My Child's DIFFERENT

The lessons learned from one family's struggle to unlock their son's potential

Elaine Halligan
with contributions from Melissa Hood

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Disclaimer

While all the stories in this book are true, some names have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved.

Foreword

'Does positive parenting work with a challenging child?'

This is the most common question I hear from parents when I describe my approach to parenting. Positive parenting is simply parenting that focuses on a loving connection with the child rather than using control techniques like punishment and shame, so logically it should 'work' with any human. But with challenging children, parents are often desperate. They see that their child is 'out of control' and they can't imagine that there's a compassionate way to get their child back on track.

The book you are holding – *My Child's Different* – is the answer to this question. Elaine Halligan's true story of her family's journey with a child who is different (her son Sam) engages the reader from the start. Her heartfelt account describes many incidents of anguish and embarrassment on the journey to gradual discovery and growth, and allows the reader to experience travelling the very potholed road that is living with a child of difference.

As this story unfolds, you see the transformation of an angry, struggling child into a capable, reflective, wonderful young man. What makes that transformation possible is the transformation of his parents, who learn the positive parenting approach that brings out the best in their son.

But this story is not just Elaine's (or even Sam's). This story has the ability to shape the lives of other families, maybe yours.

If you have a differently wired child, you know it. You also know that your child doesn't necessarily respond as other children do to the 'strategies' suggested by all those well-meaning people who insist on giving you advice on raising a child. Maybe you sometimes wonder how you can get through to a child who at times seems impossible to reach.

You may have a child who has a sensory processing issue, an attention deficit of some kind, or severe anxiety that leads to rages. Your child may be very bright but underperforming at school or not connecting so well with their peers. Your child may be the one who is *always* in trouble at school. Maybe they're highly impulsive, have trouble managing their emotions and lash out, beyond the age when other kids seem to be able to control their feelings. Maybe they've been diagnosed with dyslexia, high functioning autism or oppositional defiant disorder. Or your child may not have been labelled with any of the usual acronyms, but their temperament is so intense or sensitive as to set them apart from other, 'easier' kids.

Children like this get used to constant negative feedback, correction and criticism. It's not their parents' fault – these kids are a handful and just getting through the day with them would wear out any parent. But by the time these kids get to school, their self-esteem is already eroded. Then, when they try to cope in school and find it hard – to focus, to learn, to manage their bodies and emotions – their frustration and anxiety explodes.

Is there a way to respond to the behaviour of a child like this that helps them manage their anxiety and anger, that motivates them to persevere when learning is tough, that supports them to become their best selves? We know that the conventional parenting approach of reprimands, nagging, lectures, threats and punishment just makes things worse. In this book, Elaine Halligan describes another way: the positive parenting skills that turned things around with her son.

As Elaine and her husband Tony learned to use descriptive praise, Sam's sense of self-worth started to improve, and as he felt more successful, he became more cooperative. When they began to validate Sam's feelings of anger, hopelessness and frustration, he felt more connected to his parents and more motivated to follow their rules – and he gained the capacity to manage his emotions more effectively. As they learned to respond constructively to unwanted behaviours without making Sam feel worse or damaging his self-esteem, he began to take responsibility and learn from his mistakes.

And so Sam blossomed into a confident young man who became a leader at school and an entrepreneur in life.

Elaine's personal story is told through the lens of her work as a parenting coach, which enriches her perspective and the lessons for readers. Her business partner of nine years at The Parent Practice, Melissa Hood, was Elaine's guide throughout much of her odyssey with Sam – and she adds to the value of *My Child's Different* by contributing her own perspective to each chapter, analysing what was happening with Sam at each stage and giving practical advice on how parents can support their children to be their best.

If you have a child who is different in any way, you'll identify with much of Elaine's experience. You'll smile ruefully at the story of Sam's animal escapades and cringe in sympathy over his science lab tribulations. The Halligans' battles with the authorities in getting the support Sam needed and their navigation of the complex education and health systems may resonate with you. But above all, this book will offer hope to any parent.

My Child's Different is an inspiring success story, and not just because Sam, at 22, is showing every sign of realising his full potential. This is a story of what can be overcome when parents really believe in their child – and of what makes the difference.

