

PUSHING YOUR CHILD'S LIMITS



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Every month or so AHA receives an article from Dan Coulter, president of Coulter videos. Dan has a son with Asperger Syndrome and was recently diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome himself. This is not an unusual phenomenon in our world. Dan and his wife Julie have been producing instructive videos for many years. Now Dan is adding his new found knowledge to add a layer of perception to articles which are very helpful. Here is one that shows the power and resilience of parents. It also points out what the world would be missing without that (people and talents like AHA advisory board member Temple Grandin). If you have not had a chance to see the HBO film titled Temple Grandin it is now at Netflix or for sale for the price of two movie tickets and a soda. Read what Dan has to say about Temple below. We wish everyone a healthy and calm New Year. And as always we thank David Gussin for the opportunity to raise awareness about Asperger Syndrome and related conditions.

PUSHING YOUR CHILD'S LIMITS

By Dan Coulter

We don't know our children's limits. And that's a good thing.

Oh, we may know the limits we see today. But they're not locked in stone, thanks to something called neuroplasticity or "cortical re-mapping." In layman's terms, neuroplasticity is the ability of our brains to change as a result of our experience.

Scientists used to think the human brain didn't change its structure after a critical growth period in infancy. But more advanced scanning

techniques now reveal that the brain is changeable, or "plastic" into adulthood. That means the experiences we give our children can alter the connections in their brains and modify their behaviors and reactions.

I have a great deal of respect for parents who find ways to break through their children's limits without breaking their children. It's an art.

One such artist is Emily, mother of Aidan, a seven-year-old who often has difficulty dealing with unexpected changes. Emily recently shared some of her experiences with my wife, Julie. Last summer, Emily and her father took Aidan to a party where the kids could have rides in electric carts called "Gators." Planning ahead, Emily told Aidan he could have one ride at the beginning of the party and one just before they left. She cleared this with the mom who was holding the party beforehand.

Aiden got his first ride, but when they were preparing to leave, they discovered that the Gators were all out being ridden. Aiden lost it. The party mom felt terrible, but Emily did not ask her to try and get a cart back. Emily said, "No, it's fine. This is life. Sometimes you expect you can do something and it will change." She reasoned that Aiden had already had one ride.

Emily had to carry Aiden to the car. He cried the entire way home and begged to go back. "Pllleeeaaassee!" Emily's dad tried to comfort Aiden by repeatedly saying, "You'll ride next time." Emily told her dad, "I know you're trying to help, but every time you say he'll ride next time, you're reminding him that he didn't ride this time. It's best to stop talking to him now and when we get home, everyone is going to get out of the van and we'll let him come out when he's ready."

They got home, and Emily sat in a lawn chair in the yard waiting for Aiden. After five minutes, he came out and she told him, "I'm sorry. I know it's hard, I know you wanted to ride that Gator but it wasn't there. How can you ride it if it's not there? Sometimes life doesn't always go the way you want it to. I love you." Then she gave him a big hug.

She noted that a year ago his reaction time would have been 45 minutes and that she'd started gently pushing his limits when he was five.

Recently, Emily was driving her kids to their aunt's house for a sleepover. She realized she'd forgotten the blanket that Aiden slept with every night and dragged everywhere. Instead of going back for the blanket, she said, "Aiden, Mommy's really sorry, but she forgot your blanket and you'll have to borrow one of Aunt Kathy's blankets." To her amazement, Aiden said, "That's okay, Mommy."

Dealing calmly with meltdowns and other challenges as you teach your child life lessons is a balancing act. You have to constantly assess where to draw the line in accommodating the limits your child can't yet break, while you push the ones he can.

I can't help but think of people like Temple Grandin. How different her story would have been if her parents had followed a doctor's advice to put her in an institution instead of refusing to accept that her initial childhood limitations would define her life.

Here's to the moms and dads who never stop helping children push through their limits and discover for themselves how far they can go.

And here's to Emily, master of neuroplasticity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dan Coulter is the producer of the DVDs, "Manners for the Real World: Basic Social Skills" and "Understanding Brother and Sisters with Asperger Syndrome." You can find more articles on his website at www.coultervideo.com.

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