

# FOREWORD

As President of the Beck Institute, a nonprofit organization that provides training in cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) to mental health professionals worldwide, I am in the enviable position of reviewing dozens of books a year in the mental health field and quite a few about evidence-based practices for children. *The Uncontrollable Child* is an excellent book, one of the best, and its research-based and common-sense approach is, in my opinion, applicable to all children and their caretakers. It is written in an easily accessible, engaging style with numerous examples of what to say and what to do.

Too many books focus too narrowly on the skills parents lack. This book adds essential techniques for parents to use on themselves, to change their own unhelpful beliefs and actions, to reduce their frustration, anxiety, sadness, or sense of inadequacy, so they can be more effective with their kids. Miller vividly describes why learning parenting skills alone isn't enough. Parents often need to change their unrealistic ideas and hopes for their children and move to accepting their child's struggles and difficulties. Practicing the acceptance and mindfulness strategies outlined in this book is a necessary precursor if parents wish to become effective in shaping their children's behavior. Acceptance, realistic expectations, and a calm demeanor are necessary ingredients for change—but difficult to attain without specific guidance.

Miller then provides a clear roadmap for approaching children in a different way. The first step, validation, is crucially important, yet many parents, especially when they're upset, fail to use this strategy. The book offers numerous examples to illustrate precisely how to use validation in a variety of situations. Next, reinforcement strategies are described, followed by specific techniques to reduce unwanted behavior. Setting limits is another essential skill, and the book describes valuable tools for how to implement limits—and equally important, to maintain limits over time. Finally, parents are guided in what to do when others in the family and in the child's environment resist working together to implement the recommendations in the book.

I truly believe that *The Uncontrollable Child*, with its treasure trove of valuable skills, has the potential to help countless struggling parents and their children improve their communication, restore peace to their homes, and pave the way to an optimistic future. It has the potential to make a very significant difference in your family's life—and in your own. Read it, try it, and watch yourself change!

—Judith S. Beck, Ph.D.

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# INTRODUCTION

I've met countless frustrated parents—clients, friends, lecture audiences—who express a common wish:

*If only this child came with a manual!*

Parents—even those whose children are not particularly challenging—often find themselves floundering when parenting their children. It would be so much easier, they lament, if they had clear, step-by-step instructions on how to react and respond to everyday parenting situations.

The trouble isn't a lack of information. As a matter of fact, as a parent in the modern world, you have instantly available access to more parenting information than ever before. There are books, lectures, podcasts, websites... You can even get handy bite-sized tips delivered daily to your email inbox.

But sometimes, having all of that information can get confusing. One technique contradicts another. What worked for your first child doesn't work for the next one. You're conflicted about strategies that are so different from those that your parents used.

Don't get stuck on the "tricks that every parent must know" or "the ONE parenting technique that will change your life." When you read *The Uncontrollable Child*, you'll learn that you don't need to choose the "right" way to parent.

This book may not be the be-all-end-all parenting manual (because, realistically, that's impossible), but it's pretty close—and it will give you the perspective and knowledge you need to maximize all of your current skills. It will eliminate the need to find that "perfect method" for parenting because it will help you make the most of *every* technique that you have learned and will learn. Plus, it's loaded with practical, relatable, implementable strategies that will help you along your journey.

*The Uncontrollable Child* is based on the concepts and skills of dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), a therapeutic model that broadens the mind and worldview. A main goal of DBT is to find your balancing point, which is unquestionably necessary on the parenting tightrope. As you read, you will learn to balance the extremes of parenting: acceptance with change, flexibility with consistency, limits with love. These principles form a framework you can use to improve upon your go-to parenting techniques while learning new techniques. Most importantly, you'll gain an understanding of *why* these techniques work and how to use them for *your* child and *your* personality.

## The Purpose of This Book

In my professional life as a therapist—as well as my personal life as a parent—I meet people who struggle in life. Many of their challenges could have been prevented or eased in childhood.

The formative years are critical to the long-term well-being of every person. The relationships, habits, belief systems, and life skills that are established during childhood and adolescence are the basis of a person's future. The impact of a healthy childhood can last a lifetime, with far-reaching and long-lasting effects.

*The Uncontrollable Child* is based on the concept that strategic, effective parenting is crucial for a child's long-term success. Parents are one of the most (if not *the* most) influential forces in their children's lives; when you change, your child changes. The purpose of this book is to empower parents to revolutionize their parenting and achieve their goals: to increase their child's positive behaviors; ensure that he feels loved, accepted, and understood; *and* decrease his noncompliant, disruptive, and aggressive behaviors.

