmates, coaches, or within the learning environment. A problem often first reveals itself through a change in behavior.

Things are not always as they appear. Pay attention to your child's behavior. Listen when they tell you something. Believe them. Choose them. And when the situation is harming them, act.

Collaboration matters. Take other people's observations and expertise into consideration. But collaboration does not mean surrendering responsibility. At the end of the day, you are the parent. You decide what environments and experiences you are willing to keep your child in and what best supports their well-being.

Do not surrender your judgment to perceived authority. You are the parent. Your responsibility is to lead the way and protect your child's well-being.

To be very clear, I am not here to bash or blame anyone for being themselves. There are excellent teachers whose linear teaching style works beautifully for many students. A teacher can be excellent and still not be the right fit for your child.

My oldest son had a teacher who was highly praised and had earned more accolades than I can list. We were thrilled when we learned she would be his teacher. We believed he had hit the jackpot. The accolades were real. Her success with other children was real. And what was happening to my child was real too.

A lengthy evaluation from Denver Children's Hospital documented dyslexia and dysgraphia and laid out specific strategies for his teachers to follow. The school did not change, but we did.

We left an environment that was not working for him and found a better way for my son to reach his potential. We never looked back. His well-being—and our family's well-being—remained intact while he developed a wide range of skills and talents and eventually reached college-level reading proficiency.

As I have said before, things are not always as they appear, and different people can have entirely different perspectives. The way she taught and the curriculum she delivered earned her awards while simultaneously dismantling my child. The problem is not necessarily the person. The problem is the mismatch.

A key premise of this book is BE YOURSELF. Your child deserves the freedom to BE THEMSELVES. But this cannot be lip service—saying the right thing while your actions require your child to become someone else in order to succeed. Authenticity requires alignment.

A teacher who reaches many children through a linear approach may be doing tremendous good for those children. A coach who relies heavily on auditory instruction may reach many talented athletes while missing visual or kinesthetic learners. The goal is not to condemn the teacher or coach. The goal is to recognize the mismatch and find an environment where your child does not have to become someone else in order to thrive.

My hope is that you now see your child's education with new eyes and understand the importance of alignment—between your child, their environment, and the people teaching them. When that alignment is missing and your child's well-being is suffering, you must be willing to take radical action on their behalf.

You are the leader of your child's journey. Pay attention to what you see. Trust what you know. And when something is clearly not working, have the courage to change it.

The enormous challenge your child experiences when placed in an environment that consistently does not connect with them is the message they begin to internalize:

"I am not enough."

When that belief takes hold, it can grow like a cancer, slowly impacting how they see themselves and what they believe is possible.

Feeling “less than” can only be endured for so long before the wheels begin to come off.

Your child is essentially swimming upstream in a super strong current, all day, every day. They are so exhausted from all the trauma they are experiencing that they have no energy left to learn. They lose their optimism, and it is replaced by limiting beliefs that can take a lifetime to dismantle.

The way they process the world is not wrong or a deficit. The system is set up in nearly every way to reward everything they are not. It rewards speed and efficiency over careful consideration. That feels terrible when, deep down, your child knows they are smart and capable, but they aren't seen in a way that makes them feel valued or admired for who they are. They are not the kid getting chosen; they are the one left over.

All people deserve autonomy and respect for who they are as individuals. The sooner you design the right environment and figure out who the right people are to be in your child's circle of influence, the sooner they will feel seen and know their worth. You will see the swag return and the migraines disappear. Whew! Anything you need to do to get this done is beyond worth it for this moment. You will remember it for the rest of your life when you see your child's eyes brighten again, their shoulders come down off the ceiling, and—oh yes—when you hear their laugh return. I assure you, you will get there because what matters most is your child's heart and soul, and you already know this in your own heart.

Public schools are Petri dishes full of tiny, precious humans.

The school is a metaphor and microcosm of LIFE. It is a training center for your child to figure out who they are and how they intend to go through life. If they are grounded enough, they will not be sucked into the vacuum of complacency, domestication, and homogenization. They will remain true to themselves, and that is where the magic is. The ultimate goal in life is to know oneself and be oneself. If you help your child figure this out, you have done your highest work, and they will be on their way to a phenomenal life.

The same people who unconsciously fight at the drop of a hat bring their unconscious energy to every situation. They have no desire to change or even explore another way of doing things. They will fight to the death for their limiting beliefs. This means you are attempting to negotiate with a person who is so far out of alignment with you and your child that there is little likelihood of much shifting or collaboration. When one side is driven by ego and domestication and the other by spirit, the negotiation becomes a dance that keeps everyone stuck at square one, spinning in circles. Still, it is vital that you try to gather all the insight and information you can about their intentions so you can have an accurate understanding of just what you are dealing with and what your child is exposed to daily. Only after hearing the school out can you weigh your options and choose your next step. Assuming anything only leads to less optimal outcomes.

## **CONFIDENCE**

“I never lose; I either win or learn.”

—Nelson Mandela

Children mirror their parents' confidence. They watch everything and, like the sponges we all know they are, they mimic the good and the bad. The fastest way to build confidence in your child is to emanate confidence yourself so they can see and feel confidence in action.

Part of being a neurodiverse person is always looking for the origin of an issue. We naturally find patterns and can't resist getting to the root of a problem. When it comes to building confidence in your child, it starts with you, because confidence is modeled and mirrored before it is taught.

It is discombobulating and frightening when your child starts shutting down, melting down, and spiraling out of control. It makes you question your instincts, your judgment, and everything you thought you knew as a parent. Without warning, your world implodes. You are untethered and lost, unsure of the next right

step. The learning curve needs to be fast to combat the negative impact of an out-of-alignment environment and potential disaster.

Fortunately, confidence is built the same way for everyone. Nike's slogan, "Just Do It," says it all. It's about training your brain to override the fear of others' disapproval, trust your intuition, and act according to your inner compass—even when doing so makes other people uncomfortable. Confidence is built by taking action, reflecting, tweaking, taking a new action, pivoting, reflecting, and doing it again. Confidence comes down to trying things, failing, trying again, succeeding, and believing you have what it takes to figure things out. Confidence is knowing that even if I fail at first, I will eventually find my way. There is no better way to build confidence than to try a lot of things and keep trying until it clicks for you. Confidence is an inner game. Sure, there are external influences that may derail you from your mission as you try to fit in and belong. Confidence starts to grow when your child stops giving other people the power to define them and understands that the opinion that matters most is their own.

It is fascinating how motivated you can be when your child is in any type of danger. There are countless stories of a mom's superhuman strength being able to lift a car if their child is pinned underneath it. Bottom line is, you can do this! I am here to remind you that you have been racking up success stories with your child since they came into this world.

You didn't even realize your success because it was instinctual. You just did it because it is natural. The power of a good question can help move you from confusion to conviction. Let's try a few exercises:

### **1. Remember connection.**

Think back to a time when you and your child were in lockstep—when you felt that powerful parent-child connection and knew they felt it too.

**Example:** Maybe it was a road trip when the two of you talked for hours. Maybe you were cooking together, hiking, sitting on the edge of their bed, working on a project, laughing so hard you cried, or simply having one of those rare moments when your child completely relaxed and let you into their world.

Take a notebook and describe what that felt like.

### **2. Remember how you responded.**

Think about a time when something unsettling happened in your child's life—something that hurt them—and you had to figure out how to help and guide them.

**Example:** Maybe they were bullied, left out, embarrassed by a teacher, cut from a team, heartbroken by a friendship, overwhelmed by school, or convinced they had failed at something that mattered deeply to them.

What did you do? Did you listen? Ask questions? Make a phone call? Change the environment? Find outside help? Pull them close and remind them who they were?

Write down what you did and how it felt.

### **3. Remember what you have already overcome.**

Think about a time when the odds were stacked against you and you overcame them.

**Example:** Maybe you changed jobs, moved somewhere new, survived a financial crisis, navigated an illness, ended an unhealthy relationship, learned something you thought you could never learn, or simply kept going through a season that felt impossible.

Describe how you felt at the beginning and how you felt after taking action.

What changed inside you once you realized, "I can handle this"?

### **4. Notice when things changed.**

When was the last time you saw curiosity and joy in your child's eyes? When did you last feel that calm sense of your child simply being themselves and all being right with the world—their well-being intact?

**Example:** Maybe they used to race outside after school, build things, draw, sing, tell stories, ask a million questions, invite friends over, or talk endlessly about something they loved.

Now think about when things changed.

Did they begin shutting their bedroom door? Stop talking about school? Develop headaches or stomachaches on Sunday night? Start saying, “I’m stupid,” “I hate school,” or “I don’t want to go”? Did the child who once loved learning begin avoiding anything that might expose a weakness?

**What changed?**

The school environment has changed. Life has changed. So what? Life is change. This is an opportunity to show your child how to respond and to teach them that difficult seasons do not last forever.

You can help them regain a sense of control by showing them that they are not trapped.

**There are choices.**

**There are adjustments.**

**There is always a next step.**

Once you identify where things began to shift, work backward and reverse-engineer the solution. Draw on your past experiences. Think about the steps you took to solve other problems and how you came out the other side.

**You can do this too.**

Your child has you as their parent precisely because you are the person who can lead them through this.

Most likely, being blindsided by this new challenge stirs feelings of angst and even a little panic in you as an adult.

**Imagine how your child is feeling.**

The secret is to slow everything down and trust yourself and your child.

**This is not final or fatal.**

It is another blip in your lives, and you will figure it out together just as you have figured out the other challenges that came before it.

