

## Case Report

# Integrative Pediatrics and Child Care

## Raising Emotionally Healthy and Resilient Children: Consciously Connecting with Kids

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### Abstract

Parents are feeling more challenged in raising kids today than in years past. The challenge is in coping with difficult behavior. Statistics show that an increasing number of children are being diagnosed with and treated for behavioral or emotional issues. Behavior is a manifestation of something deeper going on in the child. By tapping into this deeper core of the child and seeing their inner spirit, their true nature, then one can better understand where the behavior is coming from. The Chinese medicine 5-element model is a useful tool in identifying a child's inner nature. Using and applying this model to children allows heightened awareness and mindfulness in parenting. Mindful parenting is an important component to raising emotionally healthy and resilient children. This deeper conscious connection can bring about positive changes for easier behavior and easier parenting.

**Keywords:** Parenting; Mindfulness; Conscious connection; True nature; Behavior; Emotional health

### Introduction

Parenting today can be challenging. The fast pace of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century means more activities jammed in to a day, more technology to distract us, more places to go and things to do. Working parents have the added challenge of working their full work week and still finding time to be a parent. With technology distracting parents and kids more every day, with the financial reality of needing both parents working, and with the overscheduled child, there is more of a need than ever to find a way to take some time and focus on how to raise an emotionally healthy child who will survive and thrive in the world as they grow. This article will discuss understanding kids' behaviors, recognizing where different behaviors come from, understanding each child's unique true nature, and how mindful parenting is important in raising emotionally healthy and resilient children. Through this understanding and connection, children can be raised to better adjust to life's challenging events and in fact thrive in life in spite of adversities. Raising and nourishing a child true to their

essence, brings out more positive behavior in the child, allows them to live true to their authentic self, and makes parenting less stressful and more rewarding.

### Behavior

Is behavior in kids getting worse or better? The answer is a subjective one. What is considered 'bad' behavior? Twenty-three hundred years ago Socrates wrote "The children now love luxury, they have bad manners, contempt for authority, they show disrespect for elders. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, and they tyrannize their teachers" [1]. Based on this, it seems child behavior is about the same as it was 2300 years ago. However according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) 8-10% of kids under 5 years old have 'significant' mental health issues [2]. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) reports that 1 in 13 kids are taking medications for emotional or behavioral problems and children being medicated for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) rose 28% between 2007

and 2011[3]. So perhaps kids' behavior is no different than it was 2300 years ago, yet treatment, in an attempt to 'fix' it, is increasing.

Behavior is often labeled as good or bad. Good behavior may be considered a child who is compliant, polite, calm, pays attention, does what they are told, doesn't rock the boat. Good behavior is easy to be around and comfortable for adults. Bad behavior may be described as a child who is hyperactive, loud, boisterous, pushes the boundaries, non-conforming, and challenges authority. Bad behavior challenges our sense of comfort and confidence in parenting abilities. The labels 'good' behavior and 'bad' behavior are not helpful. They attach judgement to the child which can be detrimental. This judgement can weigh heavily on a child's developing sense of self. Rather than labeling a child as 'good' or 'bad' it is more useful to see the behavior within the context of the child's inner self.

In examining where different behaviors come from, behaviors are reactions or responses to certain stimuli in the child's life. Fear and insecurity are two of the basic driving forces behind behavior. Feelings of fear and insecurity arise around a negative stimulus. This negative stimulus is a stressor to the child and brings out negative reactivity. Positive stimuli are motivators and bring out positive behavior. A stressor is any stimulus that makes the child feel fearful or insecure. Fear is a fundamental emotion that drives human behavior. Kids can feel fear about any number of things in their environment. An obvious source of fear is an abusive parent. Less obvious sources of fear or insecurity are situations that make the child feel scared or uncomfortable. Examples of such situations include: large crowds of people, excess noise, loneliness, physical inactivity, sensory overstimulation, sensory under stimulation, or separation from friends and family. There are different sources of stress or fear for each different kind of child. Behavior is a symptom of something deeper going on. When a child feels fearful or insecure, this feeling in them manifests as acting out which may be considered 'bad' behavior. But really the behavior is a reaction of self-protection and a cry for help in managing this feeling of fear or insecurity. Children don't like to misbehave. They are not born with the desire to misbehave. It doesn't feel good to them to be considered 'bad'. It is simply a cry for help.