## Is This Book for You?

DBT and the concepts outlined in *The Uncontrollable Child* are highly effective for children who struggle with impulse control and emotion regulation (i.e., effectively managing and responding to their emotions). These children may or may not have been formally diagnosed with a disorder such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), or disruptive mood dysregulation disorder (DMDD). If your child has one of these disorders or symptoms of any of them (which you'll learn about in chapter 1), this book will help you understand and parent him or her effectively.

Of course, your child doesn't need to have a diagnosis or display particularly challenging behavior to benefit from this book. While *The Uncontrollable Child* is geared toward parents of children with challenging behavior, it isn't only for "uncontrollable children"—it's a guidebook designed to help every parent reach his or her parenting potential.

## Climbing the Parenting Mountain

I like to compare parenting to mountain climbing.

Mountain climbing requires skill, knowledge, and tools. Without tools, it's virtually impossible to reach the top. Effective climbers use tools that are designed specifically for varying terrains and applications. Some tools are effective in one situation and not another, while others may be adapted for use in various circumstances. Overusing or underusing a tool may impede the climber's progress. Using the wrong tool at the wrong time can get in the way of reaching the summit, or even cause a backslide.

And, of course, balance is paramount.

Likewise, parenting is a journey that requires special tools. You may already have many tools in your toolbox. However, you may not be using them properly, or you may have a hard time choosing your tool. Perhaps you abandoned a useful tool out of frustration when it didn't work as promised. Or maybe you've never gotten those tools in the first place!

Parenting a child who struggles with emotion regulation requires a special set of tools. Whether you're just starting the climb with a couple of tools or have acquired a set over the years, you'll benefit from a well-organized toolbox and instructions on how to use it. This book provides you with valuable, multi-terrain tools that may be adapted to nearly every situation as well as guidance for using them properly.

If you find yourself needing help to use your tools effectively, keep in mind that most expert mountain climbers are not self-taught. There's no shame in seeking out professional assistance (or the advice of other seasoned parents) to help you scale your mountain. If you're already working with a therapist, you can use and discuss the contents of this book alongside and in conjunction with therapy. For less formal support, try reading and reviewing it with a friend who's in the same boat.

In parenting, and in DBT, a healthy balance is vital. Children need a balance of acceptance (being accepted by their parents) and change (behavior modification) in order to flourish. Every person's balancing point is unique. That balancing point is rarely a straight 50:50, so it's important to find the combination that works for you and your child.

*The Uncontrollable Child* will help you find your balance.

## How to Use This Book

This book is designed to be read sequentially, as the foundational concepts will help you use the later skills more efficiently. As you read and implement the skills, you'll learn what works for you.

At the same time, you can always go back to review and practice earlier skills as the need arises. There are constant ups and downs in parenting, and you'll likely have to revisit different sections throughout your journey. You'll mess up at times, and that's okay—as a matter of fact, it's normal and expected. This book is here to help you bounce back when you hit a setback; it will help you navigate your own thoughts and feelings as you climb the parenting mountain.

I recommend that you read *The Uncontrollable Child* in its entirety, even if you are already familiar with the concepts. You may learn new details that will help you use your existing skills more effectively. I also suggest sharing the book or discussing its contents with your spouse or other significant adults in your child's life for maximum

effectiveness.

For your convenience, I've created downloadable overviews that summarize the skills and concepts in each chapter, available at the website for this book, <http://www.newharbinger.com/46868>. (See the very back of this book for more details.) You can use them to guide and remind you as you read and implement the techniques. On the website you'll also find Roadblock Cards. These cards can serve as reminders of the unhelpful beliefs that can get in the way of implementing the skills in this book—as well as ways to “detour” around them. Additionally, the final chapter contains a comprehensive checklist, also available on the website, that recaps all of the skills. Feel free to use it as you read and whenever you need a refresher.

It is my greatest hope that this book will help you climb your personal parenthood mountain, find your balancing point, and enjoy the breathtaking view from the summit.

# CHAPTER 1.

## Getting Started

Nobody ever said that parenting would be easy.

Virtually every parent knows that children aren't just cuddly, adorable things who always do as they're told.

What you may not have known, no matter how well prepared you were for the challenges of parenthood, was that some children are objectively harder to raise than others. Among those are the "uncontrollable" children, and life with them redefines the parameters of what you thought you knew about parenting. When we compare parenting to mountain climbing, these children are the rock faces and steep cliffs.

