



## Family Matters

Elizabeth Ahmann, ScD, RN, and Deborah Dokken, MPA

# Encouraging Positive Behavior In 'Challenging' Children: The Nurtured Heart Approach™

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**A**ttention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) are among the leading causes of referrals for mental health services for children and teens. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2013), 8.4% of children 3 to 17 years of age in the United States have been diagnosed with ADHD, totaling some 5.2 million children. Nock, Kazdin, Hiripi, and Kessler (2007) estimate the lifetime prevalence of ODD to be 10.2%. ADHD and ODD can have some overlap and are also often associated with other co-morbidities. Children with these diagnoses, as well as children with sensory integration challenges, learning disabilities, bi-polar diagnosis, and others often exhibit significant behavioral challenges.

Parents of children with intense personalities or challenging behaviors often feel at a "loss" because conventional parenting approaches fall short of the mark for their children, sometimes even contributing to additional problems. Conventional parenting approaches typically *expect* "good" behavior and focus on setting limits and teaching rules through applying consequences for "bad" behavior. Using this approach, when a child has frequent "difficult" behavior, parents focus a great deal of attention on the behavior problems in an attempt to address them. As a result, the problematic behavior becomes highlighted in comparison to other more desirable behavior. For this reason, these conventional approaches can actually backfire with more intense children, resulting in increased oppositionality and/or reduced self-esteem. Parents of children with intense personalities and challenging behaviors are in desperate need of support and strategies that work very differently.

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Conventional parenting approaches often fall short of the mark for children who exhibit difficult behavior, sometimes inadvertently leading to increased oppositionality and poor self-esteem. As a result, parents of children with intense personalities and challenging behaviors need strategies that work very differently. The Nurtured Heart Approach™ is a philosophy/technique developed to help parents rewrite the often negative parenting scripts used with these children by limiting the amount of attention given to negative or undesirable behaviors while noticing and acknowledging even small positive behaviors, naming them, "energizing" attention given to them, and valuing their occurrence. Although there has been very limited empirical study of the Nurtured Heart Approach™ to date, it has been used, with anecdotal reports of success, in a variety of settings, including Head Start programs, schools, foster care agencies, a treatment center, and a pre-adolescent diversion program (Glasser, 2000).

Among a number of useful approaches – including the well known "Love and Logic™" (<http://www.loveandlogic.com>), the "Parent-to-Parent" training of Children and Adults with ADHD (CHADD) (<http://www.chadd.org/Training-Events/Parent-to-Parent-Program.aspx#.Uj9Sk79Q2j0>), and "Total Transformation™" (<http://www.thetotaltransformation.com>) – one stands out for its strong emphasis on nurturing a child's positive attributes and efforts as a means to improving behavior as well as self-esteem: the Nurtured Heart Approach™.

### Nurtured Heart Approach™

Family therapist Howard Glasser, co-author of *Transforming the Difficult Child: The Nurtured Heart Approach* (Glasser & Easley, 2008a), suggests using a movie analogy to explore the impact of parenting. In particular, he suggests considering the role of the director of a film. The director gets to pick the shots, cut scenes that do not work well, re-shoot a scene as necessary, create voice-overs, and so-forth.

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**Figure 1.**  
**Nurtured Heart Approach™ Select Resources**

**Books by Howard Glasser:**

- *Transforming the Difficult Child: The Nurtured Heart Approach* (and related workbook by Lisa Bravo) (Glasser & Easley, 2008a)
- *Transforming the Difficult Child: An Interactive Guide to the Nurtured Heart Approach* (Bravo, Glasser, & Bowdidge, 2008)
- *Transforming the Difficult Child: True Stories of Triumph* (Glasser & Easley, 2008b)
- *All Children Flourishing: Igniting the Greatness of our Children* (Glasser & Block, 2008)
- *You are Oprah – Igniting the Fires of Greatness* (Glasser & Block, 2009)

**Free E-Course:** [www.ChildrensSuccessFoundation.com](http://www.ChildrensSuccessFoundation.com)

**Online Training:** <http://difficultchild.com/nurtured-heart-approach/>

The director is in charge of how the story and its characters develop, as well as what the final production will be like.