Dr Laura Markham

Acknowledgements

I have a list of fifty things to do before I die, and I have to confess that writing a book has never featured on that list! However, as friends and family watched Sam's life unfold, I have lost count of the number of times they encouraged me to put pen to paper and tell his story. I also felt I had to wait till he was of an age where he could agree, or not, to his story being told. This book is the culmination of years of positive parenting, and Sam is fully on board with sharing his experiences.

Thank you, first, to my incredible family. To Tony, my wonderful husband, who has been my rock throughout our three decades together, coping through thick and thin and helping me keep my sanity. His selflessness continues to be a theme throughout our marriage. He is a giver and an incredibly generous person. If it had not been for you arriving in South Africa as a homeless Kiwi, we would never have met! And to my fabulously independent and amazing daughter Izzy, who has endured much, and shows great maturity. I sometimes wonder who is parenting whom, as she has an emotional intelligence beyond her years.

To Mum and Dad, who are the most supportive, positive and encouraging parents a daughter could wish for.

To my remarkable business partner Melissa Hood, who taught me all I needed to know about positive parenting and who has been there over the years to help us through each emotional crisis. Her authoritative voice provides the parental guidance in this book. Without her constant support, wisdom and compassion, I am certain I would not have been in a position to write it at all.

To my book mastermind/coach, Alison Jones, for her unfailing belief that I could accomplish this, and for guiding me step by step in pulling the story together. All that time spent together, interviewing Sam as a young adult, and

transcribing his innermost thoughts and feelings, was a powerful, cathartic process and one, I realised with hindsight, that needed to be done.

To my truly gifted and talented editor, Julia Slone-Murphy, who was able to tap into my mindset and work her magic with my words to bring the story to life.

To Annabel, our Australian au pair, who was a breath of fresh air for us all and whose colourful personality, energy and passion ensured the children were well cared for. Her perceptiveness and insight were remarkable for someone so young. Now with three children herself, she is a warm and empathetic mum.

To the gorgeous Hayley, our South African au pair, who is now married to a Zambian farmer. Together, they run a chicken business and have their own clutch of children. She has also set up a local school. She credits her adept parenting skills to the experience she had with us. I say it was a baptism of fire for her at such a young age, but it certainly played a part in making her the very resourceful and solution-focused young woman she is today.

To all Sam's teachers over the years. The positive influence good teachers can have on a child's life is incredible, and, to my eyes, the teaching profession is one of the most noble in the world. We entrust teachers with our children, not only to educate them but also to nurture their minds, and I believe they matter more to a student's achievement than any other aspect of schooling. For Sam, the teachers at Knowl Hill School, in particular, listened carefully to his needs and differentiated their routine to enable him to cope. I will forever be grateful for that.

Thank you to Mrs Stiff, Sam's form tutor at More House School. Patience should be her middle name, and her kindness and compassion ensured Sam's success in his first year.

To Mr Morgan, who not only taught Sam product design (the revolving coffee table Sam made in his class, with hidden storage and lifting table top, is still in good use today) but also showed him true grit and resourcefulness.

To Mr James Babbage, the new business studies teacher with just one A level student: Sam. They made a formidable team, with James teaching Sam business studies, and Sam trying to teach James golf. They still spend many a weekend on the golf course together. ('You just need to invest some time in getting a good golf coach to teach you the basics,' Sam loves to say. 'A good teacher can make all the difference, James!')

To Mrs Rouse, for inspiring Sam in art and pottery and for allowing his creativity to flourish.

To Mr Kirkham, who, as head of sixth form, encouraged Sam to apply for the role of head boy and allowed him to develop his leadership style unconstrained.

To all my clients who are parents and to my friends, who read the sample chapters and gave me such encouraging feedback. I so appreciate your time and valuable, insightful comments. You know who you are and there are so many of you to thank. It was your feedback and encouragement that helped shape this dream into a reality.

I also thank you, dear reader, for choosing this book. It is a testament to your commitment to your family, and shows that you are curious and willing to learn. I hope this book can support you in taking the next steps to unlocking your child's potential.

