Recently, while dining at a popular restaurant, we were confronted by the powerful role children play in shaping the world around them. A few moments after we arrived, a young couple with an eleven-month-old boy entered and sat down two tables away. We soon learned that this was their first child. Within a few moments this child managed to engage everyone around him. Waitresses were stopping to pat him on the head. If you looked in his direction he was sure to make eye contact and smile before looking away. His level of engagement, pleasant temperament and mood were infectious. For these first time parents, parenting, as they told us upon learning of our work, wasn’t very difficult. In fact, they proudly reported that they were planning on having many more children.

About half way through our meal, another young couple came in and sat not far away with a young child of about the same age. Perhaps this child was just having a difficult day or struggled with difficult temperament in general. Even prior to being seated, this young boy was squirming and kicking as his mother attempted to hold him. As she turned he reached out with his foot and knocked over a glass of water on an adjacent table. The mother yelled for him to stop. This family’s dining experience went rapidly downhill from that point. The child’s irritable, unhappy nature quickly annoyed

\[1\text{Since the case illustrations in this book are taken from both of our clinical and consultation practices as well as our workshops, we are using the plural (e.g., we and us) for each example, not only to simplify the writing style, but to acknowledge the contributions of material from both of our professional activities.}\]
diners around them. This child didn’t seem particularly interested in engaging others in a positive way and if he weren’t so young, one might conjecture that he possessed an agenda designed to disrupt and disturb his parents. Perhaps this would remain a one-child family!

We suspect that if we spent time investigating the parenting strategies and personalities of these two young couples, we would find minimal differences between them that might predict the significant difference in the level of self-control exhibited by their children at a very early age. While we have long advocated that biology is not destiny, it does significantly affect probability. The first child’s seemingly strong genetic endowment for good self-control together with a likeable demeanor had already begun fostering positive interpersonal experiences for him. In contrast, the second child’s lack of self-control had already instigated a chain of ineffective parenting efforts at managing what could be seen as his biological vulnerability. Even at this young age, differences in self-discipline held significant consequences.

THE POWER OF SELF-DISCIPLINE

The need to develop and effectively harness self-discipline at an early age, while critical in any culture, may take on greater importance in a society filled with complex demands, challenges, and stresses. The possession and ability to effectively utilize self-
discipline paves a successful road into adulthood. Thus, it is not surprising that in our fast-paced, seemingly chaotic world, children capable of implementing self-discipline at young ages appear to negotiate the maze of family, school, friends, and community more successfully than those who struggle with this ability. Effective self-discipline implies that a child has internalized a set of rules so that even without the presence of a parent or other caregiver, the child will act in a thoughtful, reflective manner.

Self-discipline can be understood as a vital component of a sense of ownership and responsibility for one’s behavior. A large body of research has demonstrated that children capable of resisting temptation—a simple example of self-discipline at all ages—fare significantly better than their more impulsive peers as they transition into their adolescent years. For example, one research team demonstrated that a preschool child’s ability to resist an attractive snack when requested to do so was a significant predictor of a host of positive adolescent outcomes, including school success, mental health, and avoiding the juvenile justice system. The power of self-discipline to impact on the course of a child and adult’s life should never be underestimated.

A number of our previous books have focused on helping children develop resilience qualities by teaching parents and educators the components of a mindset capable of fostering resilience in children. We have suggested that parents capable of successfully engaging in the process of raising resilient youngsters possess an understanding that is sometimes explicit at other times intuitive of what they can do to
nurture a resilient mindset and behaviors in their children. These parents follow a blueprint of important principles, ideas and actions composed of resilience qualities in their day-to-day interactions with their children. For children, such qualities include learning to communicate, experience empathy, be accepted, appreciated and have the opportunity to learn to solve problems, make decisions and develop a social conscience. In writing about these qualities, we have not only defined the steps necessary for parents to successfully implement the teaching of these skills, but also the obstacles that often prevent parents from helping their children develop these skills. We have come to realize that among the most important of these obstacles is the general impediment when children lack effective self-discipline and parents are at a loss as to how to instill self-discipline in their children. In fact, all of these resilient qualities mean little if children lack the necessary self-discipline to put them into effective practice. That is, knowing what to do (e.g., possessing empathy) does not guarantee that a child will do what they know (e.g., act on that feeling of empathy towards others) absent the necessary self-discipline to do so.