## **Don't Throw the Baby out with the**

## **Bathwater**

Acting out is one small area of difficulty for a child in managing their emotions and is not a reflection of the whole child. Parents often focus on the difficult behavior rather than focusing on the more positive, greater picture of the whole child. Because each child is unique, different kids react differently to stressors or motivators. For instance, while one child may feel the need to always be moving, exploring, physically interacting with the world, another child will prefer to sit quietly, reading or coloring. The active child feels happy and comfortable in a more physical environment and the quiet child feels happy and comfortable in a more quiet, calm environment. Stress will arise when the environment shifts and the stimuli in the environment create feelings of discomfort or insecurity. The emotion of fear in response to a stressor plays a significant role in how a child will behave. How a child reacts and what types of stimuli are stressful to them relates to what the child's true nature is.

## **True Nature**

If we dig a bit deeper in what prompts fear or insecurity in a child we start to see and understand their true nature. A child's true nature is their essence. It is the true child deep in the core where their inner spirit lives. It is what makes them tick, it is what determines how they perceive and function in the world around them. A child's true nature governs their temperament, their personality type, and their behavior. Children are naturally in tune with their inner spirit. If a child can live in accordance with their true nature they learn how to live authentically. This means they live with a secure sense of self and is comfortable and confident in their words, thoughts and actions. A secure sense of self is the foundation for emotional health and positive behavior.

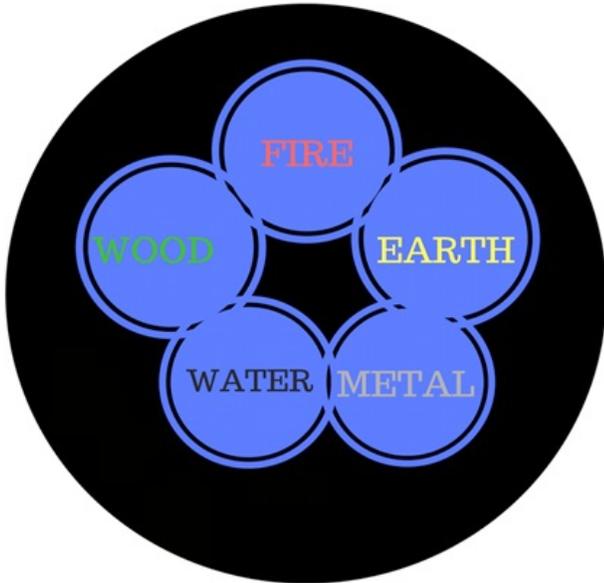
## **Identifying a child's true nature**

### **Reflect**

A simple way to start seeing a child's true nature is to just observe them in different situations - at home, with friends, in school, meeting new people. The child will react to different situations and stimuli in accordance with their true nature. *Reflection* allows a parent to step back and objectively observe the child and their behavior, and it is the first step in fostering their emotional well-being.

The Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) 5-element model offers a more in-depth way to identify a child's

true nature. For thousands of years the Chinese have used the natural world as a framework for understanding and treating mental and physical health. TCM bases its philosophy and practice of health and medicine on the balance of yin and yang, and the 5 natural elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water (Figure 1).



Fire and wood are more yang in nature - bright, outgoing, loud, active, energetic, social, leader types. Metal and water are more yin elements-calm, quiet, inward, in a more restful state. Earth lies in the middle with a balanced combination of yin and yang. Looking at the 5-element diagram in a clockwise direction, each element influences the element type that follows it and is influenced by the other element types. Wood fuels fire; fire creates earth; from the earth comes metal; water makes wood grow. Everybody has bits of all 5 elements within them, but one element is dominant and identifies one's true nature. A questionnaire for identifying each of the 5 elements can be found in Appendix 1. This questionnaire can be used by parents, teachers, caretakers or any adult who is familiar with the child. Similar to the tools and questionnaires used to diagnose ADHD, adults who know the child can fill out the questionnaire to arrive at an element type that fits the child (Table 1).