And finally, the greatest thanks go to our son, Sam. A natural entrepreneur, Sam really does add value to people's lives, in terms of contributing to their happiness and enjoyment of life. Throughout his education, teachers liked him and helped him. What's fascinating is that he has no comprehension of why they did so. He doesn't know what they saw in him, yet the qualities he possesses are so clear to everyone else: he has an infectiously positive outlook on life, an ability to make people feel good about themselves, a creative mind, an ability to problem-solve, and a great sense of humour, not to mention an incredible spirit for adventure that is anxiety inducing for this mum! At last, that brilliant diamond I always sensed was there is now gleaming for all to see.

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inability to read and write like the rest of his peer group had made him feel overwhelmed and anxious.

So many parents are fearful of a diagnosis in case their child is stigmatised. But to us, having this diagnosis was immensely helpful. Sam is dyslexic, and always will be. But rather than the dyslexia defining him, he now knows more about how he learns, and can play to his strengths to maximise his potential. Realising that neither we, nor Sam, were to blame was a life-changing moment for me and Tony. With this new awareness, we could finally work with Sam, support him, and fully understand his educational and emotional needs.

One step forward

Despite the changes we were making by adopting positive parenting techniques, we were still on an emotional rollercoaster ride. Although Sam's explosive outbursts were becoming less frequent, they were also becoming increasingly dramatic, and often seemed to appear from nowhere.

One day I was shopping in town with him and Izzy; we popped into a chemist for a few things and Sam saw some snacks near the till.

'Mummy, can I have a bag of crisps, please?'

'No, darling, we're about to have lunch.'

'Please?'

'No.'

'Pleeease?'

'No, Sam, we're just about to—'

And without warning, he exploded, turning to the nearest shelf and swiping all the bottles of shampoo and hairspray and lotions and potions onto the floor, while shouting at the top of his lungs, 'You're the worst mother in the world! I want to put you in the rubbish bin!'

It was complete carnage. Izzy was frightened and burst into tears. In my panic I resorted to restraining Sam using the

same awful technique I'd objected to when we'd started at the Hawthornes Centre. With the three of us there on the floor, among all the bottles that had scattered everywhere, I felt publicly humiliated as the other shoppers fell into a stunned silence. It was a new low. In fact, Melissa often talks with compassion and humour about low parenting moments – she calls them 'LPMs'. The worst ones are often in a public place, where you have a child doing something embarrassing like having a tantrum and an audience gathers, watching and judging silently. This fit the bill exactly.

Sam's outbursts were also getting aggressive. They affected not only our lives but those of family and friends around us, too. The shame and humiliation we felt, knowing our child's behaviour was affecting the lives of others, was excruciating. One day in Wimbledon Park, we'd spent the afternoon playing crazy golf. We'd had a lovely, relaxed time. When it was approaching time to go, I let Sam know, giving him five minutes to take a couple more swings and gather his things.

But when the five minutes were up, Sam didn't want to leave. He ignored my requests, refusing to put down the little club and running off when I approached him. I tried to shake off the grip of frustration that was taking hold. I'd done everything possible to ensure we'd had a successful afternoon, and felt it wasn't unrealistic to expect Sam to do his bit and leave the park when asked. But asking fell on deaf ears. He was now in full-on uncooperative mode, and before I knew what I was saying I'd resorted to blackmail: 'If you don't come with me right now, we will not come back and play golf again.'

I knew it wouldn't work, but my button had been pressed. Predictably, Sam went into meltdown.

At that moment, my friend Gail arrived with her son. She saw I was struggling and that Izzy was getting upset, so she offered to speak to Sam. In a flash, he whipped out a penknife, brandishing it at the four of us, and threatened to kill us. His eyes and lips were tight with fury. It was beyond anything we'd ever expected to happen. We froze.

Gail instinctively pushed her son out of harm's way and started speaking. She looked calm, but there was a frightened tone in her voice I hadn't heard before. She drew on every technique she'd learned. 'Sam, well done for stopping there and not doing anything silly with that knife. You're showing self-control, which is really good. I know you; I know you understand the difference between right and wrong, and I know that you don't harm people.'

