

YOUR RULES ARE
DUMB

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HOW TO MAINTAIN YOUR PARENTAL
AUTHORITY WHILE CREATING A
PARTNERSHIP WITH YOUR SPIRITED CHILD

REBECAH FREELING

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TESTIMONIALS

“[With] years of experience with families, Rebecah Freeling understands what makes ‘spirited’ children tick and how [these kids] are different from the ‘easy’ kids. She has figured out how to balance two essential yet contradictory components of childrearing: how to gain compliance and how to honor children’s wishes... Whether you’ve just started, are discouraged, or are tearing your hair due to the daunting task of raising a spirited child, you need this important book.”

*–Helen F. Neville, BS RN,
author of Temperament Tools: Working With Your Child’s
Inborn Traits*

“It was refreshing to read Rebecah Freeling’s clear and engaging approach to help[ing] teachers and parents alike work positively with intense children. Her experience and insight help...both adults and young ones to communicate with clarity and love. Thank you, Rebecah!”

*–Linda Williams, PhD,
Class Teacher, Detroit Waldorf School*

“As a licensed therapist who works with children and families, I have high praise for Rebecah Freeling. Her warm and unique style...brings resolution and harmony [to families]... And her sense of humor is amazing!”

–Gina Mendicino,
*Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist in
San Francisco, California*

“There are a lot of child behavior experts and a lot of theories about how best to develop our kids and get the family life we want. No expert has advice that’s never been heard before, but Rebecah Freeling integrates the best of several approaches in a way that’s wonderfully balanced, practical, and empowering. [Ms. Freeling] really ‘gets’ kids...and helps parents...understand their children in a unique way.”

–Tamina Isolani-Nagarvala,
Physician in Oakland, California

“Rebecah Freeling is like the child whisperer!”

–Eleese Meschery,
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- understand what motivates and inspires your child

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INTRODUCTION

“My nature is that I don’t listen very well. I’m very determined, and I believe in myself... Thank God for that. I don’t let anything stand in my way.”

–Chantal Sutherland

When 4-year-old Mark’s grandmother enrolled him in my preschool, she let me know: “He just hits people for no reason, and runs into people, trying to knock them over.” She hoped that Mark would thrive in my school (it had a huge natural outdoor space), but she would understand if I had to expel him. In the meantime she was getting him evaluated to see if he had some kind of mental illness and was also looking for a therapist who could help him with the trauma he’d been through in his parents’ home.

Mark HATED having to follow the routines of the classroom. As soon as he entered my class he began to run back and forth throughout the room; he wrecked the other kids’ projects; and he also hit the teachers. So I herded him out into the yard where he could run around freely without hurting anyone.

In our yard we had open space to run in, trees to climb, a huge sandbox, and raspberry bushes planted along the fence. And of all the options that existed outside, Mark chose the raspberry bushes. He dove in, sat with his back to the fence – and only then realized what he had done. But he kept screaming, “Leave me alone!” So I left him alone. I didn’t talk to him. I just picked up a rake and started in on some yard work. I remained in his line of sight and close enough that he could hear me hum softly as I worked, calm and cool as a cucumber, while he continued to scream and cuss.

After about 20 minutes, Mark screamed, “Teacher! I can’t get out!”

I said, “You’re stuck in the raspberry bushes.”

Then Mark began to cry, no longer screaming. Sadness took over where anger left off. I continued to rake and hum quietly for another five minutes while he cried.

Mark sobbed, “Get me out.”

I said, “We can work together. Would you like to do that?”

“Yes.”

“OK, I’ll move the raspberries aside with the rake and you can climb out. Then we’ll sit on the bench and talk.”

“OK.”

Mark climbed out, surveyed the damage to his arms quietly, and we sat on a bench together. I didn’t say anything.

He said, “I don’t want to be here.”

I said, “You don’t want to be here. That’s frustrating.”

“I hate this school.”

“You hate this school.”

“What do you do here?”

“We work together.”

“Oh. How do you do that?”

“Would you like to learn?”

“Yeah.”

That was the beginning of a long and difficult road for Mark. He had to reconcile his need to be in control at every moment with the reality that he lived on a planet with other humans. There were many days when I had to lead him to the yard, as often he needed to run and rage before he could work together with us.

But by the time he left my school, Mark was a compassionate, creative leader. He came to understand how his body worked, how to use it constructively, and how to express his deep anger and sadness without hurting other people. In problem-solving sessions, he came up with interesting, intelligent solutions to all kinds of problems. And he appreciated the opportunity to use his mind to gain the control he so desperately wanted.

Mark is the quintessential “spirited” child. He had a great deal of power and a very strong will. At first he absolutely hated to work with others. He had backed himself against a wall, he had barricaded himself with thorns, he was screaming to be left alone – but he longed to be led out of his predicament. And it’s not easy to help a child in that situation. *How* you help is crucial. To lead spirited kids out of the thorns, we must be willing to listen and collaborate. The helper’s tone of voice is paramount. The helper’s mood must be positive, hopeful and open. Also, I had to honor the fact that Mark was who he was for a very good reason. I had to wait for him to request help, and I also had to hold him accountable for his actions.