**THE ROLE OF PARENTS**

Discipline is a key ingredient in the process of nurturing the development of self-discipline in children. One of the most important roles you as a parents play is to be a disciplinarian regardless of the nature of your child’s inborn temperament.
However, the manner in which different parents fulfill this role varies greatly as is apparent in the following vignette:

Bill and Samantha Ewing and Tom and Jennifer Franklin attended a parenting workshop we offered. Both couples had three children, the oldest of whom in each family was a 12-year-old boy. As they described their 12 year olds, it appeared that both were born with more challenging or “difficult” temperaments. Compared with their younger siblings they were not as easily soothed, were more irritable and argumentative, and less likely to be cooperative especially when they felt frustrated.

A lively discussion ensued when the topic turned to disciplinary practices.

Mr. Ewing stated, “The only thing that Jim responds to is a spanking. You can try to reason with him for hours and he will wear you down. He never does what you ask. There’s always an argument. When I spank him on his rear, it gets him to do what I want. I don’t have to spank my other kids because they do what Samantha and I ask them to do. I guess the only way some kids learn is if you spank them. To be honest, my parents spanked me and I turned out okay.” As Mr. Ewing said this, we could not help but notice the anger in his voice.

Mrs. Ewing added, “While Bill grew up in a home where his parents spanked him, my parents never spanked me. Before we had kids I would have sworn that I would never yell or spank my kids, but having Jim changed all of that. I have to agree with Bill that Jim only seems to respond to being spanked. The only thing that bothers me is
that we have been spanking him for years and he keeps doing the same things. He’s almost a teenager. I’m not sure if we can keep spanking him much longer.”

Mrs. Franklin jumped into the discussion. “My parents spanked me just as Bill’s parents spanked him. I really don’t think it did much good. I still resent what they did. I know I wasn’t the easiest kid, but each time they spanked me, I became angrier. To this day, I don’t have a very good relationship with them. I must admit that when Stevie was born, there were times I really felt like hitting him. He made me so mad. But each time I came close to slapping him or each time I was ready to yell at him, I thought back to what my parents did to me. I didn’t want Stevie to feel about me the way I feel about my parents.”

Mr. Franklin added, “I feel the same way my wife does. We’ve read a number of books about raising kids, but even without the books we know that Stevie was born more difficult to raise. We’ve spent hours thinking and talking about how to deal with him. We know that we have to maintain authority as his parents. We know that there are some things that are nonnegotiable. But we’ve found if we select our battlegrounds carefully, if we give him some choice in certain matters, if we speak with him calmly, he is more reasonable and more cooperative when we ask him to do certain things. It’s still a struggle at times, but things are going more smoothly and there are fewer outbursts.”

Upon hearing Mr. Franklin’s observations, Mr. Ewing replied, “I’m glad how
you’ve handled Stevie has worked. It would never work for Jim. He only understands one thing, that when we spank him, we mean business and he better listen to us.”

**THE QUESTIONS AND GUIDELINES ABOUT THE PURPOSE OF DISCIPLINE**

The Ewings and Franklins both believe they are serving as effective disciplinarians, but their approaches contrast sharply with each other. Each set of parents believes that the manner in which they are disciplining their children fosters the development of self-discipline and in doing so facilitates the development of resilient mindset. How can this be? If we assume that there is only one true path than in fact one set of these parents must be incorrect in their approach. Reflect for a moment with which approach do you feel most comfortable. Which approach do you think would work best for your child or children? As parents consider an array of disciplinary practices, we are often asked, “What are the best ways of disciplining children?” We prefer to re-frame this question by first reminding parents of the meaning of the word discipline. Discipline derives from the word disciple and is best understood as a teaching process. As a form of education, children should not associate discipline with intimidation, humiliation, or embarrassment.

If discipline is placed in the context of an educational process, parents can ponder, “What are the main goals of discipline?” While many answers may be forthcoming, we believe that discipline has two major functions. The first is to ensure
that children have a consistent, safe, and secure environment in which they can learn reasonable rules, limits, and consequences as well as develop an understanding of why these are important. The second function, equally important but not as readily emphasized, is to nurture self-discipline or self-control. But this may not always be an easy task. As with other human qualities or traits, children come to the world with different pre-dispositions and capacities. That is, some children find it very easy to develop self-discipline while others struggle. Some children are easily disciplined, quickly able to shift their behavior after a single adverse experience or disciplinary intervention while others struggle. In either case we want children to incorporate rather than dismiss or resent what we are attempting to teach them.

