

The approach you will learn in this book is just that: an effective alternative. It is about giving children an unshakable sense of self-worth with which they can navigate the complex territory of modern life. They learn to use their intensity to propel success rather than to break rules and create chaos.

Upside-Down Energy

Imagine yourself, for a moment, in a classroom. Your students are working diligently on a project in their groups. Everyone's cooperating. Everyone's staying on task. What do you do? Most likely, you tiptoe over to your desk to get some pressing tasks accomplished before the next disruption. You might even sit back quietly and enjoy the sight of your beloved students getting so much out of their educational experience.

Then, a couple of students start to argue and their voices rise, disrupting the others in the room. Now what happens? On a good day, you start with a gentle reminder to get focused on their work again. When this doesn't work, still on that proverbial good day, you might go to the students, gently insert yourself into the fracas, and try to help the kids work out their differences. You might give a 'sermon' about the importance of respecting the others' need for quiet in order to get their work done or about cooperation within their group. And on that good day, you might well give one or two or more warnings before exacting any consequence or escalating your response to the problem.

On a bad day, you might not give a single warning, jumping right to some form of reprimand, heated reaction or worse. Either way, you have demonstrated the same fundamental message to the students: when they are behaving themselves and following the rules, they get little or no response from you; but when they threaten to break a rule or cross the line into actually breaking a rule, suddenly they have intense, highly present interest, connection and relationship with you.

Adults tend to get really tuned-in when things are going wrong. We shift into high gear to attack problems, dismantle and analyze them, and search for fixes and solutions. The Nurtured Heart Approach is not designed to solve problems or to address specific misbehaviors or even to address specific misbehaving children. At the foundation of this approach is a refusal to focus on problems. We don't put any energy into figuring out what the problems are or why they exist. We don't pour energy toward developing solutions or techniques for solving those problems. Along these same lines, we also do not single out the children who create problems. The approach is applied to every child in the classroom.

We aren't pretending problems don't exist. But we don't want to pour gas on the fire of what the child already perceives: that problems are the most efficient route to juicy connectivity and relationship. Instead, we bring our main

focus to what's going right: on recognizing, in honest and satisfying detail, the child's successes, good choices, following of rules and other positive behaviors.

The perception that this approach seeks to change in the child is that he can only exact relationship when acting out. It is not a method for behavior modification but rather a way to excite the spirits and souls of children that also happens to modify the behavior of those who are disruptive. *We have resoundingly found that when we inspire the greatness of children, they act out greatness.*

We inspire children to express this innate greatness by **removing all energy from responses to students' negative choices (aside from providing an energized consequence when a rule is broken); and by energizing the many positive choices students make in the moments those choices are being made.**

This approach teaches how to see success where it might have gone unnoticed before, and how to *create* success where it might not otherwise appear to exist. You'll learn how to acknowledge that success to students in convincing detail; how to treat each moment as a new opportunity for success; how to make rules crystal clear; and how to create an unceremonious and effective consequence as soon as those rules are broken.

The truth is that relationship with you, the educator, is the most ardently sought incentivizing energy in any classroom. The children in your charge are often looking for connection with and feedback from you. They are not just looking for attention; *they're looking for energized relationship*, which is a more textured kind of connection. Even if you can't quite wrap your mind around this, trust me: it's the energetic truth. Your faith in the fact that *YOUR energy and relationship are the biggest "gift" in the room* will give you a big leg up as you begin to work with this approach.

Even if you seem to be the very last thing on their minds, the fact is that they are looking to you, in every moment, for 'juice'—for your focus and connectivity. If you are energetically responsive to them when they are making poor choices and are relatively distracted or low-key when they are being 'good,' you inadvertently demonstrate to them that under-functioning or bad behavior is required to create satisfying relationship with you. In every moment, they drink in impressions about the energetic truth of how the world and the people in it really operate, and most children conclude very early in life that this truth boils down to something like this: *misbehavior is the quickest, most reliable way to meet my need for intimate connection with others—particularly the adult in the room.*

Ultimately, what we energize is what we show love for. And so, with traditional disciplinary methods that inadvertently create intense relationship around misbehavior, you wind up accidentally showing your students that you

love and care about them more when they misbehave or threaten to misbehave. We are typically so much more *there* when things are going wrong.