Glasser and Easley (2008a) suggest that by the way they respond to their children, parents are the directors of films in which they shape the stories of their children’s lives, and in a significant way, the children themselves. Like a director’s role in a movie, parents play an active role in whom their children become by the behaviors they encourage, those they ignore, and the limits they set.

To help parents rewrite the often negative parenting scripts used when children have ADHD, Glasser and Easley (2008a) developed the Nurtured Heart Approach™ (see Figure 1). According to Glasser and Easley (2008a), the Nurtured Heart Approach™ is designed to help parents direct the best possible films and create the greatest “stars” by limiting the amount of attention given to negative or undesirable behaviors while noticing and acknowledging even small positive behaviors, naming them, “energizing” attention given to them, and valuing their occurrence. Through its three “stands” (see Figure 2), the Nurtured Heart Approach is designed to side-step oppositional behavior, promote desirable behavior, build a child’s character, and support the development of “inner wealth.” In addition to use when children have ADHD, over time, the Nurtured Heart philosophy and techniques have been extended for use with children exhibiting varying and even greater degrees of behavioral challenge.

To date, there has been little empirical study of the Nurtured Heart Approach. Brennan and Hektner (n.d.) completed a small study of its effectiveness, as well as a review of the literature evaluating the Nurtured Heart Approach, and they concluded that while some of its assumptions may be questionable (in particular that “negative child behavior can always be attributed to unintentional positive reinforcement by parents responding with negative attention” [Brennan & Hektner, n.d.]), it is also true that “[m]any elements of the approach have strong support in the theoretical and empirical literature...On balance, the Nurtured Heart Approach appears to promote effective and validated parenting practices...” (Hektner, Brennan, & Brotherson, 2013, p. 425).

Brennan and Hektner (n.d.) also conducted a longitudinal quasi-experimental evaluation of the Nurtured Heart Approach, finding that:

- Parents trained in the Nurtured Heart Approach reported gains in well-being, while parents in the control group did not.

**Figure 2.**

**The Three ‘Stands’ of the Nurtured Heart Approach**

The Nurtured Heart Approach™ supports parents by developing three key perspectives or “Stands.”

- |              |  |
|--------------|--|
| Stand One:   | Refuse to accidentally energize negativity   |
| Stand Two:   | Energize the positive                        |
|              | Step 1: Active recognition                   |
|              | Step 2: Experiential recognition             |
|              | Step 3: Proactive recognition                |
| Stand Three: | Provide and uphold a perfect level of limits |

- Trained parents increased positive attention given to their children and decreased yelling, scolding, and negative responses.
- Although at both baseline and follow up, parents trained in the Nurtured Heart Approach perceived fewer strengths in their children than did parents in the control group, after training, their recognition of strengths had improved.

Brennan and Hektner (n.d.) concluded that “the Nurtured Heart Approach shows promise as a parent training model, and its effectiveness should continue to be studied with more rigorous research designs both among parents and in schools.”

Even though very limited empirical research exists, the Nurtured Heart Approach “has been used – with informal research and anecdotal reports indicating success – in a variety of settings, including Head Start programs, schools, foster care agencies, a treatment center, and a pre-adolescent diversion program (Glasser, 2000). According to Glasser (personal communication, June 26, 2013), its greatest value and impact occurs when it is implemented in a family setting.

## Basic Strategies

The following is an introduction to some of the basic strategies comprising the Nurtured Heart Approach.

### Nurtured Heart, Stand One: Refuse to Energize Negativity

A conventional approach to parenting typically addresses rules and values through instruction, lessons, and lectures. Another common approach is emphasizing rules

and behaviors by pointing out or correcting on the spot any “negative” behaviors showing a child has broken a rule or is failing to demonstrate a value of importance to the family. The parental admonitions illustrated below show examples of this traditional approach.