Given these two key functions of discipline, one can ask several additional questions including, “What skills must parents possess to be effective disciplinarians?” and “What skills are we attempting to teach children in our quest to nurture self-discipline?” In response to the first question, which we will cover in greater detail in the next chapter, we believe that disciplinary practices will be most constructive when parents display empathy, good communication skills, the ability to modify negative parenting activities, an appreciation of each child’s unique temperament, and realistic goals for their children.

However, we have found that many well-meaning parents do not demonstrate these qualities and consequently, fail to nurture self-discipline in their children. When
parents are reactive, crisis-oriented, overly punitive, harsh, belittling, arbitrary, or inconsistent, the positive goals of discipline are likely to suffer. Ironically, when parents such as the Ewings resort to screaming or hitting, they are actually displaying the very behaviors they wish to stop in their children, serving instead as models of poor self-discipline.

The development of self-discipline is also compromised when the parents have very different disciplinary styles or when parents are hesitant to set limits for fear that their children will be angry with them; some children take advantage of this fear by telling parents they don’t love them when consequences are enacted. Finally, children will struggle to develop self-discipline when parents impose unrealistic expectations for behavior, resulting in children becoming increasingly frustrated and angry.

RESILIENCE AND SELF-DISCIPLINE:
A FOCUS ON MINDSETS AND SOLUTIONS

The question, “What skills and attitudes are we attempting to reinforce in children when we discipline them?” can also be posed in the following way: “What do we desire to be the end-result of our disciplinary techniques?” We believe the answer may be found within a concept we proposed in our book Raising Resilient Children, namely, “resilient mindset.” A mindset may be understood as comprised of assumptions or attitudes we possess about ourselves that impact on our behaviors and
the skills we develop. In turn, our behaviors and skills influence our set of assumptions so that a dynamic process is constantly operating.

Children who possess a resilient mindset are hopeful and have high self-worth. They feel special and appreciated. They have learned to set realistic goals and expectations for themselves. They demonstrate self-discipline and have developed the ability to solve problems and make decisions. They are likely to view mistakes, hardships, and obstacles as challenges to confront rather than as stressors to avoid. They rely on productive coping strategies that are growth-fostering rather than self-defeating. They are aware of their weaknesses and vulnerabilities, but they also recognize their strong points and talents. Their self-concept is filled with images of strength and competence. They have developed effective interpersonal skills with peers and adults alike. They are able to seek out assistance and nurturance in a comfortable, appropriate manner from adults who can provide the support they need. Finally, they are able to define the aspects of their lives they have control over and to focus their energy and attention on these rather than on factors over which they have little, if any, influence.

It is difficult to imagine children being hopeful and optimistic or being prepared to deal successfully with challenges and adversity, if they lack self-discipline, if they act before they think, if they fail to consider the potential outcomes of their behavior. In his book, *Emotional Intelligence*, Dr. Daniel Goleman has defined self-discipline as a
significant component of emotional intelligence, a form of intelligence deemed essential for success in all aspects of our personal and professional lives including our interpersonal relations.

If we consider self-discipline as a driving force for individuals with resilient mindsets and lifestyles, we are in a better position to answer, “What skills or attitudes are we attempting to reinforce in children when we discipline them?” A general answer is, “We want our disciplinary techniques to nurture a resilient mindset in our children, which includes the presence of self-discipline. We want our children to develop attitudes about themselves and others that are keeping with a more optimistic, hopeful outlook and lifestyle.”

However, a more specific answer would include discussion of the qualities defining self-discipline and consideration of the mindset possessed by resilient, self-disciplined children compared with youngsters who are not hopeful. As we have stated and will emphasize throughout this book, resilience qualities are necessary for a child to be truly resilient, but aren’t enough. The child must also have insufficient absent effective self-discipline to be resilient.

The following are Judith McCarthy’s comments: [I’d love to see the part below separated out as a box—boxes help make the page look more interesting to a reader flipping through and also set this apart as important material that isn’t quite like the rest of the text. See my suggestions for
converting it to a box. Don’t literally put a box around it—just note as I’ve done where the box begins and ends.]