Sam broke down in tears and handed me the knife. He was immediately remorseful and anxious to show us (and himself) in any way possible that he wasn't a monster. He helped pack up our things, carried a bag, and held his sister's hand as we walked home.

Gail later told me she knew she had to stay calm, but confessed her legs had gone to jelly. She was also acutely aware that had she tackled Sam physically and tried to get the knife out of his hand, things could have gone very wrong.

Having read about the side effects of SSRI drugs, and that there was some controversy surrounding their effects on suicidal behaviour, these episodes began to ring alarm bells for us. Worried that it might be Sam's medication that was exacerbating his mood swings, we raised our concerns with his paediatrician. To our immense relief, she agreed that the drugs no longer appeared to be improving Sam's behaviour, and we started the process of weaning him off them.

With hindsight I now realise these explosive episodes were probably due to a combination of the drugs' effects and the impact of being repeatedly restrained at Hawthornes. It was our biggest mistake, allowing this restraint to happen. Sam had been physically controlled and we had been emotionally controlled. Thank goodness the positive parenting strategies replaced coercion.

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Sam spent eighteen turbulent months at the Hawthornes Centre. It became ever clearer to us that we had been too

critical of him in the past, focusing on his negative behaviour instead of the positive things he did. ('Sam, why can't you just behave like a normal child?' 'Why are you doing that? Just calm yourself down.' 'Your sister's not making a fuss, and she's younger than you.' 'What's wrong with you?') In contrast, the centre's methodology to help Sam achieve his potential – behaviourally, academically, socially and emotionally – followed a consistent approach of being positive: absolutely no criticism, scolding, telling off, nagging, lecturing or threatening. We also learned how to be firm, to be clear about the use of rules, rewards and consequences, and how important it was for both of us to be consistent – to work from the same song sheet. The training was not just for Sam, but also for me and Tony. It was an intense and time-consuming commitment. During term-time, I had to attend the centre with Sam every day and observe the skills being used; and every week, all four of us attended an hour-long family session with Melissa and Tony and I had additional ninety-minute parent sessions. It was all-encompassing, all-consuming, and it was our life. Not only was the commitment emotionally and physically exhausting, we also often found it confusing getting 'back in charge' and learning, almost from scratch, how to connect and communicate effectively. We were not going to give up now, but we faced many more lows.

One cold evening, Sam and I were returning home from the centre after another long day, running to catch the rush-hour train. The 16:58 service must have been one of the busiest trains in the country. It was truly unpleasant and, at times, felt dangerously overcrowded. Sam was stressed, exhausted, hungry and overwhelmed. We were lucky enough to grab a couple of seats before everyone else piled onto the train. Soon the carriage became a solid mass of bodies pressed up against each other, everyone tired and tetchy and wanting to get home.

Sam started kicking one of the passengers standing beside him. I asked him to stop, but he continued. Suddenly I started to feel overwhelmed too. I was in a crowded carriage and it was obvious I could not control my little boy. He was clearly

aggressive and dysfunctional and I was unable to stop him. I reprimanded him. I threatened him. I nagged him, and begged him, but his behaviour got worse. Understandably, the lady who was under attack from Sam was getting increasingly upset, her tuts and huffs getting louder and more hostile until suddenly, at full volume: 'What your boy needs is discipline – a darned good smack will sort him out.'

I felt hopeless, embarrassed, and completely out of control. I didn't know what to do and then out of nowhere, on this packed London train (where so much as engaging eye contact with other passengers is frowned upon), I heard myself making a speech: 'My child is autistic. I need your support, not judgement, as I am dealing with a disabled child.' I went on, now channelling Bonnie Harris, author of *When Your Kids Push Your Buttons*: 'He is not being a problem, but having a problem. As you can see, I am not coping well, but the last thing in the world I am going to do is to smack my child for having a problem. Will you all please stop judging me and will someone help me to leave the train at the next station.'

The silence was excruciating.

Then another passenger spoke out. 'Yeah, leave that poor lady alone – she's doing the best job she can.' And in an instant, the whole carriage descended into a heated argument about how to discipline a child, whether I was doing it right or wrong, how little we understand about autism, and whether or not smacking is an effective form of discipline. Sam sat wide-eyed and silent as he observed all the adults around him behave like they were having a playground slanging match.

