Attention 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.

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™.

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).

Encouraging Positive Behavior In ‘Challenging’ Children: The Nurtured Heart Approach™

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Parents trained in the Nurtured Heart Approach report significant gains in well-being, while parents in the control group did not. Although at both baseline and follow up, parents trained in the Nurtured Heart Approach perceived more positive behavior from their children and decreased yelling, scolding, and negative responses.

Despite 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.

The Three ‘Stands’ of the Nurtured Heart Approach

- 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.”

Note: To learn more about this approach to parenting, visit www.ChildrensSuccessFoundation.com
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 seatbelt 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.

**References**