[Start box here]

THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ATTITUDES EXPERIENCED BY CHILDREN

The following is a list of positive attitudes together with their negative counterparts, which will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters (obviously, a child or adolescent might not use these actual words, but we wish to capture the feeling they are likely to experience):

1. **Positive:** I am able to define what I have control or influence over in my life and focus my time and energy on these areas.
   
   **Negative:** I have little, if any, control over circumstances in my life.

2. **Positive:** I am able to think before I act and solve problems in a thoughtful way.
   
   **Negative:** My solutions to problems rarely work. I just don’t know how to approach a task.

3. **Positive:** My success is based on my own efforts and resources.
   
   **Negative:** I often think that any success I have is lucky, just a fluke, and I’m not certain I can be successful again.

4. **Positive:** When I make a mistake or fail at a task, I attempt to examine what I can do differently next time to succeed rather than see myself as a failure.
   
   **Negative:** When I make a mistake, I question how smart I am or if I will ever
learn how to do things.

5. Positive: I feel a sense of self-worth in different areas of my life.
   Negative: I feel I have let myself and others down.

6. Positive: While some things in life may not seem fair, I believe that when this occurs I must ask ourselves what I can do to improve the situation.
   Negative: I believe that life is unfair and I have been dealt a lousy hand.

7. Positive: I believe that most adults are helpful and compassionate and not annoyed or angry with me. I also think I can contribute to the well-being of others.
   Negative: I think that people are always angry about things I say or do. I feel I get little, if any, support from others.

8. Positive: Even when things are not going well, I am able to think more optimistically, and consider different solutions to problems.
   Negative: I am pessimistic about things in my life improving. I often feel hopeless about the future.

It is important for parents that you to appreciate that the tasks of helping children develop the positive attitudes shown above and the self-discipline and nurturing a resilient outlook or mindset to go along with them in children requires time and cannot be accomplished within a quick fix-it mentality. This task will be most successful when rooted in a strength-based approach, an approach that appreciates
that self-discipline is best nurtured in an atmosphere in which parents and the entire community are dedicated to raising resilient children.

Given this belief, in this book we will apply and expand our model for helping children develop a resilient mindset to the area of discipline and self-discipline. We will provide many examples of the ways in which an understanding of a resilient mindset can help parents you to be more effective as a disciplinarians and to build your child’s self-discipline. Let’s examine how this understanding assisted Bill and Samantha Ewing in helping to change their son Jim’s behavior.

Back to the Ewings *(Judith raised a question whether this should be pulled out in some way)*

In our parenting workshop we reviewed the ongoing attempts of the Ewings to lessen Jim’s problematic behaviors and discussed the assumptions they held that were contributing to what we considered to be a punitive approach. They defended their use of spanking by asserting it was “the only language Jim understood.”

Given the seeming ineffectiveness of spanking Jim, we introduced the possibility of their changing their style of discipline. When we did, Mr. Ewing countered, “Are you saying it’s our fault that Jim acts the way he does? If we back off and change, it will amount to giving in to him and he will never get better. If anything, he’ll know that he can do whatever he wants without any consequence.”
We have frequently heard this argument. Thus, we responded by agreeing with Mr. Ewing’s goal of wanting Jim to be more responsible and respectful, but at the same time questioning the means by which he attempted to achieve this goal. We have found that parents are more likely to consider new parental practices, especially those involving discipline, if we first validate the goals they express.

We said, “No, we don’t think it’s your fault and we certainly agree with your desire for Jim to meet his responsibilities and not talk back to you. Our concern is that based on what you told us he has basically shown a lack of respect for years. While yelling or spanking may seem to help temporarily, it doesn’t seem to have led to any long-term changes. We have to figure out a way for you to discipline him so he really changes and you don’t have to keep reminding him to do things. In our experience, if parents use a certain form of discipline and it doesn’t work, it makes more sense to look at what they can do differently rather than expecting the child to change suddenly.”

Fortunately, Mr. and Mrs. Ewing interpreted these remarks as supporting their wish for Jim to be more responsible and respectful.

Mr. Ewing asked, “What other approach can we use? I think we’ve exhausted every possible option. The calmer approach that Tom and Jennifer use with their son Stevie doesn’t seem to work with Jim.”

We responded, “Many parents feel that they have exhausted every option, but sometimes a new perspective can lead to more effective disciplinary practices. We feel
a perspective that may prove helpful is to look at what we call a resilient mindset.”