*Tina, stop that! Calm down! It's not responsible to act that way!*

*Greg, put that down. You are not cooperating! You are supposed to be brushing your teeth.*

*Louise, what are you doing on the computer?! You should be doing your homework!*

In *Transforming the Difficult Child: The Nurtured Heart Approach*, Glasser and Easley (2008a) call the type of admonition above “energizing negativity” – putting parental energy, attention, and intensity on highlighting the problematic behavior of children. Glasser and Easley (2008a) argue that highlighting problems, even inadvertently, is not an effective method for parents to use in developing the behaviors they want to nurture in their children. On the contrary, the frequent negativity experienced by children with ADHD or other challenging behaviors creates a sense in these children that they are faulty and failures, resulting in damaged self-esteem and eroded self-confidence. Figure 3 identifies an exercise (Exercise A) called “Explore the Role of ‘Director’” that a parent can use to explore the balance of negative and positive in his or her personal parenting style.

### **Nurtured Heart, Stand Two: Energize the Positive**

Instead of the conventional approach of paying attention to negative behaviors in an effort to extinguish them, the Nurtured Heart Approach encourages parents to energize the positive. Glasser (2013) suggests that the way parents typically address positive, preferred behaviors in children needs some work. “Good job.” “Thank you.” “Nice work.”

These commonly used phrases are positive but not engaging, and certainly not “energized.” They are much less interesting to a child than any yelling a parent might do, and they may hardly even grab a child’s attention. Praise can be tricky, too, because children with a poor self-concept will often not believe praise and may feel that parents offering praise do not know who they really are inside.

Instead of communication oriented to the negative, the bland positive, and praise, Glasser (2013) challenges parents to “energize” the positive they see in their children, no matter how small, as a way of offering recognition, building character, and encouraging preferred behaviors. The Nurtured Heart Approach offers three steps for “energizing” the positive actions children take: active recognition, experiential recognition, and proactive recognition. Each is explained below.

#### **Energize the positive, step one: Active recognition.**

Step one of energizing the positive is called “active recognition.” Active recognition involves a parent simply noticing and stating in detail the behavior he or she observes the child doing in the moment – no judgment or evaluation, just a factual observation – like a photograph. This “snapshot”-like description helps children know that they are noticed and paid attention to. The following are some examples of “active recognition.”

**Figure 3.**  
**Four Exercises to Introduce  
The Nurtured Heart Approach™**

#### **Exercise A: Explore the Role of “Director”**

Step 1: For one day, carry around an index card or small notebook. Mark an “X” on the card or a page of the notebook every time you point out a negative behavior in which your child is engaging. Put an “O” any time you acknowledge a positive behavior. At the end of the day, tally up the Xs and Os.

Step 2: Then ask yourself, “What scenes am I focusing on in the movie of my child’s life? Am I giving the greatest emphasis to the scenes showing the difficult behaviors? Or am I showcasing how great my child is?”

Step 3: If you are focusing mostly on positive behaviors, pat yourself on the back! If not, perhaps it’s time to reconsider your approach so that your child can begin to really shine.

#### **Exercise B: Explore Active Recognition**

Step 1: Today, once or twice, just pause and notice something your child is doing. It could be anything.

Step 2: Simply tell your child exactly what you see him or her doing. Use several sentences so that you are giving a full description, but do not attach any judgment or evaluation. Avoid following up with any further discussion. Just offer your observation and move on.

Step 3: Reflect for a moment. How did that feel? What did you notice?

#### **Exercise C: Explore Experiential Recognition**

Step 1: Today, watch for a behavior of your child that demonstrates, at least in some small way, a value you hold dear.

Step 2: When you notice a behavior like this, tell your child exactly what you see him or her doing. Comment briefly on the value being demonstrated. Do not engage in any further discussion about it. Just plant the seed.