Wood kids (Pioneers) are highly energetic, physical, intense, competitive, adventurous, and visionary. Often labeled with ADHD they are bright intellectually but may be considered difficult because of their desire to always be moving. They can be disruptive in a classroom because of their high energy. Their stressors include

Table 1 outlines characteristics of each element type

with a list of stressors that affect that element type and the behavior response that ensues from stress.

physical restriction, too many boundaries, lack of activity, no opportunity to explore and learn. Their response is frustration, anger, and challenging the boundaries.

Fire children (Leaders) are charismatic, outgoing, friendly, like to be the center of attention, natural performers, and love novelty and sensory stimulation. These children may be labeled as inattentive ADHD due to their easy distractibility with sensory stimulation and novelty. Their stressors are sensory overstimulation, being fed too much information at once, under stimulation leading to boredom, and told to be serious. They react with anxiety, hyper excitability and even panic.

Earth children (Peacemakers) thrive on human connection. They love family, friends, harmony among people, and are affectionate and caring. Their source of stress comes from disconnection, lack of human contact, not fitting in. They respond with worry and over thinking situations.

Metal children (Alchemists) like routine, predictability, logic and structure. They feel secure with rules and boundaries. They are very sensitive to criticism or being wrong. Their stressors are inconsistency, disorder, unpredictability, and being openly criticized. When these stressors arise, they react with becoming overly rigid sometimes to the point of obsessive compulsion, hypersensitivity (crying) to other's criticisms, not being able to 'let it go'.

Water children, (Philosophers) are imaginative and deep thinkers, who like mysticism and magic; they live in their own world, are quiet and contemplative, and are not interested in the concept of time and daily schedules. They feel stress with being rushed, forced to live with the urgency of daily affairs, and with too much human contact. Their response is withdrawal and disconnection from people and their environment.

Once a child's element type is identified it then becomes evident what the child and their behavior are all about. This is their true nature. When a child is allowed to live according to their true nature they feel better about themselves and their role in the world. Working *with* their true nature, rather than working against it is the foundation of raising an emotionally healthy child. The

**Table 1:** characteristics of each element type with a list of stressors that affect that element type and the behavior response that ensues from stress

	<b>Traits</b>	<b>Stressors</b>	<b>Response to Stressors</b>
WOOD	Athletic Exploring Competitive Adventurous Goal oriented Being physical Highly energetic	Boredom Confinement Lack of physical activity	Anger Frustration Destructive behavior
FIRE	Charming Engaging Performer Charismatic Class clown likes novelty Sensory learner Center of attention	Boredom Over stimulation Under stimulation Told to be serious Too much information	Anxiety Panic Hypersensitivity Can't calm down
EARTH	Caretakers Adaptable Affectionate Compassionate Like to help others Loves connection with others	Separation Not fitting in Disconnection Lack of human contact	Worries Obsesses Overthinks
METAL	Organized Follows the rules Embarasess easily Loves logic and patterns Loves routine and structure Likes to complete tasks and check them off a list	Disorder Criticism Changes Inconsistency Unpredictability	Becomes rigid Compulsive - OCD Can't just 'let it go' Hypersensitive (crying) when criticized or told he is wrong
WATER	Solitary Mellow Easy going Deep thinker Very imaginative Lives inside his head Poor concept of time Enjoys magic and mysticism Has deep inner strength and wisdom	Time constraints Being misunderstood Too much human contact Urgency of everyday affairs	Withdrawal Social Isolation