Let the Mama Bear kick in.

Your child will feel your confidence and follow your lead back to themselves.

Now it is time to learn. Understand how your child’s brain is wired, how they process information, where their strengths lie, and where the environment may be out of alignment with the way they learn.

A nonlinear thinker placed in a highly linear environment can begin to feel as though something is wrong with them when the real problem may be the fit.

**Stop trying to force the square peg into the round hole. Look at the hole.**

When your child is struggling, it is easy to become frightened and hand your confidence over to someone you believe must know more than you do. Teachers and specialists have important expertise, but **you know your child in a way no professional ever will.**

Teachers come and go from year to year. A teacher may have tremendous influence during the months your child is in their classroom—for better or worse.

**You are the part of their world that makes sense.**

You are the person they can trust to have their back—the person who gets them, believes them, encourages them, is there to lean on when things hurt or are confusing, and does the happy dance with them when things finally fall into place.

**You are their anchor. You are a safe harbor in their storm.**

You are not disappearing at the end of the school year. You are with them for life.

When you stand beside your child, listen carefully, ask questions, seek the right expertise, and act when something is not working, your child receives a powerful message:

**I matter.**

**My parent sees me.**

**I do not have to figure this out alone.**

**Someone who loves me unconditionally has my back.**

**That is where peace begins.**

Your child can relax enough to stop fighting for survival and begin trusting that together you will find a way forward.

**STOP GIVING AWAY YOUR PARENTAL POWER.**

The buck stops with you.

Do not let fear convince you that because the school cannot provide something, nothing can be done.

There are other teachers.

There are specialists.

There are different environments.

There are different approaches.

There are options you have not discovered yet.

**Yes, you can find a way forward.**

And when your child cannot yet advocate for themselves, **you must lead the way.**

## Chapter 7

### MISTAKES and MINDSET Strength in the struggle

“You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and YOU have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.” —Jane Goodall

My dad gave me this gift when I was young, and I have, in turn, given the same gift to my children and thousands of dyslexic and ADHD kids across the state of Montana, for whom I have advocated for over the last 2.5 decades. I wrote laws and policy for creative children, facilitated many teacher and faculty training sessions, gave keynote speeches, and sat across the table from too many distraught children and moms to count—all in an effort to ensure each child can truly be themselves and reach their potential. I am sharing this story because it explains something my dad taught me about mistakes, mindset, and believing in yourself.

My creative-thinking dad, from whom my sons and I inherited our dyslexic wiring, was the OG of growth mindset before anyone was calling it that.

#### **He celebrated mistakes.**

When we sat down for dinner, my dad would ask:

**“Honeygirl, tell me about your day. What mistakes did you make today?”**

Then he listened.

He never shamed me for approaching something differently or made me feel stupid because my solution was not the obvious one. Instead, he noticed the creative way I had tried to solve the problem and asked questions that helped me figure out what worked, what didn't, and what I had learned.

He encouraged me to be authentic and do things my way—even when my way was not the way he would have done it.

He fiercely resisted domestication of any kind.

That built independence. It built trust in myself, and it built trust in him as someone I could always come back to.

My dad listened with kindness, curiosity, and wisdom.

He asked me to explain my thinking out loud so I could hear for myself where my reasoning was strong and where it needed work.

Without calling it anything special, he was teaching me critical thinking.

He was developing my creativity, competence, and confidence.

Every question mattered. Every response mattered.

He understood that he and my mom were not merely managing my childhood. **They were helping shape the person I would become.**

My dad, God bless him, understood the influence he had on the little girl sitting across from him. He knew I could grow up afraid of life—or become an adventurer ready to grab it by the tail.

I chose the latter.

According to my dad, one of the greatest sins in life was living a **vanilla life**.

I wholeheartedly agree.

A life that is completely small, predictable, and protected from every possible mistake becomes a prison of its own making.

My dad carried this philosophy forward with his grandsons.

Once, after something particularly unfair and painful happened to one of my sons, Papa hugged him. He told him that what had happened was wrong. He reminded him that life would not always be fair—but that unfairness did not get to determine what happened next.

Then Papa reminded him of something worth carrying for life:

**“No one event ever gets the power to define you.”**

### **Growth Versus Fixed Mindset**

**“The formulation of a problem is often more essential than its solution.” — Albert Einstein**

A fixed mindset demands one outcome and often insists there is one correct way to get there.

That is a difficult fit for a nonlinear thinker.

Your child sees possibilities. They connect dots. They may arrive at several solutions before someone else has finished explaining the problem. Their thinking can take what looks like the scenic route because they are looking at the whole picture rather than moving neatly from A to B to C.

**The creative thinking process is logical. It just isn't always linear.**

That distinction matters.

A child may know the answer without being able to immediately explain every step they took to get there. To a teacher expecting one prescribed process, this can look confusing. Sometimes a child is even questioned about how they reached an answer because their path is not obvious to anyone else.

**But different does not mean wrong.**

This is why forcing a nonlinear thinker into one rigid method can create unnecessary frustration. The goal is not to train the creativity out of your child. The goal is to help them understand their own thinking well enough to use it intentionally—and, when necessary, communicate that thinking so other people can follow along.

Your child's ability to look at a problem from several angles is an asset.

Teach them to ask:

**What is the real problem?**

**What am I noticing that others may be missing?**

**What are the possible ways through this?**

**Which solution makes the most sense?**

That is critical thinking.

And when a child learns to trust their thinking while remaining curious enough to challenge it, they become increasingly capable of solving problems for themselves.

## **STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS DON'T WAIT TO TAKE ACTION**

The first five years of life are foundational to a child's emotional and psychological development. What happens during these years shapes how children understand themselves and the world around them. And that development does not stop when they enter school. At two, three, even four years old, children are still free. They live in the present unconcerned about the past or future. They are living their life free to be completely themselves. They freely express their emotion, needs, wants, desires. They are free to be themselves. Then a thing called school begins and they lose that sense of wonder and exploration. Their carefree joyful spirit is dulled. They begin to feel that being themselves is not safe and start doing everything they can to fit in and be what others want them to be. Being in school demands conformity to be accepted. Everything is standardized including your child.

School adds another powerful layer of influence during these formative years.

When performance, conformity, and outside approval become more important than curiosity, individuality, and growth, children begin looking outward to determine who they are and how they feel about themselves.

They notice what earns praise.

They notice what brings criticism.

They notice what makes them acceptable.

They will gravitate toward what feels good and away from what hurts.

Slowly, they can begin caring more about what other people think they should be than about what they know and feel inside themselves.

In *The Four Agreements*, Don Miguel Ruiz describes this process as **domestication**—learning the rules of belonging through approval and disapproval, rewards and consequences.

That is why the adults surrounding your child matter so much.

Parents. Teachers. Coaches. Peers.

Every one of them contributes something to the voice your child eventually carries inside their own head.

And as parents, **we have enormous influence over what that voice becomes.**

We can reinforce the message that worth comes from performance and approval, or we can continually bring our children back to themselves.

**Who are you?**

**What do you think?**

**What did you notice?**

**What matters to you?**

**What did you learn?**

**What will you try next?**

K–12 can feel enormous while you are living through it, but in the span of your child's life, it is a short chapter—God willing.

Do not let a difficult school year define your child. They are building their foundation. They are figuring things out. All experiences are opportunities to choose how to live.

**Doing nothing is a decision.**

Step back. Use the wider lens.

Your child needs at least one adult who can see beyond the grade, the missing assignment, the behavior report, the test score, or the teacher's opinion and remember the whole human being standing underneath it all.

That is you.

Support curiosity. Protect creativity. Build competence. Keep reminding your child that struggling with something does not make them less capable, less intelligent, or less worthy.

Nonlinear thinkers frequently expend tremendous energy trying to decipher what a highly structured environment expects from them while simultaneously doing the actual work.

A standardized system naturally favors standardization. It is built to move many children through common material, expectations, schedules, and measurements.

Think **Happy Meal, not custom culinary experience.**

That does not make school inherently bad. It means **you cannot expect a standardized system to automatically recognize and develop every individual strength in your child.**

That is where you come in.

Your job is not to fight everything.

Your job is to know your child well enough to recognize when the environment is helping them grow—and when it is asking them to become smaller in order to fit.

**Protect the child while you solve the problem.**

## **BUILDING YOUR A-TEAM**

### **How to Approach the School and Get the Best Outcome for Your Child**

At some point, you are going to have difficult conversations with teachers, administrators, specialists, counselors, or other people involved in your child's education to ensure your child is in an optimal environment for learning. How you enter those conversations matters. Your mindset and confidence are felt by the rest of the team.

The most effective approach I have found is calm, compassionate, informed, and collaborative. **Always give grace where you can. Always take the best action for your child.**

Remember that the people sitting across the table have pressures, limitations, fears, and responsibilities of their own. You do not need to agree with them, and you certainly do not need to pretend something is working when it isn't just to be likable. But allowing people to feel heard and respected gives you a much better chance of getting them to hear you and ultimately create the optimal situation for your child.

**The goal is not to win the meeting. The goal is to help your child.**

I often joke with the parents I support that I have a shelf full of Oscars. They usually look confused until I explain that decades of advocating for my own children and for children across Montana have required some award-winning acting. There have been plenty of meetings where Mama Bear was roaring inside me while the person sitting across the table saw calm, thoughtful Kelly asking questions, taking notes, and leading the way toward a better outcome for my child. That is not weakness. That is strategy.