Step 3: Reflect. How did that feel? What did you notice?

#### **Exercise D: Explore Proactive Recognition**

Step 1: Reflect on a particular behavior and/or value you would like to encourage in your child.

Step 2: Carefully consider potential situations or instances in which you might be able to “catch” (e.g., fastening seat-belt) or “assist” (e.g., hand the child a grocery bag) your child to exhibit a small step related to this behavior or value. You will stay alert for these as opportunities for “proactive recognition.”

Step 3: Mentally prepare a behavioral request and brainstorm possible “experiential recognition” responses acknowledging the behavior or value you are watching for and hoping to promote.

Step 4: Watch for the types of situations or instances (identified in Step Two, above) in which you expect you might be able to “catch” your child exhibiting a small step related to the behavior or value you want to encourage. Or create a scenario in which you can “assist” your child to act in the way you hope to see. When you can either “catch” or “assist” your child in taking a small step in the direction of behavior you would like to see, use an “experiential recognition” statement (such as a statement you mentally prepared in Step Three above).

**Note:** To learn more about this approach to parenting, visit [www.ChildrensSuccessFoundation.com](http://www.ChildrensSuccessFoundation.com)

*Alex, in that soccer game, I noticed that you didn't fall over when that larger guy ran into you. He came right down the field and rammed straight into you. You looked a bit stunned, and you wobbled, but you didn't fall.*

*Maria, I heard you singing in the shower for several minutes. You sounded happy.*

The neutrality of active recognition messages allows children to take in recognition and acknowledgement without feeling the shame of being noticed yet again in a negative, judging way, and also without the prickly discomfort some challenging children feel when receiving praise. Instead, it begins to create a dynamic nurturing – a supportive, affirming role for parents in their children's inner worlds.

Glasser (2013) recommends that parents pause several times each hour, or multiple times a day, to offer active recognition to their children. Figure 3 offers an exercise (Exercise B) called “Explore Active Recognition” that parents can use to explore this skill.

**Energize the positive, step two: Experiential recognition.** Most children with “challenging” behaviors are experiential learners: they learn best through actual experience. Experiential recognition is a strategy that makes use of this key fact. This strategy builds on active recognition by parents adding to their statements of active recognition an acknowledgment of any of a family's values evidenced in a child's actions or behaviors.

With experiential recognition, Glasser and Easley (2008a) urge parents to deliver the same essential values messages they were trying to address when pointing out problematic behaviors, but instead, switching emphasis to make note of these values when problems are not happening. For example, instead of “Tina, stop that! Calm down! It's not responsible to act that way,” a parent could watch for instances in which Tina is calm and acting responsibly. Then these instances could be used to address the same behaviors that created concern.

*Tina, I notice that Hunter is pestering you, but you are staying quiet and calm. This shows me the strength of your self-control.*

*Tina, I see that you are clearing your plate and cup from the table without me even asking. That shows how marvelous your responsibility and thoughtfulness are.*

As these examples demonstrate, through experiential recognition, parents can both convey lessons about preferred behaviors and values as well as awaken the “greatness” of those very qualities. For example, if a parent values effort, experiential recognition could sound like this:

*Ellen, I see you are using that pencil to trace tiny figures on those small pieces of paper. You have 10 or 12 of them done and it looks like you plan to make more. You have a very determined look on your face. I see you are putting a lot of effort into that!*

If a parent values responsibility, experiential recognition might sound this way:

*Nate, you set the table without me even asking. That shows me how responsible and thoughtful you are!*

Whatever values are important to a family, or whatever areas of behavior a particular child may need work on can be emphasized through experiential recognition: effort, self-control, responsibility, manners, positive attitude, and so forth.