natural traits of each element are meant to be nourished and strengthened – these are the motivators. Stressors should be minimized whenever possible. This may mean manipulating or affecting a child's environment so that they can function more naturally. For instance, water children will need a place of their own where they can go to be alone and immerse themselves in reading, thinking, or daydreaming, with no interruptions or invasion of their space by other people. Fire children, quite opposite, will need an outlet for the desire to perform and be the center of attention. Putting on a show for the family, or trying out for the school play is motivating. Allowing fire children to

be funny and free spirited will nourish their fire element. Wood children benefit from time spent outside and being physical, not from time sitting quietly, inside and inactive. Providing the wood child with opportunity to run, climb, compete, and be adventuresome nourishes their wood spirit. Earth children will love to help out in the kitchen, help care for younger siblings, enjoy dinner hour with the family-to encourage their desire to help and to connect is to nourish their earth spirit. Metal children do best with an organized, predictable environment. Chaos in their environment will work against their nature. Knowing the plan for the day and keeping things predictable and

organized help them to feel safe and secure.

## Case Study

William is a 6 year old kindergartener. He is a bright child who does well with the material taught in school. He has boundless energy and needs to be physical and to move a lot to feel 'right'. His teacher is concerned because he cannot sit and focus for longer than five minutes at a time. His teacher has brought up the possible diagnosis of ADHD and suggested that his parents talk to William's pediatrician about the possibility of starting medications. At home William is cheerful, helpful and is a good brother to his younger brother. He has trouble sitting through dinner and often needs to get up from the table during dinner. He absolutely loves to be outside, running around and playing with the neighborhood kids. By looking at the element table William is a wood child. The ways to engage and motivate William are through exploration, physical activity, and competition. To expect him to sit and concentrate for 15 minutes creates a major source of stress for him, and as a result he gets frustrated and angry. The desires to be active, social, and explorative are his innate traits, traits of his true nature and are not 'bad'. This is not to say that he has no responsibility for his actions or that he should be allowed to act out of control and disruptive. But to work with his nature rather than against it will yield positive behavior and may avoid the necessity of starting medications. Restricting his time with friends and time outside and opportunities for physical activity will only exacerbate the stress he feels from confinement and isolation. Ideally, his school and home environments can adapt to allow for certain aspects of his element type - allowing for movement, exploration and ways to let him blow off his excess energy. Understanding why William acts the way he does, by identifying his element type as his true nature is the first step in working with William and his exuberant behavior.

## Mindful Parenting and Consciously Connecting

### Connect

A child's true nature can be seen by understanding their behavior within the framework of their natural element. By understanding a child's behavior in the context of their natural element allows their true nature to shine. *Connection* to this true nature is the next step in nourishing a child's emotional health

Mindfulness has become a buzz word and is becoming popular for people who want to live their lives from a more centered, calm, focused place, getting away

from reactivity to the stressful, chaotic world around them. Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD is the founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine Health Care. He and other mindfulness leaders teach people how to live their lives more mindfully. He defines mindfulness as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmental to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" [4]. Studies have shown that using mindfulness-based interventions effectively reduces psychological reactivity to stressful life situations, treats anxiety, and decreases recurrence of depressive episodes [5]. Multiple studies have been done in recent years on mindful parenting showing the positive effects on children's behavior, academic ability, reducing stress and anxiety, and bringing about easier, more positive parenting [6]. A mindful approach to parenting has been suggested as one avenue for promoting secure attachment relationships and the parent-child relationship is an ideal context in which to extend the concepts and practices of mindfulness [7]. To incorporate mindfulness with parenting means seeing the child just as they are, without judgement. It is the ability to be with the child in the moment, connecting with what they say and do in a conscious way. Seeing and accepting a child for who they are, their traits, their likes and dislikes, their temperament, allows a parent to consciously connect. Children need that connection and to know that they are accepted just as they are. Children want to be heard, they want to be understood for who they are, and they want to know that they matter and are worthy. When children feel understood and secure in expressing themselves according to their inner true self then they learn to live through their own personal power. When a parent is mindful and truly present in the moment with the child, then parenting becomes more responsive and less reactive.