Mrs. Ewing wondered, “What’s that?”

We reviewed the attributes of a resilient mindset, focusing especially on increasing Jim’s sense of ownership and responsibility for his own behavior by involving him in problem-solving activities. We suggested to the parents that they use an approach similar to that advanced by our colleague Dr. Myrna Shure. Dr. Shure has developed a very successful program titled, “I Can Problem Solve” in which children are engaged in arriving at solutions to difficult situations.

More specifically, we recommended that the Ewings sit down with Jim during a quiet time and say to him, “We think we may be nagging you too much. What do you think?”

Mr. Ewing immediately said, “I know Jim will say yes that we do nag him too much. But what he calls nagging, we see as our job as his parents to make certain he meets his responsibilities.”

We answered, “We would guess that Jim will say you nag him too much. We also anticipate that he will fail to see his role in all of this, but that’s okay. Once he agrees that you nag him too much, you can say that you don’t want to do it and want to figure out with him what will help.”

Mrs. Ewing said, “He will probably say that what will help is if we stopped reminding him to do some things and stopped spanking him when he was
“You’re probably right. If he says that you can take ownership for your behavior, but you can say that just as you will attempt not to yell or spank, you want him to think about what he can do differently to improve the situation.”

Mr. Ewing answered with a sentiment we have heard from other parents when we have suggested this line of conversation.

“Jim will probably say he doesn’t know what will improve the situation. Or he might say that if we didn’t nag him he would follow through on things and that he wouldn’t speak disrespectfully to us. But we know that even if he says this, he really won’t follow through.”

We observed, “Even if he hasn’t followed through in the past, in our experience if children come up with ideas of how they will remember to do things or how they would like to be reminded if they forget, they are more likely to be cooperative since the ideas come from them. It increases their feeling of ownership, it improves their problem-solving skills, and it will help them to be more resilient and cooperative. Also, if he says he doesn’t know what he can do differently, don’t put him on the spot. You can simply say, ‘We wouldn’t expect you to know this moment, but think about it for a day or two.’”

We then added a comment we have shared with many parents, “Our goal is for kids to become more respectful and cooperative, not compliant, obedient, resentful, or disrespectful.”
angry. We want them to develop self-discipline, which basically implies ownership for your own behavior.”

We cautioned, “Changing the way you speak with Jim or react towards him will not lead to his changing overnight. The problem has been going on for years and will take time to correct. Patience will be necessary. We say this since some parents who have gone out of their way to modify their own behaviors become angry and resort to harsh punishments when they feel their children are not changing as quickly as they would like. However, we feel that if you change the script you have been using and become less punitive and harsh, it will actually lead to an improvement in Jim’s behavior.”

To define more clearly and support the changes the Ewings planned to make with Jim, we engaged in some role-playing activities. We asked the Ewings to consider various scenarios with Jim, what they thought his response would be to their changes in behavior, and how they would respond in kind. Although it was not easy for them to modify their established scripts, they recognized that their approach was leading to a very angry and strained relationship with Jim. We encouraged them to link their disciplinary practices with the question, “Is what we are doing reinforcing self-discipline and a resilient mindset in Jim? Is it leading to a more positive relationship with him?” The Ewings consulted with us for several months. Although Jim could prove very challenging, leading them on occasion to question whether this more “reasonable”
approach would be effective, they stuck with it. One of the factors that motivated them to persevere was a recognition of the extent to which their previous script had been so negative and self-defeating. They found that a strength-based perspective of discipline supported by the concept of a resilient mindset, offered an effective alternative to their earlier style of disciplining Jim.

The Ewings also discovered another important benefit of linking discipline to resilience, namely, that it greatly improved their relationship with their son. As we have emphasized in our previous books, discipline is most effective when carried out within a caring relationship. Such a relationship is the foundation upon which a resilient mindset characterized by such qualities as self-discipline, compassion, respect, and responsibility flourishes.

In the chapters that follow we will describe the ways in which meaningful connections to children can be used to nurture their capacity for self-discipline and resilience. When such connections exist, parents and other caregivers become disciplinarians in the true meaning of the term—as teachers who assist children to learn to reflect on and consider the consequences of their actions, to assume responsibility for their behavior, and to consider the rights and feelings of others. The true power of resilience lies in children’s ability to harness resilient qualities in their everyday lives. Efficient self-discipline is the fuel to make the resilience engine run.