We got off the train at the next station. I realised we were still miles from home. I sat on a bench on the platform and I wept. Sam was quiet, meek as a lamb, and comforted me as he realised the impact of his own behaviour on others around him. This was my lowest LPM.

Not long after the train incident came a breakthrough. Once again, after an exhausting day, Sam started acting up at the station on the way home. This time, he ran away from me. My heart stopped as he sprinted off across the railway bridge and hid behind a bench on the platform across the tracks. Hawthornes had taught us that being in charge meant that when a child ran away, you were not to chase unless there was a serious risk to health or safety. In that fleeting moment, I did my risk assessment, and concluded Sam was safe on the platform where I could see him.

So this time I sat it out, waiting. I read my newspaper, watching him out of the corner of my eye as he tried to play this cat-and-mouse game. I realised I was breaking a deeply ingrained pattern of behaviour. It took courage and willpower (and a huge degree of trust that Sam would not actually do anything stupid) but, for the first time, I was letting Sam know he was no longer controlling this merry dance.

After a while, I went over to the opposite platform and asked Sam if he felt ready to come home. He looked relieved that I was not shouting or angry. This allowed me to calmly coach him, using the language we'd been taught over the past few months. 'I understand that you must have felt very angry with me when you ran to the other side of the platform,' I said in my best coaching voice. 'You've been making so much progress with being responsible and mature, so something really significant must have been bothering you that made you do what you did.' And then it all came out. He told me about how he'd had a really bad day at the centre. His remorse and embarrassment were evident, and he admitted he'd bitten the teacher in a fit of rage. He said (again) that he hated the centre. Then, he told me something that made me feel queasy. *The teacher had bitten him back.*

'She said it was to teach me a lesson,' said Sam, quietly.

Today, Sam is adamant that the environment we placed him in made him angrier. 'I think it made me quite violent, and that's the part I regret. I feel so sad now about how angry I got, and I know how much that hurt you,' he told me when we discussed this moment recently. 'I also remember pushing

Dad over one day in a fit of rage. His face was so full of shock. I hated myself for what I did.'

For Sam, this was his lowest moment in his childhood. Tony and I didn't know what else to do. Giving up at this point was just not an option … we had nowhere else to go. And we were learning several strategies that were really working.

Learning a new way

We all do what we think is right for our children. We love them equally but need to treat them uniquely according to their needs. Sam's needs were very different from Izzy's, which is why the behaviour modification approach was required. We were desperate, but, being the eternal optimist that I am, I was always hopeful that there was a solution. I continued researching and exploring. I kept an open mind, I asked for help, I listened to advice. I now believe this was the key that allowed me to problem-solve at last.

I'd thought that parenting didn't need to be taught, that raising and nurturing your children with love was the most instinctive activity in life. How my view has changed! I learned that parenting is a deeply conditioned state that is based on our own experiences of being parented, which may or may not have been positive. But add to this a child with an intense, sensitive, impulsive temperament, and suddenly things become much more complicated. It can feel as if you need to have a degree in child psychology for any chance of being remotely successful.

We were learning how to be effective parents.

We were learning a set of 'core' skills that would help us understand Sam's temperament, make it easier for him to develop his potential, and help us get the best out of family life. Like all parents, we were seeking the holy grail of parenting: keeping calm. And slowly – very slowly, with setbacks aplenty along the way – it was beginning to work.

These were the core skills we were taught:

- *Descriptive praise:* this helped us to develop Sam's motivation, cooperation and confidence. His sense of self-worth started to improve, and as he felt more successful, he became more cooperative. A wonderful positive cycle developed.
- *Reflective listening:* this helped us improve our emotional bond with Sam. When we connected with him, and validated his feelings of anger, hopelessness and frustration, he felt more connected to us and understood, and he became able to manage his emotions more effectively.
- *Preparing for success:* this helped us reduce stressful moments and be less reactive. We started to talk through anything that I knew Sam would find stressful, from exciting trips to New Zealand to the more mundane activities like going to the supermarket.
- *Rules and rewards:* this helped us to formulate, communicate and follow through on rules consistently.
- *Positive discipline:* this helped us understand how to respond constructively to unwanted behaviours, in ways that taught Sam to take responsibility and learn from his mistakes, without making him feel worse or damaging his self-esteem.