How We Accidentally 'Energize' Children for Breaking the Rules

On a day when I was scheduled to give a school in-service, I arrived while the school day was still in session and was shown to the library, where a class was in progress. As I set up my equipment in an adjoining part of the large space, a librarian/teacher sat at her desk doing her own work. At this point the students were going about their business, working mostly independently; at times they worked cooperatively and with full focus. As everything went smoothly, there was no interaction at all with the teacher. Then one boy began to create a minor disruption, which drew the teacher out of her seat as though she had a hook in her mouth.

This teacher was clearly a *kind and loving* person who seemed compelled to get to this child as quickly as possible. In a *kind and loving* manner, she took the boy aside, gently put her arm around his shoulders and launched a conversation. I could hear her *kindly and lovingly* telling him not to be disruptive, to be quiet and respectful to his classmates, and to stay focused and get his project completed. And, finally, in a *kind and loving way*, she released him back to his table, with obvious faith in the impact of her words.

This child had stumbled upon a 'button' that created an experience of loving attention. Certainly, he knew that he had broken a rule. He knew that he was being told to behave differently. But beneath the content of her communication was a delicious reward of connection, relationship and energy. Whether you call it a chat, a reprimand, a lecture, a life lesson, a pep talk, a diatribe, a sermonette, an instruction, or an admonition, the energetic meta-message was upside-down from the one intended. This boy soon created a new disruption and several other children soon followed suit.

The inadvertent energetic message of this teacher's response to this student was: *When you do the right thing in my room, you are relatively invisible; when you act out in disruptive ways, you are the recipient of...kind and loving relationship.* No educator would send this message on purpose, but it happens like this in schools around the world every second of every day.

Although she was indeed kind and loving, this teacher was energizing negativity. Her heart-felt intention was beautiful and her aim was to support and teach—but her timing was upside-down. I don't want her to stop being *kind and loving*; I just want her to turn that timing right-side-up. The Nurtured Heart Approach is a way of giving that kindness and love at the right time, in an energetically congruent way: when children are making choices to *not* break rules.

If I'm a teacher and have a thing for respectfulness, I focus on other things

when my students are being respectful. When a child is disrespectful, however, I snap to attention. I become much more present and verbally adamant that this is not okay. My students interpret this as a clear message that I am more available for caring connection when disrespect is happening.

A verbal (or even nonverbal) warning or a threatened consequence might be enough to stop the average child from causing problems just to get a hit of adult connection. But for the child who is more intense and needy, it's not a real deterrent. They need the juice more than they fear the consequences. With this approach, educators refuse to give that juice when things go wrong. Instead of giving energy to negativity, *they tenaciously seek out opportunities to give it when things are going right.*

Let's use the imaginary classroom as an example. Let's say that in those moments when your class is quiet and everyone's working hard, you make a few specific 'energizing' statements:

"Wow, I can see that Jenny is really focused on figuring out the first step of the directions. Way to apply yourself, Jenny! And Shawn has taken responsibility for writing down the input of all his group members during the brainstorm. Tonia is offering to help Frank assemble the group's materials; that's great collaboration." And so on.

If Tonia and Frank start to become irritated with one another, you quickly scan the situation to see what's going right—*before anyone actually breaks a rule.* You might say, loud enough to be overheard by the entire room: "Tonia, I can see you're getting frustrated with the way Frank wants to organize the materials. I want to commend you for handling your strong feelings so well. And Frank, thank you for not raising your voice. I can see you're finding a solution, just the two of you." You also make a point of verbally recognizing a couple of other children who are working peacefully and quietly, following the rules and getting the project done: "I see Hannah is focused on her work, despite the distraction, and is cutting strips of red and purple paper. I also see Jonas taking out the glue to start assembling the project he's doing with Hannah."

Can you see how this shows children that it's juicy and rewarding to do the right thing? How the students are being energized for just doing what they're supposed to do? In stark contrast to energizing the good that is happening, this approach also strives to make rule-breaking boring and uninteresting.

Ever have students push your negative buttons so astutely that you wonder why they are out to 'get you'? This approach is about getting students to push the *positive* buttons because they create the fireworks once reserved for negative behaviors. When they push the negative buttons, it's as though the machine's batteries have just died. They get no energy, no sparks, no histrionics. In its place, they experience only an un-energized reset from the action—

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