According to Glasser (2013), experiential recognition offers several benefits for parents and children. First, the more effort parents put into experiential recognition, the less likely a child will act out to get attention, and conversely, the more likely a child will increase the behaviors parents value. More importantly, experiential recognition is a strategy that expands a child's perception of being valued and recognized for positive behaviors in line with parental values. Each instance of recognition gives the child a direct experience of being held in esteem. Figure 3 provides an exercise (Exercise C) for parents titled “Explore Experiential Recognition.”

**Energizing the positive, step three: Proactive recognition.** Although Glasser (2013) urges parents to make an effort to notice, mention, and “energize” the positive behaviors in which their children engage, no matter how small, he acknowledges that at some times, or with some children having particularly challenging behaviors, opportunities to celebrate the positive may not abound, at least initially.

To address this, Glasser (2013) suggests that parents may need to be proactive or create opportunities for children to do the things they would like to see them do. “Proactive recognition” consists of making a clear request of a child followed by recognition, particularly “experiential recognition,” of actions the child takes in the direction of that request. For example, a parent might say: “Matthew, it's time to do your homework.” Then the parent would observe what happens, following up with a pertinent recognition of any step in the requested direction, such as:

*I see you getting your backpack, and that tells me you are being cooperative and getting what you need to do your homework.*

*I notice you have your hand on a pencil, and that shows me you are being responsible in getting ready to start your homework.*

Parents can proactively create opportunities for positive recognition of their children in two particular ways: 1) set the bar low, and 2) design situations for success (Glasser, 2013).

**Set the bar low.** To “energize” the positive with kids having particularly challenging behavior, set the bar very, very low and “catch” the tiniest of opportunities as they arise. Glasser (2013) offers the following example: When in the car about to go somewhere, parents can pay attention for the moment their child clicks the seatbelt closed, “catch” it, and say:

*Please put on your seatbelt... Oh thanks! When you put on your seat belt after I ask, that shows nice cooperation and also good attention to safety. I really appreciate those qualities in you! Thanks!*

**Design situations for success.** Parents can also design situations to use in setting a child up for success. In this way, parents can “assist” the child in demonstrating the positive behaviors they hope to develop. Glasser (2013)

uses an example of a parent coming back from the grocery store with several bags and just handing a bag to the child to carry into the kitchen. It is likely the child will not drop the bag but will, in fact, carry it to the kitchen. This way the parent has designed a situation that assists the child to experience success, and can say:

*Thanks so much! I was overwhelmed with all the bags. You jumped right in when I was in need and helped me out. That showed what a helpful and responsible person you are. Awesome – thanks!*

Parents who might like to try this strategy can be directed to Figure 3, Exercise D, called “Explore Proactive Recognition.” According to Glasser (2013), the three steps in Stand Two – active recognition, experiential recognition, and as necessary, proactive recognition – together can promote positive behavioral change and support an improved self-concept in children with challenging behaviors.

### Nurtured Heart, Stand Three: Provide And Uphold a Perfect Level of Limits

In implementing Stand One of the Nurtured Heart Approach, parents shift their time and energy away from a child’s negative behaviors. In implementing Stand Two, parents communicate limits to a child through positive recognition for desired behaviors or rules not broken. These two Stands together pave the way for Stand Three in which timely, simple, non-punitive consequences can be introduced by parents, communicating with their child or children in a neutral manner. Glasser and Easley (2008a) suggest that in many circumstances, a very brief time-out is all that will be needed to help a child regain self-control and “reset” his or her behavior. “Resetting,” time-outs, and consequences are discussed more fully in the book *Transforming the Difficult Child: The Nurtured Heart Approach* (Glasser & Easley, 2008a).

### Implications for Nursing

Nurses who see value in the Nurtured Heart Approach can learn more about it from the resources in Figure 1. Nurses can also share these resources with parents and can introduce parents to an initial experience of this approach by using the exercises in Figure 3. Any nurse can consider becoming a Nurtured Heart trainer in order to teach parents and other colleagues this parenting approach. Nurses may also find that some Nurtured Heart Approach techniques are helpful in their own work with children who exhibit challenging behaviors in the clinical setting. ■■■

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