We practised our new skills religiously, particularly the descriptive praise. I wouldn't be surprised if others around us thought we'd gone mad as we adopted this alien language: 'Sam, I really appreciate you kept your cool there and just shouted at your sister to show her how mad you were. That was a huge improvement on yesterday when you got angry and hit her. You're learning more self-control – good for you!'

To be honest, I really didn't care what others thought any more. We were seeing results. Our household was becoming more manageable, and we were becoming stronger.

And once we started to see results from the core skills, it allowed us to move on to the next stage in our training, finally working on some 'applied' skills:

- *Fostering independence and encouraging good habits:* we started to apply the core skills to train Sam in the attributes we thought would benefit him as an adult. As well as equipping him with life skills, teaching him to be more self-reliant massively boosted his confidence.
- *Fostering good relationships between siblings:* we began to explore ways to ensure Sam and Izzy had a positive relationship and were able to resolve conflict constructively. All children will bicker and fight; helping them learn dispute resolution is one of the greatest gifts you can give them.

The importance of failure

All of us have failed. Most of us do it regularly. It's the most normal experience in the world, and it's vital we help our children to understand that we can treat failures as learning opportunities. Sam had experienced failure of a spectacular nature at a very young age. He had been to the deepest, darkest place of despair, feeling isolated, lonely and hopeless. After he'd spent eighteen months excluded from normal education, we realised there was nowhere further to fall.

I love J. K. Rowling's motivational speech at the Harvard University commencement in 2008, which illustrates beautifully the power of failure and what the human spirit can reveal in the face of adversity:

Failure gave me an inner security that I had never attained by passing examinations. Failure taught me things about myself that I could have learned no other way. I discovered that I had a strong will, and more discipline than I had suspected; I also found out that I had friends whose value was truly above the price of rubies.

The knowledge that you have emerged wiser and stronger from setbacks means that you are, ever after, secure in your ability to survive. You will never truly know yourself, or the strength of your relationships, until both have been tested by adversity. Such knowledge is a true gift, for all that it is painfully won, and it has been worth more than any qualification I ever earned.

As we changed our parenting style and felt more in charge, Sam, in turn, realised he also needed to turn things around and start making his own changes. We were now walking the tightrope between supporting him every step of the way and not 'rescuing' him, allowing him to problem-solve, complete a project himself, and experience that sense of satisfaction.

In doing so, Sam came to realise he wanted to turn his life around.

If you change nothing, nothing will change. Change was needed again.

His own project became getting back into a proper educational environment. Tony and I could not agree more.

Melissa says: The importance of being in charge, not controlling

It's clear that at various points in her story so far, Elaine has felt overwhelmed and let her instincts give way to the advice of professionals. She did need professional support and the help she got generally made a very positive difference to the Halligan family. But she also needed to trust her own instincts to be able to take on those aspects of the advice that worked for her, and modify or ditch the rest. Consider this wise piece of advice from the Buddha: 'Believe nothing, no matter where you read it or who has said it, not even if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and your own common sense.'

When I first met the Halligans I'd been working at the Hawthornes Centre for four-and-a-half years. Sam was attending

the centre and I was the facilitator assigned to work with the family at home. I can remember the first time Elaine and Tony came to my home and they told me about Sam and his diagnoses. I hadn't previously worked with anyone diagnosed with PDA. When I was being flippant I described this condition as being characteristic of someone who didn't do as they were told. I'd certainly had experience of that in my work (and at home)! The Halligans had been advised that they should avoid giving Sam any direct instructions. Fortunately, I was ignorant enough and enthusiastic enough about the skills I'd been trained in to ignore that advice! I helped Elaine and Tony require good behaviour of him while connecting with him and addressing the reasons why he misbehaved.