Conflict arises when parents have set expectations of who their child *should* be, of what *they want* that child to be. Often we see parents raising their kids in a rather egoic way - that is according to their own agendas. These agendas often include the sports the child should play, the instrument they should learn to play, the innumerable extracurricular activities they should be doing to 'get ahead', the way they look and dress, the college they should aspire to attend, the profession they should choose for life, or whatever else the parent feels to be important. These are all aspects of life that parents like to believe they can control. They believe that their agenda is what is best for their child. Many kids live afraid of disappointing their parents, not meeting their

expectations, and they live in a way meant to please their parents. This does not allow for a child to live according to their nature but rather according to their parents' way of looking at life. When a child lives their life with a false sense of identity which is an identity according to Mom and Dad, and out of alignment from their own true nature, a child then cannot grow into their own sense of self. Kids have an innate sense of who they are, who they want to become, and what is right for them. Kids want to feel affirmation from their parents for this authentic sense of self, and they need the parents to see their intrinsic goodness and spirit. This personal power from within a child, when accepted and nourished according to their true nature grows into emotional health and resilience. Parental guidance and insight is important; exerting control and enforcing parental wants and expectations is not helpful.

## Respect

Finally, respect is the third component for emotional health. Respecting a child's true inner spirit, their inner authentic self means loving it, nourishing it, building it up.

Emotional health can be defined as living free of anxiety, depression, and maladaptive behaviors. Emotionally healthy people are optimistic, genuinely happy and able to cope with life's stresses in a healthy adaptive way. Resilience is how one recovers from stress. Resilience in a child is the ability of a child to recover from a difficult time or a stressful experience, and pick them self back up and return to a centered state of calm. Kids do best with a grounded sense of who they are. They can accept themselves as they are, especially if they have the support and belief of their parents. With self-acceptance and non-judgement kids gain confidence in themselves which breeds inner strength and resilience. It is not difficult for kids to believe in themselves and have self-confidence. In fact, it is natural for them. They can take ownership for their lives. Who they are internally, not what happens externally, is what gives them the strength of resilience and the ability to adjust and grow. If children are in tune with their inner power they will be less apt to feel defeated by life's difficulties and more apt to learn and grow from life's experiences. If adults can accept the child as who they are and nourish this true nature of theirs then they will raise an emotionally healthy and resilient child.

A child may lose self-confidence and belief in their inner self when adults around them criticize, judge and lead them to believe they are not worthy just as they are and should change and act differently. It can be difficult

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for parents to let go of the control they desire to turn their child into who they the parents believe the child should be. Parents fear that their child will fail or suffer if they don't live the way the parent feels is the right way to live. This need to control a child's life is common but is not in the child's best interest. If parents can learn to free themselves from the need to control, and instead allow the child to evolve according to their true nature, they may be pleasantly surprised by what their amazing little child is capable of and what they may blossom into.

To paraphrase Dr. Wendy Mogel's analogy for parents: Try to see your child as a seed in a packet of wildflower seeds without a label. Your job is to provide the right environment and nutrients. You plant the seed in fertile soil, you water it, you provide it with sunlight, you pull out the weeds and you allow it to grow. You don't know what it will look like, you don't know when it will bloom or if it will prefer sun or shade. Your job is to provide it with nutrients and allow it to grow as it is meant to grow [8].

## Conclusion

Children's behaviors are largely based on their true nature. Life events and environmental factors certainly influence a child's behavior, but if the child is raised to be resilient and emotionally healthy then their adaptability to life events and environments is greatly strengthened. Reflecting on and identifying a child's true nature is an important part of building positive behavior. Connecting with the child in a mindful, conscious manner starts to make parenting easier. The connection between child and parent on a deeper level helps to reduce conflict and stress between them. Respecting the child's true nature means nourishing that nature. Working with the child's true nature instead of suppressing it is a positive way to build a child's self-confidence and feeling of self-worth. From a grounded sense of self children have the confidence and ability to lead a life of emotional health and resilience.

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