**Kindness. Compassion. Confidence. Competence.**

These are the qualities I want you to carry into the room. Kindness keeps the door open. Compassion reminds you that the people across the table are human too. Confidence keeps you from giving away your parental power. Competence—knowing your child, understanding the problem, doing your homework, and knowing your options—gives your words weight.

You can carry all four and still be absolutely clear: **This is my child. This is not working. We need a better solution.**

Walking into the school guns blazing may feel satisfying in the moment, but when everyone becomes defensive, your child pays the price. You can be firm without being threatening, disagree without losing control, and say, "This is not working for my child," without embarrassing the person across the table and creating an unnecessary enemy. You can remain collaborative while making it perfectly clear that you will not stand by while your child continues to suffer.

Before every meeting, bring yourself back to one question:

**What does my child need now, and who has the competence to provide it?**

Not who is right or wrong. Not who deserves the blame. Not how angry you are. Those questions pull you away from the outcome. The question that matters is what your child needs in order to move forward.

Sometimes parents arrive in a panic because they have begun accepting everyone else's explanation of their child. Maybe the school says the child needs to try harder. A relative says they are immature. Someone else says they are lazy, unmotivated, difficult, or simply need to learn responsibility.

This is when you stop, look at your child, listen to your child, and get curious about what is actually happening. Your child does not need you to join the chorus of people telling them what is wrong with them. **They need you to figure out what they need in order to flourish.**

Sometimes that means better instruction, different support, a different teacher, outside expertise, accommodations, a change in environment, or simply an adult finally understanding the real problem.

Whatever the answer turns out to be, keep returning to the same question:

**What outcome will best protect my child's well-being while helping them move forward?**

That is your compass.

When your child is struggling and you feel no one is responding with the urgency you know the situation deserves, fear takes over quickly. You feel angry, desperate, or emotionally flooded because your child's well-being feels threatened. **That is a normal reaction to watching someone you love suffer.** The challenge is not to eliminate that Mama Bear instinct, but to harness it so it helps you move toward the best outcome for your child—with grace that moves mountains.

### **WHO'S IN CHARGE ANYWAY?**

At this point, ask yourself: Who is responsible for fostering and protecting your child's self-worth and confidence? Is it you? Their teacher? Their coach? Their counselor? Is it God?

Everyone has influence, but ultimately your child must learn that their worth belongs to them. That inner knowing develops over time through experience, through overcoming hard things, and through the guidance of adults they trust.

Until your child develops their own voice and the ability to advocate for themselves, **you are their greatest asset, their advocate, their guide, and their cheerleader.** You step up and speak before they have the language or confidence to speak effectively for themselves. Eventually, your advocacy becomes their self-advocacy. That is the goal.

Your child is the person who will ultimately find their own way through life. There will be bumps and bruises, failures, unfairness, disappointment, rejection, and plenty of times when being a square peg in a round-hole world is exhausting. Other people will make that journey easier or cause more pain along the way, but no one else gets the power to determine who your child becomes.

Help your child learn to be **their own best friend.** Teach them to listen to their gut, hone their intuition, trust themselves, ask questions, seek help when they need it, and pay attention when something does not feel right so they get curious about why.

There is a world of difference between believing **"I am struggling with this"** and believing **"There is something wrong with me."**

A child who learns to trust themselves carries a built-in advantage through life. They learn to say: This hurt me. I don't understand this yet. I need help. This environment isn't working for me. I made a mistake. I will try again. I've faced challenges before, and I've overcome them.

**That is how self-trust is built.**

Every time your child makes it through something difficult, they prove something important to themselves: **I can trust myself to find my way.**

Your role is to help them build that inner strength while they still need your protection, perspective, encouragement, and guidance. Your job is not to remove every storm from your child's life, nor should it

be. Your job is to make sure they are not standing alone in the middle of one believing the storm defines them.

**Hard experiences are part of everyone's story. They are not your child's identity.**

Pain, frustration, confusion, rejection, humiliation, and being misunderstood have two sides. These experiences either become part of the fuel that propels your child forward or begin building limiting beliefs that hold them back. **The difference is not simply what happens to your child. It is how they learn to understand what happened. They can choose the lens in which they see life.**

One of the most useful reframing tools I teach children is:

**Is it good? Is it bad? Who knows?**

Teach your child to pause before deciding what an experience means. Something feels terrible today and ends up redirecting their life toward something far better tomorrow. We simply do not know the ending while we are standing in the middle of the story.

Help your child resist the downward spiral of: This ALWAYS happens to me. Nothing ever works out. It always gets worse.

Instead, teach them to pause, gather information, and wait long enough to see what unfolds. This is not pretending something painful did not hurt. It is refusing to give one painful moment the authority to predict the rest of their life.

Children in pain do not always recognize their own strength. They also do not understand how vulnerable their developing self-worth is. Pay close attention to how your child is interpreting what is happening around them. Their interpretation becomes part of the story they tell themselves about who they are.

This is why you continually adjust the environment while deliberately creating opportunities for success, connection, competence, and **shining moments**. Your child needs real experiences that remind them: I am capable. I belong. I have something valuable to contribute. I will find my way.

The goal is not a childhood without difficulty. That does not exist. The goal is for your child to meet difficulty without allowing it to dismantle their sense of self.

The people who inspire us are rarely the ones who lived perfectly protected, predictable lives inside the box society prepared for them. We are drawn to people who got knocked down, figured things out, found another route, and became more fully themselves along the way.

Your child is becoming that person.

Do not romanticize their suffering, and do not waste it either. Help them learn from it, grow through it, and understand that what feels like fire today does not get to burn down who they know themselves to be.

**The experience becomes part of their wisdom—not their identity.**

## **Resilience: The Tragic Cost of Lost Potential**

I am going to go way out on a limb and challenge the widely accepted narrative surrounding resilience. The truth must be told before meaningful change can begin.

Beware of the word resilience. It has become a convenient escape from responsibility, allowing adults to reframe a child's suffering as evidence of strength rather than confronting the conditions causing the harm.

We have become so comfortable praising children for their resilience that we have stopped asking why they are being forced to demonstrate it in the first place.

Imagine Sam, a bright, curious child full of ideas who struggles to read aloud. Every morning, Sam walks into class knowing that today will bring another round of round-robin reading. As classmates take turns,

Sam's stomach tightens. Instead of listening and learning, Sam counts paragraphs, desperately rehearsing the words ahead.

Then comes Sam's turn. The words do not come easily. Classmates listen. Embarrassment takes over. Sam wishes the floor would open up. Tomorrow, Sam will return and face it all again.

And what do we call that? Resilience.

Celebrate Sam's courage to return, absolutely. But do not praise a child for enduring repeated humiliation while overlooking the adults' responsibility to prevent it. Sam's intelligence was never the problem. The instructional environment was.

Overcoming adversity is entirely different from enduring repeated psychological harm. Ongoing misunderstanding, dismissal, ridicule, exclusion, and being overlooked teach children to read the room, become chameleons, and conceal who they truly are to survive in environments that fail to recognize their worth.

Trauma is not resilience. Endurance is not resilience. Survival is not resilience.

Consider the bright, nonlinear thinker who thrives in an Advanced Placement classroom. The instruction is intellectually stimulating, the discussions sophisticated, and the peers eager to explore ideas at a deeper level. These students are not overwhelmed by intellectual challenges. They are energized by them.

The problem is the educator who underestimates their intelligence, misunderstands how they learn, or mistakes differences in reading, writing, processing, or organization for limitations in thinking. These children give everything they have to succeed, only to be misunderstood, underestimated, and inadequately supported.

Eventually, the burden becomes unbearable. A student abandons advanced classes. A college student changes majors. An adult redirects a career. And we call it resilience.

But there is an enormous difference between choosing a new path because you discover something you love more and abandoning a path because years of unsupported struggle have convinced you that you cannot succeed. One is self-discovery. The other is surrender disguised as choice.

Consider the lifelong consequences: advanced classes abandoned, degrees never pursued, careers never realized, inventions never invented, businesses never built, discoveries never made, contributions to society that never materialized. These are the losses we can see.

The most devastating damage is what happens inside the child. Every dismissal, humiliation, lowered expectation, and experience of working twice as hard only to be judged as less capable becomes another cut. Death by a thousand cuts.

Children begin to internalize the opinions of the very adults who misunderstand them. They stop questioning the environment and start questioning themselves: Maybe I'm not as smart as I thought. Maybe I don't belong here. Maybe I'm not capable of what I dreamed of becoming.

Eventually, the voice of the educator who underestimated them becomes the voice inside their own head. The misunderstanding becomes part of the child's identity.

A child who once raised a hand stops volunteering answers. A child who loved learning begins dreading school. A child who dreamed without limits starts measuring every possibility against the fear of failure. Their intellectual ability has not disappeared. Their potential has not diminished. But their belief in themselves has been systematically eroded.

The most devastating loss is not simply what these children stop doing. It is what they stop believing is possible for themselves.

Meanwhile, parents are exhausted from years of advocating, negotiating, pleading, and paying for support. Teachers are exhausted by competing demands, insufficient training, and systems that leave them struggling to meet the needs of every student. Everyone wants the struggle to end.

And in that exhaustion, we begin lowering the dream instead of removing the barriers.

We call it being realistic, finding a better fit, helping a child accept limitations. But whose limitations were they—the child's, or an educational environment that failed to recognize how that child thinks and learns?