Spirited kids have amazing strength and potential. And parents and teachers have an amazing opportunity to help them create incredible lives with that strength, if we are courageous, steadfast and unrelenting, just like they are.

My name is Rebecah Freeling. I am a child behavior expert and parent coach. I specialize in energetic, intense, strong-willed, won't-take-No-for-an-answer, "spirited" kids; and I wrote this book to provide parenting advice to parents of these kids.

I've worked with a lot of kids over the years, and I intend to equip you, empower you – and encourage you. In this book I'll be sharing some techniques that I've found to be key to developing an effective working relationship with your spirited child. But even more important, I'll be sharing a parenting mindset and encouraging a perspective-shift that can dramatically reduce your frustration and stress. This mindset will also help you to parent in the true sense of the word: It will make it easier for you to work with your child as a teacher, trainer, and mentor. Because that's what raising kids is all about, right? We want to nurture them and we want them to know they're loved, but we also want to equip and prepare them to thrive as adults.

What I have to share is based on my experience with many, many kids and their parents. But before I get started, let me tell you a little about the path that brought me to where I am today.

MY JOURNEY

I've noticed and paid attention to the process of teaching ever since I was a young girl. And when I was a kid I was aware that some of my teachers really connected with me and the other kids, and some of them didn't. I remember in particular my fourth-grade teacher, who didn't think I was nearly as clever as I actually was, and I got lots of notes sent home that year.

Math was especially troublesome, because I thought math could be a really interesting story about how the

numbers all related to each other. We were doing fractions and I thought it was so interesting when the big number was on the top and the little number was on the bottom. And if the little number didn't want so much on top and the top was too heavy the little number could slide some of it off so that the number on top could become smaller than the little number on the bottom. But when I tried to explain improper fractions to the class this way, my teacher said, "Rebecah, this is math class, not storytelling." Another note sent home.

But the next year I had a teacher who was able to connect with every one of her students and I immediately intuited this – that she totally "got" me and every other kid in the class. And I watched the way she responded to everybody as individuals and I thought, "That's what I want to do. I want to be a teacher." And so it was that teacher who inspired me and made me want to work with kids and connect with them in the way she connected with me.

So fast-forward many years, and I've started an early-childhood center in Columbus, Ohio, where I attempted to do just that: establish a genuine, strong connection with each child who enrolled. And I like to say that this resulted in my attracting more than my share of what we are now calling "spirited" kids – the ones who have "too much" energy, they may be aggressive, they're often in trouble at home and at school. I'd have 3- or 4-year-olds who had already been kicked out of two or three preschools! And in my school, which was called Briar Rose Children's Center, no one ever got kicked out, everyone learned what the State said they needed to know to move to the next grade, and most important, everyone learned the self-discipline they needed to function "appropriately" in the world around them. And now some of these kids are doing some amazing things. One of my kids, now

a teenager, extended a consequence she received as a result of forbidden partying to include raising hundreds of dollars for the local food bank that had supported her family in her younger years. Another just biked across Spain. Another is training to be an Olympic swimmer.

In 2011 I closed Briar Rose and my partner and I moved to the West Coast. And once I got settled I decided to quit teaching in the school context and instead focus more directly on what I enjoy most – helping to solve the behavior- and parent-child relationship problems that cause so much stress to so many families. I began to work with kids and their parents as a family coach, and now my team and I provide other services to families as well.

A SUMMARY OF WHAT'S COMING: ESSENTIALLY, IT COMES DOWN TO TWO THINGS...

I said above that this book is intended to give parenting advice. In particular, this book shows you what you should do to manage, leverage, and transform your spirited kid's problem behavior. And I've learned that the most effective response to spirited kids' problem behavior amounts to two basic strategies. One, parents need to establish themselves as the ones in charge of the family. And two, parents should share their decision-making power with their child, and relate to their child as a partner and collaborator.

This may sound like a paradox, and if it does, think about a team captain, or the team's coach. Everyone's in the game, everyone has the same goal, but these folks lead the team. The first part of this book (Chapters 2 and

3) focuses on parents being in charge, because – due to the child’s place in the course of human development – you can’t develop a truly collaborative relationship with your child unless you first establish yourself as a leader she’s willing to follow. The second half of this book (Chapters 4 and 5) focuses more directly on collaboration itself, providing perspectives and one key strategy that will help you to partner with your child in an effective and empowering way.

And in Chapter 1 I summarize some of the key assumptions that underlie my approach to parenting. These are my assumptions, and I hope they’ll become your assumptions too – because ultimately, working with spirited kids is about perspective, and it’s about the two broad strategies I described above. In other words, this book is not an index of parenting tips, although I *do* talk about a few techniques in great detail. But parenting spirited kids is much more effective and much less frustrating if you start with an empowered perspective as to who these kids are and how they work.