I loved the skills I'd learned at Hawthornes, particularly descriptive praise, reflective listening and the ideas around positive discipline. I embraced the idea of being both positive and firm at the same time, but by now I was having some reservations about the way the concept of firmness was applied. I'd understood that restraints were only to be used in order to avoid a child hurting themselves or someone else or damaging property, not as consequences for misbehaviour. While the director of the centre wanted to ensure the children followed the rules, the rigid and exacting way in which these were enforced was something I became increasingly unhappy with. Near enough was never considered good enough, despite the effort it may have taken children to achieve what had been asked of them. To my way of thinking this was not 'being in charge' but being overcontrolling. When I left to set up The Parent Practice eighteen months later this was one of the distinctions I wanted to make.

Parents do need to be in charge, of course. Because we have greater experience, perspective and a more mature brain which gives us greater powers of reasoning and self-control. But if we are overcontrolling we will create resentment and resistance. As with so many aspects of parenting, it's a question of balance.

Alfie Kohn, in his book *Punished by Rewards*, suggests that parents should always ask themselves the question, are we doing what we're doing in order to help the child or just to get him to obey? He thinks that many people adopt a controlling approach because of a mistaken view that the alternative to control is

permissiveness. This is pendulum thinking. I found myself doing this when my older son was behaving badly as a little boy. I would try a positive approach and then conclude that it hadn't worked (as he was misbehaving) and so would come down hard on him with punishment. I'd then feel remorseful and try the softer approach again. Success came when I discovered that I could be positive and firm at the same time.

Parents find themselves on a spectrum between 'controlling or authoritarian' on the one end and 'permissive' on the other. Somewhere in between is the 'authoritative' parent. These parents are in charge but are not overcontrolling. Their rules are about teaching the child, not being 'the boss'. Their steps to control are in order to teach the child self-control. Their methods of discipline are to teach the child self-discipline. The child has input but isn't ruling the roost.

If we overcontrol our children the danger is that we may:

- provoke rebellion, as they feel manipulated and nagged;
- create dependency on us – they don't learn to think for themselves and they don't develop responsibility;
- create docility, as their spirit is broken.

Parenting works best when it is about encouraging, not forcing. If you want to motivate a child to do what they should do, don't make them fear you.

If you want to raise a child to be an adult who can speak up for their own needs, solve problems and sometimes question authority then you will need to allow them to express opinions. If they are to be emotionally intelligent adults they need to learn that their feelings count in childhood. If you want to raise a child who can be creative and solve problems then involve them in problem-solving.

This balancing act can be very hard to get right. It starts by being curious about a child's behaviour. It begins with the assumption that children want to do the right thing and acceptance that they will make mistakes. It continues with the idea that when they get something wrong they deserve to be treated with respect and helped to make amends and learn from the episode.

Society favours children, and adults, who conform.

The notion that our children may be shunned for being 'different' breaks our hearts, but there is plenty we can do to help such children develop into thriving, resilient adults.

In *My Child's Different* Elaine Halligan shares the true story of her son Sam, who by the age of seven had been excluded from three schools and was later labelled with a whole host of conditions – ranging from autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) to pathological demand avoidance (PDA), before finally being diagnosed with dyslexia.

He had become 'the Alphabet Kid'. His family never gave up on him, however ...

Drawing lessons from Sam's transformational journey from difficult child to budding entrepreneur, Elaine has teamed up with parenting expert Melissa Hood to explore the enabling role parents can play in unlocking the potential of children who are seen as 'different' or 'difficult'. Together they offer encouragement to parents who may be concerned about what the future might hold, and demonstrate how – with the right support and positive parenting skills – their children can grow up to surprise and delight them.

It is really important that we provide young people with the support they need to succeed, and to understand dyslexia as a different and brilliant way of thinking. Alternative thinking can spur creativity and innovation and has the power to change the world. This book shows how with the right support, young people can maximise their potential.

Sir Richard Branson, business magnate, investor, philanthropist and founder of the Virgin Group

Most parents worry about how to bring up their children, especially if they worry that their child is in any way different. This book offers both comfort and insight to those in this position. It will really help parents, teachers and others relate to and better support those children who are different. A definite book to read!

Sir Anthony Seldon, Vice-Chancellor, University of Buckingham

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Parenting