The child did not suddenly become less intelligent. The adults stopped expecting the environment to rise to meet the child's abilities.

The meetings stop. The arguments stop. The emails stop. The child stops asking for something different. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief. But silence is not proof of healing. Cooperation is not proof of well-being. The absence of conflict is not proof of success.

Sometimes the battle ends because the child has surrendered. That is not peace. That is a tragedy we have mistaken for progress.

Years later, the teacher has moved on. The school has moved on. The system has moved on. The child carries the consequences into adulthood: diminished self-worth, narrowed possibilities, and a life shaped by limits that were never theirs.

The child did not reach the limits of their potential. They reached the limits of the support they were given. The thinking was never the bottleneck.

### **Before You Celebrate Resilience**

Before you celebrate your child's willingness to change direction, ask what drove that decision. Did they discover a more meaningful path, or become too exhausted to pursue the one they loved? Are they moving toward something that excites them, or away from an environment that convinced them they did not belong?

Never confuse a child's diminished expectations with diminished abilities. Your child deserves an environment that recognizes their intelligence, protects their self-worth, and expands what they believe is possible.

We could win the school battle and lose the child. We could also end the school battle by surrendering the very future we were fighting to protect.

We are not here to teach children to make themselves smaller to fit the world. We are here to help them develop the confidence, skills, and opportunities to make their contribution to it.

I know firsthand that the damage does not necessarily end when you leave the environment that caused it. I have never completely healed from the ill-treatment I experienced within a broken educational system. I still carry that pain every day.

But I also carry something extraordinary.

The encouragement, wisdom, and unwavering belief of incredible teachers who saw me, understood me, and recognized my potential. Some became lifelong friends and mentors. Their influence has stayed with me just as surely as the pain, shaping my confidence, expanding my possibilities, and enriching my life in ways I will always treasure.

That is the extraordinary power educators hold. Some leave wounds that last a lifetime. Others leave gifts that last a lifetime.

I share this not to revisit my own experiences, but to make the lifelong consequences real for you. I want you to understand what is at stake for your child. The adults who surround your child are helping shape not only their educational experience, but their self-worth, their confidence, and what they believe is possible for their future.

Pay attention to who diminishes your child's spirit and who helps it flourish. Seek out the teachers who recognize their intelligence, nurture their gifts, and give them the confidence to reach beyond what others believe is possible.

Try this.

"Grab a glass and throw it on the floor."

"Okay, done."

"Did it break?"

"Yes."

"Now say you are sorry to it."

"Sorry."

"Did it go back to the way it was before you shattered it?"

"No. It didn't."

Look at the floor. Thousands of tiny shards scattered in every direction. Some pieces are so small you can barely see them. Others have disappeared beneath furniture, into cracks and corners where you will never find them.

Now put the glass back together.

You cannot.

No apology, no amount of regret, no collection of fragments will restore that glass to what it was.

And yet we expect children to endure years of humiliation, rejection, misunderstanding, and psychological harm—and somehow emerge whole simply because we call them resilient.

Some wounds never fully heal. Some losses cannot be recovered. Moving forward does not mean the damage has disappeared.

**We cannot know in advance which experiences will leave lasting scars. Why would we gamble with a child's developing self-worth?**

**The time to protect the glass is before it shatters.**

## **No Limiting Labels**

Labels are limiting when we allow them to define a person rather than describe one aspect of who they are. Pigeonholing people is a lazy way of seeing the world. In our three-second, sound-bite society, assumptions are formed almost instantly, repeated confidently, and treated as truth despite bearing little resemblance to the person being described.

I understand the value of a diagnosis, but it comes with important cautions. When my son was in kindergarten, I didn't even know what dyslexia was. I trusted that the educational system would recognize his needs and guide me toward understanding them. I had no idea how little I knew about what was happening or what lay ahead.

By the grace of God, an extraordinary teacher pulled me aside and told me what a remarkably bright child I had. She recognized that he processed information differently and that his thinking did not follow the traditional linear path. Her name was Mrs. Cota, and I will be forever grateful for her courage, insight, and willingness to share what she recognized. She gave me information I didn't even know I needed. And she nearly lost her job for telling me.

Think about that. A teacher recognized something important about a child's intellectual abilities, shared that insight with his mother, and nearly suffered professional consequences for doing so. What happens to all the children whose teachers remain silent? What happens to the parents who never receive that conversation?

Parents cannot advocate for needs they don't know exist. They entrust their children to educators believing that important observations, concerns, and learning differences will be communicated openly and honestly. But when information is withheld, concerns are dismissed, or educators are discouraged from sharing what they recognize, parents are denied the very knowledge they need to protect their children. Every day without understanding is another day without appropriate instruction, another day of unnecessary struggle, and another opportunity for a child to internalize failure that was never theirs.

This is what makes the lack of transparency so damaging. Parents believe the professionals responsible for their children's education will guide them when something is wrong. They don't know what they don't know. And they certainly don't expect to have to investigate whether the people they trust are withholding information or misunderstanding their child's needs.

The federal Child Find obligation exists precisely because identifying children who need special education cannot depend entirely upon parents recognizing disabilities they have never encountered. Yet legal obligations mean little to a child whose needs go unidentified, whose difficulties are dismissed, or whose parents never receive the information necessary to pursue appropriate evaluation and support. A parent cannot exercise rights they don't know exist, advocate for needs they don't understand, or challenge decisions made using information they have never been given. Transparency is essential to protecting a child's educational opportunities, dignity, and well-being.

We eventually obtained a comprehensive evaluation at Children's Hospital. We provided the school with the professional report documenting my son's dyslexia and educational needs. Their response was astonishing: "Dyslexia isn't real. It doesn't exist."

The school had the information. The diagnosis was documented. Yet the educators lacked the preparation and training to provide the instruction he needed. Ultimately, I left my career to homeschool my son and began educating myself in a field I had never expected to enter. Not because I had planned to become an expert in dyslexia, but because my child needed an educational environment that recognized his intelligence and supported the way he learned.

This experience taught me the difference between identifying a learning difference and actually providing an appropriate education. Child Find and FAPE are not optional courtesies extended to parents. They are federal obligations intended to protect the rights of children with disabilities. Parents should not have to become detectives to discover what educators already recognize about their children.

A diagnosis can open doors to services, accommodations, and legal protections. But a diagnosis is not a solution. It is information. Its value lies in what happens next: whether that information leads to better instruction, appropriate support, and an environment in which the child flourishes.

And here lies the danger of labeling. Once a label becomes the primary lens through which parents, educators, and children interpret everything about that child, we have traded understanding for assumptions. People begin believing they know the child because they recognize the label. They don't. They know a term and carry ideas about what that term means. Some are accurate. Others are incomplete, misguided, or entirely false.

Those assumptions begin shaping expectations, opportunities, instruction, relationships, and ultimately the child's understanding of themselves. The diagnosis that was supposed to open doors becomes the justification for closing them.

A child who repeatedly hears what they cannot do begins internalizing those limitations. The label gradually moves from describing an aspect of their learning to defining who they believe they are. Instead of understanding their strengths alongside their challenges, they begin viewing their entire identity through the narrow lens of a diagnosis. This is how a useful tool becomes a limiting narrative.

People are kaleidoscopes. Multifaceted, fascinating individuals with extraordinary combinations of abilities, experiences, interests, personalities, and perspectives. Your child is no exception.

Help educators see the whole of your child. Their intelligence, creativity, humor, curiosity, strengths, and passions deserve as much attention as the areas where they need support. Every person experiences the world through a different lens. No two children arrive with precisely the same combination of abilities, experiences, influences, and possibilities.

When we reduce someone's identity to a single characteristic, we narrow what we notice, what we expect, and what we believe is possible. And expectations are powerful. What we focus on multiplies.

This is a core value I have shared with children and parents throughout decades of working together. Focus on what your child can do, what they love, what excites their curiosity, and what you want to help them accomplish. Recognize their challenges. Address them directly. Provide the instruction and support necessary to overcome unnecessary barriers, but never allow those challenges to become the child's identity.

Your child wants what every human being wants: to be loved, understood, accepted, and valued. To have adventures, enjoy meaningful relationships, experience peace, and find joy and purpose in life.

A diagnosis should expand our understanding of a child, not shrink our expectations of who they can become. The label is information. Your child is infinitely more.

Why are we here if not to enjoy life and when things get rocky, do our best to navigate through and become better for the challenges we overcame?

Mother Teresa was famous for letting people know that if they wanted her to champion a cause with them, they would have to focus on the positive, not the negative. "I was once asked why I don't participate in anti-war demonstrations. I said that I will never do that, but as soon as you have a pro-peace rally, I'll be there." —Mother Teresa

Well-being preservation looks different for each individual and changes based on the situation. Here are a few of the usual suspects you might experience or witness.

Reframing is the technique of consciously looking at something from a different perspective, utilizing a growth mindset perspective. Its key is to stay focused on the outcome we are seeking, not the hurdle we

temporarily face. The skill of reframing situations is a learned behavior that pays great dividends in maintaining wellness. It takes practice and repetition to be optimistic in a mostly pessimistic environment, but it is well worth the effort. Mindset incorporates reframing and attitude. If children can see life experiences as ways to grow and expand, they can renew their love of learning.

Your child is responding on a visceral level. There is sophistication in their simplicity: they sense more than they know how to explain, but they don't yet have all the pieces to make sense of what is happening. They want relief. They want the pain, shame, and humiliation to stop. They want to be understood, seen, and appreciated for the value they bring. They want to belong.