If you glanced at the title of this book and thought, *Yup, that's my kid*, then you know all about parenting these children. If you just picked it up out of morbid fascination and thought, *Whew, my kid isn't uncontrollable*, don't stop now—everything in here can be helpful to you, too.

An uncontrollable child—one who struggles to regulate her emotions appropriately—need not remain "uncontrolled" for the foreseeable future. With the mindset, framework, and tools that make up dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), you can once again take control of your parenting.

In this chapter, you'll learn fundamental concepts that will prepare you to understand and implement the information and strategies in the rest of the book. First, we'll examine the hallmarks of uncontrollable children and the unique challenges—and strengths—of this particular personality trait. Next, we'll explore the basics of DBT, starting with the mystery of what, exactly, "dialectical" means and covering the foundational concepts of DBT. And finally, you'll meet a couple of children who may uncannily remind you of certain people living in your household.

### Who Is the Uncontrollable Child?

*This child is out of control!*

*She can't handle it when anything goes wrong.*

*No matter what I do, he just doesn't cooperate.*

*She refuses to listen to anything I say!*

*I just can't get through to this kid.*

*It's a constant battle with him.*

*Why is she so sensitive about everything?*

*I can't seem to do anything right with her!*

There is no singular definition, no clear-cut description of an uncontrollable child. He takes many forms: the drop-of-a-hat crier, the too-old-for-this tantrumer, the always-on-edge teen, the impulsive wall puncher, the exaggerated drama queen.

Put simply, the uncontrollable child is one who struggles with *emotion regulation*.

Everyone runs into challenges, disappointments, and upsetting moments in life. Most of us are able to regulate our emotions and handle these situations appropriately; sometimes our emotions get the better of us. Uncontrollable children—those who suffer from *emotion dysregulation*—tend to get overwhelmed by their emotions at an above-average frequency. They overreact in ways that are not age-appropriate or socially acceptable: bursts of anger, bouts of sadness, screaming, fighting, even self-harm.

## Diagnosing the Uncontrollable Child

Some parents have a hard time seeking a diagnosis for their child. They may prefer not to label him, believe that he'll grow out of it, be afraid of stigma, or feel like something is wrong with them if their child has an "official" disorder.

As a mental health professional, I believe that a diagnosis—technically a cluster of symptoms—can be helpful to determine the proper course of treatment for a child or find an appropriate therapist. It gives a name to your child's symptoms for improved communication between professionals.

Having a diagnosis can make it easier to modify school assignments or adapt your parenting strategies. Additionally, when people have a diagnosis for themselves or their child, it can be very validating; their experiences and challenges suddenly make sense. *I thought I was going crazy, but it turns out that this is something that actually has a name!*

However, depending on the circumstances, a diagnostic label may not be necessary for a child's success. A diagnosis is not an all-inclusive definition of the child, and not every part of her personality can be explained away by a diagnosis. It's not to be used as an excuse or to lead to despair: *I can't do my homework all by myself; I have ADHD!* or *I'll never be able to get her under control; even the psychiatrist said that she has a real diagnosis.* A diagnosis tells us what she *has*—not who she *is*.

Life is challenging when you're struggling with an uncontrollable child. It's important—for your child's well-being and your own sake—to seek help when symptoms are extreme or interfere with her functioning. Let's take a look at some disorders that feature emotion dysregulation: attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, oppositional

defiant disorder, and disruptive mood dysregulation disorder. Hopefully, this will help you make sense of what's going on with your child and your family.

## Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a fairly well-known disorder that is primarily characterized by inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsive behavior. The symptoms are present before the age of twelve; in some children, they are noticeable from an early age. ADHD can be mild, moderate, or severe.

Symptoms of ADHD include:

- Trouble focusing on tasks and paying attention to detail
- Difficulty following through and completing tasks
- Difficulty organizing activities or keeping track of belongings
- Distractibility or forgetfulness
- Constant motion or difficulty staying still
- Excessive talking and interrupting
- Difficulty waiting one's turn

While most healthy children are impulsive and active, the more extreme characteristics of ADHD significantly impact a child's functioning.

## Oppositional Defiant Disorder

Children who are persistently defiant, irritable, angry, argumentative, or uncooperative may be diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD).

Symptoms of ODD include:

- Defiant, noncompliant, argumentative, hostile behavior
- Tendency to deliberately upset or annoy others
- Frequent blaming of others for misbehavior
- Vindictiveness or spitefulness
- Frequent irritable and angry moods
- Constant loss of temper

If these symptoms are present for at least six months, the child may qualify for a diagnosis of ODD.