Your role is to help them put those pieces together—to understand what happened, find words for what they are experiencing, and recognize what they need. That understanding gives you a starting point for addressing the pain and creating an environment where your child belongs and flourishes.

Your child, like all children, is inherently vulnerable and holds little power in a world governed by adults. They depend on adults for guidance, protection, and opportunities, trusting that teachers, coaches, and parents know better and have their back. They also place enormous trust in peers whose acceptance matters deeply to them. The people whose judgments they trust hold considerable power over their daily life and sense of belonging.

When those same people tell your child they fell short once again despite putting forth their best effort, the message carries more than disappointment. Your child trusts their judgment and begins questioning their own abilities and worth. Things start to feel hopeless and go south quickly. Their well-being and confidence are shattered, leaving scars on their self-worth that endure long after the incidents themselves.

Your child's vulnerability does not disappear when they take a risk. Learning asks them to try something they have not mastered, make mistakes, and risk looking foolish in front of people whose opinions matter to them. That is what makes it an act of courage.

It is not being a Pollyanna to see the glass half full. Reframing helps your child recognize the opportunity to learn alongside the discomfort of getting something wrong. Not being concerned about making a mistake allows your child to put all that creative energy into learning.

Many inventions and innovations were spinoffs from so-called mistakes. Countless people would have died if the mistake of penicillin had not been made in 1928 by Dr. Alexander Fleming, who came across this powerful antibiotic completely by chance.

In choosing to see the positive, not the negative, in things and looking at things with curiosity rather than absolutes, we are open to many possibilities. Children live at a higher energetic vibration when they are free to explore without criticism. Focus on what we want more of, and better outcomes are on their way. Focusing on what we can do gets the creative juices flowing. We are unavailable for all the excuses or limiting beliefs about what is not possible, what is standard policy, or what has always been done, regardless of whether it works or is beneficial to the student.

I love this quote by Nelson Mandela, which sums up a growth mindset and the perfect reframing:

"I never LOSE; I either WIN or LEARN." —Nelson Mandela

The tool of reframing helps us to always stay focused on the outcome we are looking for, not the hurdle we temporarily face. It is not being a Pollyanna. It is simply choosing to see the positive, not the negative, in things, people, and situations. Focus on what we want more of, trust in the support of the divine, and watch as the magic happens.

As the person who knows your child most completely, pay attention to their behavior at school and at home. Let subtle changes be your guideposts. If you notice your child beginning to lose confidence, withdraw, or dim their light to escape pain, radical changes must be made immediately.

This is your child's life, and it's your responsibility to safeguard their heart and soul. I am pulling back the curtain so you can see the urgency of making adjustments that will elevate your child and bring peace to

your family. You are the one who must take the lead. You can go about things in a kind way, but when push comes to shove and your child needs intervention, you have to be decisive and act with intention immediately. Things with kids go south quickly once they max out.

Don't delay taking action to address negative changes. You know and love your child better than anyone else possibly could, so trust your intuition. When your joyful, confident child faces a landslide of serious challenges, shaming, and humiliation, they begin to become a different person altogether. When your child is overwhelmed, they can't manage it alone. The psychological scars endure long after the experiences themselves and rear their ugly heads at the least opportune times. This is when you must step in to guide them back onto a healthy path.

## Don't Wait

The likelihood of a school being completely transparent with you about concerns or red flags regarding your child—their challenges, abilities, or negative experiences—is about as likely as winning the lottery. They won't be transparent because they don't want to upset you or be legally responsible for addressing the situation. They wait, and they want you to wait too, because then, like magic, time goes by and they do not have to face the consequences or commit the manpower and budget required to address your child's needs.

The most difficult part to believe is the practice itself: wait and watch them fail. Let them get far enough behind to prove they need help before intervening. This reality is not okay, and it creates distrust immediately. It shakes your belief that the school is always acting in your child's best interest.

Schools will even tell parents, "We need these kids to fall two standard deviations below their peers before we can begin addressing anything." Teachers are trained and warned by their administrators not to tell you when they think something is off. Instead, they offer false reassurance: "Sally is such a kind, bright child. She will catch up. She is just a slow starter. Don't be concerned; all kids will catch up." Or, "She is the sweetest child. Nothing is really wrong; she is just a sensitive soul." Yada, yada, yada.

Calling your child a "late bloomer" does not address their need for instruction. The belief that waiting alone will resolve their difficulties is a costly myth, 180 degrees off the mark. When a safe space and proper instruction are withheld, your child loses ground academically, and the impact reaches into their social and emotional life.

Your child is the one who loses.

Kids suffer while teachers and parents wait for them to "catch up." Kids thrive with the correct instruction and struggle without it.

Don't give your power away to anyone when it comes to your child's well-being. You will never get that time back. Trusting a teacher who does not understand your child, while dismissing the distress unfolding before you, amounts to throwing your child to the wolves. Your child needs to know that when something is wrong, you will recognize it and act.

Teachers come and go year after year. They have your child for nine months and make a positive or negative impact. You, on the other hand, are their anchor. You are not going anywhere in nine months. When you stand your ground for your child, they know they matter to you and that they have a partner in life who has their back.

## CHAPTER 8 Building Back Confidence and Well-Being Guidance for Parents to Minimize Anxiety and Maximize Wellbeing

“My wish for you is that you continue. Continue to be who you are, to astonish the world with your acts of kindness. Continue to allow humor to lighten the burden of your tender heart.” -Maya Angelou

The good news is there is always a way to live a better life. Everyone we know is fighting a tough battle, and most people find their way through to better times. For dyslexic children and children with ADHD who process the world around them differently, preserving self-worth and building confidence is not easy—but it is what matters most. Maintaining well-being is possible when you recognize the alignment problem and refuse to succumb to it.

Knowing how to navigate school and other systems as a nonlinear thinker is vital to your child's success and joy in life.

Children who know themselves—their strengths, abilities, and challenges—and have a support system in place find it easier to roll with the punches of life. Without that understanding and support, frustration, anger, humiliation, and self-hate take hold, with consequences that reach far beyond childhood. I wrote this book to help you recognize that slippery slope and change the direction of your child's experience.

Understanding the challenges and strengths associated with dyslexia and ADHD is a game changer. Taking action now opens opportunities for your child to develop their abilities, expand their confidence, and build a life in which they flourish.

### Don't Fix Your Child. They Are Not Broken.

Your child is not broken. It is the environment that is broken. The current system is dysfunctional and eventually abusive to children who do not think in a linear way. It is especially toxic for the youngest children, who do not yet have the words, emotional skills, or inner strength to express their frustration and pain. They feel that same worthlessness day after day, trapped in a destructive environment with no way out.

It is up to you, their loving parent, to pick up on the signs of their silent screams. The red flags become clearer when you are dialed in and really engaging with your child. They are harder to recognize when you are relying on reassurance from the school that everything is okay.

We all get sucked into compliance because we are taught from a very young age to respect authority no matter what. We go along to get along. After all, it is a survival tactic. We keep doing it until it becomes clear that the person in authority is not acting in our best interest. It's not that people are evil or bad. We all go about life in our own way, and when we are forced to fall in line simply because someone holds authority, a lot can go wrong.

One of the most dangerous interpretations of the biblical teaching to honor your elders is that age alone deserves unquestioning obedience, regardless of wisdom or quality of heart. This willingness to yield without questioning the way something is done—or what is being asked of your child—gives child abuse room to happen.

Society affords teachers and coaches an enormous amount of power, too much of it unchecked. Unless you are vigilant about how that power is used, your child can end up in troubled waters with no way out. Don't get me wrong: there are plenty of educators out there who absolutely contribute to your child's well-being and build their confidence. Those are the individuals you want to entrust with your child's growing and vulnerable mind, heart, and soul.

### Remember...Nice Is Never Enough.

Your child needs something beyond nice. They require competent educators who are eager to inspire, guide, and instruct using techniques and curricula your child will relate to. So many teaching methods and

curricula are out of touch with current times that they are, in essence, obsolete. Children are eager to learn but have zero interest in wasting time learning how to take tests and regurgitate information readily available through Google, ChatGPT, or other AI tools instead of learning about life.

Being held back rather than encouraged to expand their mind and develop their potential is a form of enslavement.

The unconscious collective in the school system is all about getting things done and checked off the “to-do” list, but that comes at the cost of tragically missing the bigger picture altogether.

The real effort in education should be to inspire each child to know themselves and be themselves, then equip them with the skills to share their unique gifts, talents, and strengths with society—to build a better internal and external world.

Education should assist and guide children during their formative years as they discover, develop, and reach their full potential as individuals. Yet the majority of schooling misses or rejects this entirely, arguing for their limitations and creating homogenized followers ready to fill slots in the workplace. Instead, education should encourage children to be themselves, create new opportunities, and develop new insights that help elevate and evolve humanity.

The frustration is not with people individually but with the unconscious collective that praises the goal and trappings of mediocrity: compliance, completed checklists, and fitting in, while individual potential goes undeveloped.

It behooves you to guide your children in developing their ability to adapt. Being able to adjust, pivot, take an entirely different approach, or dream a new dream is vital to well-being.

It is simple: if something is working, do more of it. When it stops working, change course. Staying fluid and flexible teaches your child that change is inevitable and is something to embrace, not fear. When the target changes, change your tools and strategies. Changing is growing, and growing develops abilities that build self-esteem.

Let's get to some tried-and-true solutions used by lots of neurodivergent children and adults. Over time, you will formulate your own strategies to help your child cope with the stress of being a misfit. Have a good time exploring new ways to help your child shift their state. Live in the present moment. BE YOURSELF. When your child begins to trust and choose themselves, caring less about what others think and more about what they themselves think and feel, their stress decreases and self-worth rises. This is the beginning of good things to come.

## Finding and Fostering Strengths

The #1 key to preserving your child's self-worth and growing their confidence is finding their passion and developing it.

All people need their place to shine in the world. For dyslexic children, finding that path early is especially important because of the mismatch they experience in school.

In his book, *The Dyslexia Empowerment Plan*, Ben Foss offers a program that creates a visual profile of your child's dominant strengths. It maps skills that are ready to be fostered and those that need attention. This is a super useful tool for helping your child and their teachers see those strengths. I am certain you can already identify your child's natural strengths and areas of weakness.

The bottom line is that your child is enough as they are. They are not broken, so they do not need to be fixed.

When you hold this belief 100%, your child feels it and will rise. They need to be supported, loved, and believed in just as they are. This might be the most important realization for parents. You may say you believe in your child and even go to bat with others about their abilities, but if your actions don't match your words, your child feels the disconnect.

Instead of smashing your child into a box they don't belong in, recognize their innate value. Help them develop their skills, abilities, and talents so people long to mimic them, not mock them.

Reframe everything into the positive because whatever they focus on they will attract. Focus on what they can do and what they are naturally good at. Get outside daily. Exercise. Get sunshine. Go on a drive. Blare the music. Utilize tapping. Dance. Do whatever it takes to maintain and expand well-being and confidence. Your child is counting on you to notice their struggles and their strengths and address them accordingly. Remember - you are their hero so live up to their opinion of you.

"Know Thyself" as inscribed at the Temple Of Apollo in Delphi, is a big clue in life and most certainly in the fostering of well-being in children. When children know who they are, what they are about and understand their innate value and worth, they become almost bulletproof. Knowing their strengths as well as their weaknesses makes them a realist. They can give themselves grace and not be so hard on themselves if they are better at science, sports, or art than music and reading. This way of experiencing the world is something that is taught.

#1 Passion development to an expertise level is the best hack for building self-worth, self-confidence, and, coincidentally, gaining acceptance and belonging regardless of any misalignment in a school or social setting.

The best way to combat anxiety is to be outstanding at something. It's even better if your child excels at something others believe to be beyond their ability. I am talking about real excellence—not just good at something, but exceptional.

Fun ideas with that immediate awww factor include doing a standing backflip, juggling, or channeling Picasso.

Once your child has revealed their passion and talents, it is up to you to provide opportunities for multiple, repeated experiences of success. Things go right often enough to build up the muscle memory of hope, joy, and peace in the body. Your child's body traps trauma. It can also remember the feelings of being calm, accepted, loved, relevant, productive, valued, and supported. This book focuses on all the ways to rise above adversity and turn it into part of the story that catapults your child toward success.

Being present is a way to keep anxiety at bay! Consuming instead of creating is a driving force behind the disaster we have on our hands: children spending more time watching other people live than discovering and living their own lives. People are not present when they spend most of their waking hours consuming content instead of creating something—anything!

Nature provides us all with present moments. It demands our attention and full presence in a way not much else can. That's why you will find creatives adventuring: climbing mountains, hunting, fishing, filmmaking, milling around the trails, on the ski hill, surfing in the ocean, jumping into rivers or lakes—anywhere, everywhere, all the time outside in nature, feeling that connection and receiving energy from Mother Earth.

It is not just fun for your child; it is as essential as breathing itself. It is what sustains us, in childhood and throughout our lives. It is coming home to where we always belong. We all feel the magnetism of Earth's pull—that powerful connection to nature and sense of belonging. It is what makes everything in life make sense.

So, find ways to get your child outside in nature so they can fill up their reserves to tackle the rest of life in a bold, brave, and beautiful way.

"No man ever steps into the same river twice"- Heraclitus

The river represents everything in life.

River time continues to help me, my kids, and families I have worked with for decades. It is a state changer. The movement of the river, the cool water running over your feet, and the order of nature bring you back to the present. It is a joyful reset.

Everything is changing all the time. The river changes. Your child changes. This moment is just a moment in time. What your child is experiencing now is not all that lies ahead.

The other day, after hours of reflecting on things and writing this book, I was in desperate need of river time. I knew what to do. Fortunately, I am blessed to live in God's playground, where a river or creek is only minutes away in any direction. I packed up and drove down the road for a bit, found the perfect river spot, walked her banks, and waited for the clouds to part so I could feel the warmth of the sun. Then, with exuberance, I jumped in.

I stayed in the chilly March runoff water for a few minutes until I could feel every inch of my body tingling with life force. Being present in nature and with nature filled me up with pure joy. A reset.

Soon after my dip in the river, a young child showed up. Gus is four and full of life. He started skipping rocks and dancing all over the shoreline. He was learning to read the currents by tossing in sticks of different sizes and densities and watching them float downstream. Some got stuck in an eddy or up against a rock or beaver dam. Some sank, and others flowed freely toward their next home miles downstream. The lessons were poignant.

The stick represents your child and how they navigate the river of life. If we resist the urge to interfere, they will find a way. Next to trusting your intuition and taking the lead in your child's journey, this lesson of noninterference is most important.

I know it might seem contradictory. Taking the lead does not mean taking over. It means recognizing when your child needs you to step in and when they need room to find their own way. The secret to the whole damn thing on this journey is trusting yourself and your child—and balancing your child's level of adversity with loving support and guidance.

"Everything is better at the river." —Buttercup (that's me)

With my whole heart and soul, I believe this. I know that everything is better at the river. And my nudge is for you to feel the urgency, as a parent of a creative nonlinear child, to help your child carry that river inside their being. To carry its lessons of movement, change, and finding a way forward—and meet life with courage and grace.

You are not fixing your child; you are seeing them in all their glory. This is the turning point. This is when it all clicks, and you realize there is no going back. It's on now—you are empowered to do and be whatever it takes for your child to feel their worth. You are unstoppable. Settling for anything a smidgen less than helping them reach their potential is nonnegotiable.

As the leader of your child's young life, it's your job to make sure your child can live their big, beautiful life. Your direction becomes clear as your guidance system kicks in—TRUST yourself. You have this, and you know it!

## A Note Before You Begin

This section shares ideas drawn from my experience and research for you to explore—not individualized medical or mental health advice. People respond differently, and personal experiences do not guarantee the same results for everyone.

Consult a qualified healthcare professional about your individual needs before using herbs, supplements, or making treatment changes, including decisions for children and teens. These ideas are not a substitute for diagnosis, treatment, or prescribed care.

## #2 Being in the Present Moment

Being in the present moment is a powerful way to shift your state. There are many ways to practice it, from cranking the music to dancing. Being PRESENT is being in the space where life is happening. Instead of rehashing the past with regret or shame, or worrying about what might happen, you bring your attention back to what is happening now. Teaching and modeling this for your child is a gift of well-being—a practice they can carry with them throughout their life.

### #3 Nature is a consistent “go-to” for reducing anxiety and restoring well-being!

If your child is looking for other neurodivergent friends, a great place to start is the great outdoors. So go ahead—get outside! Get into nature, soak up the sun, lie on your back and find shapes in the clouds, jump in the lake, sprint up the mountain, catch a wave...do it and do it often to make nature appreciation a part of your everyday lives.

I am from Montana and ended up moving back here to get married and raise my kids. I intentionally chose an environment where my children would have access to being in nature and exploring the great outdoors daily. Nature is where I personally recalibrate best. It is in my top two choices for coping with my dyslexia. Here is a little thought I recently had about why nature is a Godsend.

Nature holds space for us 24/7.

We are comforted knowing the sun will rise and set daily. It's predictable. Nature also allows us to adapt to the different seasons and storms. Nature teaches us how to look forward to changes and let go of the past while welcoming the next change, even with some trepidation. We trust the natural world because we know what comes our way is fleeting. It won't last forever, so we are willing to allow change and get used to being out of control for bite-sized stretches of time. It's all real. You are present in nature.

Storms and changing weather are like the events of our lives—forever becoming. We benefit from experiencing impermanence over and over, season after season. All storms eventually run out of energy, and equilibrium is restored once again. We've all been in a rainstorm, and the first thing we do when the rain stops and the sun peeks through the clouds is—look up! We are eager to see the rainbow.

Nature provides structure, certainty, and a feeling of control. It is not that we have control over the specific weather, but we feel certain about the ultimate outcomes. We know there are only so many ways a storm can unfold, so we feel safe.

Nature provides a constant illustration of the cycle of life. Nothing is ever wasted, giving us a feeling that everything is connected for a reason and everything is essential. Everything in nature MATTERS. Therefore, we MATTER, and it feels good to matter.

So, in nature, we belong. We are part of something grand and glorious where we feel held. As nonlinear people, we feel our worth in a way we rarely do elsewhere. The life-force energy of a warm breeze or a ray of sunshine brushing our cheek wakes us up, and we feel alive—fully alive!

By experiencing nature, we become better at weathering the storms that arise. We accept the ambiguity in nature willingly. It doesn't scare us; it comforts us. We don't know for certain what nature will stir up or what details will transpire on any given day, but we can take comfort—and find inspiration—in knowing it can change within minutes.

Using a wide-angle lens, we see beyond the immediate moment into that space of peace where everything makes sense. Even though we feel small, we still feel deeply connected and certain that we belong everywhere. There IS a place for us in nature and life.

Nature gives us hope.

### #4 BE YOURSELF!

Being authentic builds inner strength and expands confidence.

Anything that can positively change your child's state is an option. And, by the way, the more at ease you are, the more your child will be too. Children are skilled, sensitive energy readers—you can't fool them. Some of the best remedies are hiding in plain sight. Have fun exploring...

These ideas do double duty. They're for you and your child. Your well-being matters right alongside theirs.

## Breathing

Breathing is trending, and it's easy to understand why. It is free and always accessible. When your child is feeling stressed, notice whether they are holding their breath or taking quick, shallow breaths. Help them notice too. Practice together when they are calm so the exercise becomes familiar.

Try box breathing, where you make a box with your breath: breathe in through your nose for four counts, hold for four, breathe out for four, then hold for four before starting again.

Or try straw breathing: take a gentle belly breath in through your nose, then purse your lips as though you are blowing through a straw. Breathe out slowly and gently, as if blowing out a candle. Keep it comfortable, without forcing a big breath or a long hold. Explore and find what resonates with your child.

## Journaling

Writing your thoughts down on paper is restorative. Think of it as mind dumping. It releases emotion and frees the mind for bigger and better things.

Julia Cameron's book, *The Artist's Way*, is an excellent resource to help you start or deepen your own journaling practice. Her Morning Pages exercise calls for three handwritten pages—a commitment more suited to an adult.

For your child, keep it simple. Writing itself can be stressful for children with dyslexia. Set a timer for one minute and let them write whatever comes to mind. One minute is an awesome start. They can choose to do more if it's helpful. The point is relief and expression, not another writing assignment.

## Movement

Any kind of movement will change your state. Jump up from your chair. Do a few push-ups or jumping jacks. Move your body and free your mind.

## Dance

Dancing alone or with someone is an activity in full presence.

## Road Trips

Taking a drive is pretty easy and super useful because driving is a right-brained activity. Go on an adventure! Changing up the routine can breathe fresh air into your lives and provide new mini challenges to overcome successfully, boosting self-esteem. For a nonlinear person, the change of scenery offers room to explore, relax, and restore.

## Tapping

EFT tapping is a technique for helping your child feel grounded. You gently tap specific acupressure points on your body while repeating a phrase aloud or to yourself. For example: "I am available for joy today" or "I am enough as I am."

## Nutrition

This is another key element. Nutrition is what fuels our brain and body. Give your child the best nourishment you can afford. Build meals around whole foods: vegetables, leafy greens, whole fruit, whole grains, and protein. Limit added sugar, soda, and heavily processed snacks. Keep it simple. You are fueling a growing brain and body.

## WATER!

Alongside movement and breathing, water is a pillar of a healthy environment for learning and living. Your brain and body need adequate hydration to function well. Dehydration can bring headaches, fatigue, changes in mood, and difficulty thinking clearly.

Before pushing harder, check the basics: has your child had something to eat, moved their body, and had enough water to drink?

Keep water available throughout the day—at school, during activities, and at home. Make water part of the routine. Needs vary with age, activity, heat, and health.

This applies to you, too. A busy day makes it surprisingly easy to forget your own needs.

## **SLEEP!**

Getting good sleep is a must! Kids need more sleep than adults, and the amount changes with age: children ages 6–12 generally need 9–12 hours, teens need 8–10 hours, and adults ages 18–60 need at least seven hours. Make room for sleep—yours, too.

## **Vitamins and Minerals**

Nutritional needs change as we grow—from childhood through the teen and college years and into adulthood. These considerations apply to you, too.

Vitamin D deserves attention. It supports bone health, muscle function, and the immune system. Low vitamin D levels have also been linked with depression. That connection matters, but taking extra vitamin D is not a guaranteed mood fix. Research on supplements and depressive symptoms has produced mixed results.

B vitamins and magnesium also deserve attention as part of your individual nutritional needs. Start with food, then find out whether additional support is needed. More is not automatically better.

Work with a qualified healthcare professional to identify individual needs, whether testing would be useful, and appropriate supplement amounts based on age, diet, and health.

## **Sunlight**

Getting enough vitamin D is not always easy. Fresh air and sunshine are a welcome part of caring for your whole self.

## **Tai Chi and Qigong**

Explore tai chi or qigong—practices that bring movement, breathing, and focused attention together. Both are rooted in Chinese traditions that cultivate life-force energy, or chi. Try them yourself or together with your child and see what resonates.

## **LAUGHTER!**

Being able to laugh easily and genuinely at oneself is a gift you can help your child develop. Try funny movies, comedy shows, or goofing around with friends. Make room for the things that lift your child's mood and bring you joy, too.

## **Earthing**

Go outside and walk barefoot on the earth, or go ahead and lie down on the earth. The ocean is also grounding, so taking a dip is beneficial and fun.

## **Mindfulness**

Being aware of the present moment!

## **Fragrance**

Fragrance is another way to change your state. Aromatherapy doesn't mean essential oils exclusively. Think fresh-baked cookies or the aroma of a pot roast in the Crock-Pot. Expand your horizons. Notice which scents bring your family comfort, joy, or a welcome burst of energy.

## Music

Music is my drug of choice next to nature. Sometimes they take turns in first and second place. So, naturally, I integrated lots of music and dancing into our family life. Explore all kinds of music and sounds to find what calms or energizes your child.

## Exercise

### LAUGHTER!

Yes, I listed this twice because it is twice as important. He who laughs last, lasts!

### SCREAMING!

Shocking, right? Sometimes you need to let loose, too! If a good shout feels like a release, find a place where you can let it out.

The point is to keep being creative. What helps you or your child today might not be what helps tomorrow. The target keeps moving—in the learning and the living. Keep exploring. Trust yourself. You've got this!

## Herbs

Explore the world of natural remedies. Valerian root, ashwagandha, and lion's mane are among the options people explore for relaxation, sleep, focus, or well-being. People respond differently—what one person loves, another hates.

Do your homework with a qualified healthcare professional who understands herbs, medications, and your individual needs. This applies to adults, too.

## Healthy Relationships

Friends and loved ones bring joy to our lives. Building and maintaining strong, healthy, loving relationships is another nonnegotiable for your neurodivergent child.

The feeling of not belonging is so prevalent that your child needs connections with others who see them. If people are not available, animals are a great addition and source of companionship.

Have fun exploring these ideas, and take comfort in what you are learning about your child—and yourself. Each discovery builds your ability to recognize what is needed and respond. Your skills expand. Your confidence grows. You are taking the lead, and you can do this!

But taking the lead doesn't mean going it alone. Put together an A TEAM of people who elevate your child and bring you peace and strength. Their support helps you hold space for your child as they develop skills, gain confidence, and get ready to fly on their own.

\*Functional medicine is worth looking into, mindfulness work, a personal coach for you and your child, fun friends, and loving humans to play with.

## SLOWING DOWN to Escape the Fight-or-Flight Response

When your child lives in survival mode—fight, flight, freeze, or fawn—their sympathetic nervous system is continually activated, causing the body to release stress hormones. When the body keeps responding as though there is danger, it has little time to calm. Your child reacts by fighting, fleeing, freezing, or fawning—going along with others to avoid conflict.

The exhaustion of always being “on,” trying to find workarounds and ways to produce what is needed to survive, leaves them in hyperfocus, total shutdown, or energizer-bunny energy. The result is that they struggle to regulate their lives in a way that brings harmony and ease. Your child is in survival mode, not creative learning mode.

Part of creating well-being is recognizing triggers before these responses become ingrained. Your child may vacillate between different survival coping mechanisms. When you pay attention, you are better positioned to catch them before they fall.

Slowing down everything around your child gives them room to find their internal equilibrium. Their energy returns as they become more at ease in their environment. You will see their shoulders come down and their eyes brighten. You might even get a full night's sleep. Everything changes for the better when your child's nervous system has room to recalibrate.

Slowing down is one of the most difficult processes for a nonlinear person in survival mode. When your child slows down, they risk feeling their real feelings or spinning off. It is critical to help them trust that it is okay to slow down.

An excellent starting point is breathing. Start with conscious breathing, then slow the pace of walking and, finally, the pace of talking. Slowing the physical pace gives the mind room to quiet, settle, and take in information.

Kids sit on a continuum of behaviors, from rapid-fire talking to being almost completely silent. They talk fast because they feel perpetually rushed by a world that misunderstands them. They try to get their ideas out before someone misinterprets them and shuts them down. They are trying desperately to be heard and understood.

On the other side of the continuum, your child might fall silent, afraid to speak up for fear of ridicule, shame, or being misunderstood once again. It feels too risky to share their thoughts. This is incredibly disheartening because they have incredible thoughts and insights.

Watching your bright child shut down is unbearable. You know they are a chess player in a room full of checkers players. Their thinking involves connections and possibilities that their teachers and friends are missing.

## Chapter 9

### Resources and Reimagining Education

#### Resources

Over the last ten years, the amount of quality information about dyslexia, ADHD, and wellness has exploded—in a good way. Information you once had to hire experts to discover is now a keystroke away. A Google search gives you a starting point for understanding your child's needs and optimizing their learning environment with confidence.

#### Check out these resources to get started:

Susan Barton — [bartonreading.com](http://bartonreading.com)

Bessel van der Kolk — *The Body Keeps the Score*

Kelli Sandman-Hurley — Dyslexia Training Institute (DTI)

University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) — [ufl.edu/education/ufl.edu/resources/dyslexia/](http://ufl.edu/education/ufl.edu/resources/dyslexia/)

Jerome Schultz — *Nowhere to Hide*

ADDitude magazine — [additudemag.com](http://additudemag.com)

Ben Foss — *The Dyslexia Empowerment Plan*

Understood — [understood.org](http://understood.org) (ADHD and dyslexia)

Jeffrey Freed and Laurie Parsons — *Right-Brained Children in a Left-Brained World*

Jonathan Haidt — *The Anxious Generation*

Clinton Ober, Stephen T. Sinatra, and Martin Zucker — *Earthing*

Mona Brookes — *Drawing with Children*

Ann Albers — *44 Heart-Themed Mandala Coloring Meditations*

You know your child, and you will figure it out one day at a time. Fear not. You have this!

Fear not, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

—Adapted from Isaiah 41:10

#### Reimagining Education

After living with the current education model for fifty-five years and working in or around the system for thirty-six, I have imagined millions of models. ANYTHING BUT THIS seems to be a viable option. Mandatory education served a purpose and still does. But the world—and our individual lives and needs—has changed significantly. We need to change the systems to match those new needs and energy.

So I have this idea: What if...we change things up a bit and just see how it goes? Maybe this could reduce the anxiety our children and teachers are feeling.

#### The current "Old Schooling" system includes:

1. Child care
2. Safe social interaction
3. Social services: counseling, free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch
4. Academic instruction
5. Extracurricular activities: athletics, music, art, debate, etc.

## 6. Transportation: buses and driver's education

### A New Education Model

What if we could incorporate most of those elements, but in an entirely different way? Why not evolve into a model that replaces traditional teaching roles—except those focused on reading, economics, and the creative arts—with paraprofessionals supported by educational AI, free apps, social workers, chefs, farmers, and on-call experts in every field?

I know we need all kids to learn to read, create beauty, move their bodies, and develop a solid understanding of how economics works for their well-being and society's well-being. But what if we could do better? What if we could move beyond a model designed to serve the country and build one that develops each child's full potential?

What if we used tax dollars to elevate each child to their full potential along a path of their own choosing? I vote for making dreams come true. Let's start building our own schools.

The students could create their own education. Build your own model. Think independent study for children in K–12, with exposure to new ideas and places.

The sky's the limit.

Kids explore what interests them and begin developing those interests to mastery. The adults bring the guidance, instruction, and resources to help them go further than they could go alone.

When they run into a problem—which, of course, they will if they are creating and learning—they page an expert, talk it through, or meet in person to work through it and move on. And the pay? We would compensate our paid experts fabulously.

The experts could be a mix of volunteers, similar to the Peace Corps model, and paid advisors. Paid advisors would serve two- to four-year terms to keep fresh ideas coming and prevent stale ideas and patterned beliefs from infecting young minds.

There are so many options because we are free people. We can choose to create outside the box and build a healthier, happier future for our children. I hope sharing this little dream of mine sparks something in you—that you will be brave and build your own education for your child.

Now that I have shared the severity of the mental health challenges facing children in public school, the next step is to take the lead in your child's educational journey. Take radical action when it is called for. Use what you have learned, trust your intuition, and build the support you need to act. Dream big and model that for your child.

It all boils down to helping your child BE THEMSELVES. See them as the individual they are, and create an environment where they can develop their abilities, explore their interests, and grow into their full potential. Give them room to make mistakes and learn, with your loving guidance along the way.

Let your child have their journey with your loving guidance and room to find their own way. Don't let anyone define your child except your child.

Keep in mind that your child being misunderstood and a misfit is a blessing. It may sound strange to call it a blessing while you are in the throes of pain and suffering. But trust me—you will eventually get there. Your child is being forged for a fantastic future. There is a beautiful life around the corner.

Help them filter out the noise so they can evolve faster and further. They are on their way to being themselves.

There is a lot here to digest and wrap your mind around. But the bottom line is that you are the leader of your child's experience on this planet—until they take the reins. Your guidance shapes how they see the world, people, culture, and their place in it.

Life is short, so make it sweet by seeking alignment and letting go of the rest. Have fun grabbing back those reins and engaging with your precious child. Remember to trust your gut and, above all—BE YOURSELF!

## Chapter 10

### BONUS: Energy Impacts Everything

Criticizing, comparing, complaining, or condemning will come back to bite you. We are all energetically connected, so what you do to others, you are doing to yourself.

“What goes around comes around.” Maybe so, but I have rarely seen it play out in real time. I’m not waiting around for it. Being right is not high on the list. Your child’s well-being is.

When you worry incessantly about your children you are inadvertently contributing to their demise. You are unintentionally keeping them stuck in a low vibration. You do not help your child by worrying on their behalf. You help your child by providing what they need to live their life out fully and beautifully.

You are holding your child back when you carry negative energy. They are so sensitive as young children they feel your energy and have no way to release it.

Worrying excessively means, at a gut level, you don’t believe in them and their abilities or trust yourself and your abilities. You might be questioning the teacher, seeking understanding from the school but it comes off as a lack of confidence in your child.

Children FEEL the energy of their parents and teachers. They know when they are falling short in the eyes of their elders. They want you to be proud of them, so they work harder and harder without any real direction.

They spin out of control and end up feeling like they are never getting it right or worse, they start feeling like they are broken, stupid and not enough. Without the instruction or support of their teacher or parent they are in it alone, all alone.

Once this overpowering feeling of having to do life all by yourself sets in for your child you have lost them. They check out, shrink and start becoming a lone wolf because it is safer to be invisible than to be a perpetual disappointment and feel the humiliation and shame that comes in constant waves. Be mindful that still waters run deep.

Self-Advocacy: Standing one’s ground becomes a mantra after decades of being trampled over and cast aside on the regular. Teaching your child to be a strong self-advocate is essential. It will make all the difference in how your child sees themselves and shows up in the world. It takes a lot of courage, practice and time so start right away teaching and showing through example. Building confidence, knowing one’s worth, and honing excellent social skills is done through trial and error. Get to it!

#### Transferring Stress and Anxiety

Transferred stress is a real thing to be avoided. It is not easy to always be the strong one who is maintaining stability, but it is what it is. Managing your own stress is the best way to avoid passing your anxiety onto your child as a normal state in your family. It is not normal to have debilitating anxiety or depression. Make healthy living and joy your family’s norm.

#### Sibling Guilt

Not all people are wired the same; this goes for siblings, too. When one child is divergent and the other is more linear, it can be rough on relationships. We are raised and conditioned in society to believe our family should know us best and be able to relate to us almost by osmosis. This actually doesn’t happen because we share blood and DNA. In reality, some of the most challenging relationships are with our family because we have the most interactions with our family and thus more opportunities to make mistakes and disappoint people because of our differences. Once siblings are older and able to understand that people are doing their best and aren’t out to make their lives more difficult, either the damage has been done or compassion and understanding elevate the relationship. It is really a coin toss. You never know which direction the relationship will end up. Sometimes the kid who is more linear wins all

the awards in the linear system and feels guilty because they know their sibling is every bit as skilled or talented but are dismissed and discarded. Parents also have trouble celebrating wins for all their children when society keeps only acknowledging the kids who fit in the box better.

### Entrepreneurship

Made By Dyslexia was founded by dyslexic entrepreneur Kate Griggs. They have invested in researching the strengths and value of dyslexic thinkers. Dyslexic people thrive as entrepreneurs because they have vision and are excellent critical thinkers and problem solvers. It is wise to develop business skills so when the time comes these kids will thrive as business owners. People all default to their strengths so don't fight it, embrace it and develop it with vim and vigor.

## About the Book

Youth anxiety has reached epidemic proportions, contributing to a mental health crisis among school-age children. Neurodiverse children suffer deeply in struggling schools when their nonlinear thinking does not align with a linear school system. Overwhelmed teachers face mental health challenges of their own, driving the need for parents to take back the reins and lead their child's educational journey. Your child's well-being hangs in the balance.

Kelly addresses the root causes of our national reading crisis and the wellness and mental health issues facing our youth. She provides strategies and solutions to help your child stay healthy—mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually—while thriving academically and socially.

## About the Author

Kelly Fedge DuBose is a champion of people, especially young people. She is an entrepreneur, disruptor, and passionate advocate, unwilling to settle for the status quo.

As the founder of Decoding Dyslexia Montana, Kelly helped spearhead the passage of Montana's landmark dyslexia legislation in 2019. She has worked with educators, universities, policymakers, and families across the state to improve literacy instruction, challenge institutional barriers, and expand opportunities for children.

Her expertise extends beyond advocacy and policy. Kelly has worked directly with children and parents as a coach and structured literacy tutor, helping families recognize their children's strengths, understand their learning challenges, and create environments where they can flourish.

As a modern-day alchemist, Kelly synergizes people and organizations to work collaboratively for the greater good, creating win-win-win solutions and outcomes. She is the founder of Decoding Dyslexia Montana, Montana READS, Bravehearts, and the Gallatin Valley YMCA, to name a few.

Kelly also has dyslexia and is the proud mother of two sons with dyslexia. Her professional expertise, firsthand experiences, and decades of advocacy inform her understanding of the extraordinary potential of children whose abilities are underestimated.

At the heart of Kelly's life's work is a commitment to recognizing, fostering, and expanding human potential.

A heart-centered leader and skilled connector of people, Kelly uses unconventional methods to reengineer broken systems, bring people together, and create meaningful change.