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Foreword

Kids Beyond Limits is a great gift to every person who loves a child in great need of help. If that describes you, please take the important messages of this book to heart. The author's approach to the child with special needs has evolved from her own rich clinical experiences, which showed her over and over again that the brains of these special children *can* change, often dramatically, to awaken and enable and empower *and transform* their young lives. We humans are all endowed with a plastic brain, that is, a brain that is capable of constantly changing throughout life. Even while they struggle, these children still operate with this great resource, ready to be taken advantage of by them, by the enlightened clinician who is trying so hard to help them, and by the parents and grandparents who love them. Anat Baniel brilliantly explains how the effective engagement of this marvelous, innate human capacity for positive brain change *can* be the stuff of miracles.

I have spent much of my own scientific career trying to understand how we can harness our capacity for brain remodeling for the benefit of children and adults in need of neurological help. From several decades of research, summarized in many thousands of published reports, we scientists have defined the “rules” governing brain plasticity in neurological terms. We now know how to drive brains to change for the better.

It has been a great wonder to me, then, that my friend Anat Baniel, working in parallel along a completely different path, has defined almost

exactly the same rules. Moreover, Anat interprets them here in practical and understandable human terms, in ways that should contribute richly to your own more enlightened parenting, grandparenting, or clinical intervention.

As she explains in this book, Anat began her journey of discovery working closely with her mentor, the great Israeli visionary Moshe Feldenkrais. From this platform of understanding, through close observation of the thousands of children whom she has helped, Anat elaborated and crystallized her understanding of how to connect with and then really help children in great need. As her reputation for providing help to the “hopeless child” grew, she began to see children from almost every condition and diagnosis of special needs. From this almost unequalled personal experience, Anat discovered two great truths.

First, the principles that underlie the limitations of the child with special needs—which are the same ones that can lead to real progress for that child—are the principles of brain plasticity. Those principles are beautifully outlined here in practical human terms as Anat Baniel’s Nine Essentials.

Second (and this is an even greater truth), most “hopeless child” cases aren’t.

This book is an important manifesto expressing important practical implications of what I have called “the brain plasticity revolution.” Our brains are subject to continuous change. Each time we acquire or refine a human ability, we physically rewire—*specialize* by remodeling—our brain machinery. Every new or improved ability is a direct product of this kind of physical brain change. How can we make better use of this great human asset in our own lives? How can we assure that this human capacity is most effectively brought into play for the benefit of our own growing children? The child who struggles so hard just to respond, to initiate action, to understand, to move competently, and to have command in his or her world can especially make great use of their brain’s plasticity on their path to growing and evolving their capabilities in ways that contribute

to a better life for them. If you can really connect with such a child—as the author so beautifully describes—then with appropriate guidance almost every kid with special needs is capable of substantial, continuous, and *sometimes almost unbelievable* personal growth.

Don't underestimate the complexity or difficulty that may be involved in getting a child with such struggles on a positive growth path. Building a more effective and more powerful brain requires us to start where the child is, and where that brain is right now. This can require a highly personalized approach and almost certainly a great deal of very hard work for all concerned. The principles in this book should provide you with a new understanding of how to achieve that personalization in order to begin helping that special child in your life make new and real progress in a positive, empowering direction.

Remember that a little positive neurological change achieved each day can represent great progress over the course of a year, and even more so across the span of a young life. The author provides us with a number of wonderful examples that illustrate how each newly established level of neurobehavioral control opens up a whole new set of possibilities for each child. Anat Baniel explains how the principles that govern the operations of a brain built for change can be practically applied to set up a child for continuous growth. Once the child is on that positive growth path, every little advance can be truly exciting for them, and for you.

I strongly encourage you to take the advice presented in this book seriously so that you have a clearer idea about how you might be able to really help the child that *you* love.

—MICHAEL MERZENICH, PHD,
neuroscientist, professor emeritus at UCSF, and member of the
National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Medicine

1

How It All Began

We have more possibilities available in each moment than we realize.

—THICH NHAT HANH

I am often asked how I became interested in working with children who have special needs. Was there something that drew me to this work early in my life? Was there a child with special needs in my own family or among my friends? Was I simply drawn to working with children? The answer to all three questions is no. My introduction to kids with special needs was not something I had planned for or consciously chosen. It began when I met a baby named Elizabeth.

It was early in September 1980, during the first year of my practice. My teacher and mentor Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais and I had recently arrived in the United States from Europe.

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We had made arrangements for him to teach some workshops and see a few students at a friend's place in Manhattan's Upper West Side. I would be assisting him.

When the doorbell rang that first morning, I welcomed in a handsome young couple in their thirties, carrying a crying baby who they were desperately trying to calm down. The baby, Elizabeth, was crying so hard and was in such great distress that it would have been impossible for her to receive the work she had come to do with Dr. Feldenkrais. After a few moments Dr. Feldenkrais asked if I would watch the baby—whom the mother placed in a safe position on the couch—while he took the parents into the next room for a short conference.

At this point I had never worked with children and had never even considered it. In my own practice, back in Israel, I worked primarily with adults involved in high-level physical performance, such as dancers, musicians, and athletes, who were having pain or were bothered with other limitations. As I watched baby Elizabeth, lying there on the couch crying, something happened that I would never have anticipated. She was in a great deal of distress and discomfort, and was unable to move on her own. But I had only one thing in mind at that moment, a deep desire to ease her discomfort and unhappiness. Though I hadn't the vaguest idea of what to do for her I took her into my arms. I knew none of the particulars about her medical diagnosis or condition, nor was I thinking of her as *special*. I knew only that she was very unhappy.

Other than holding her, there was nothing intentional in what I did, but within seconds she stopped crying and calmed down. Suddenly she was peaceful and seemed comfortable. As her crying stopped I dried her tears and gazed into her tiny face. Looking back on it, there was nothing tangible or objective that supported what I was feeling at this moment except that I experienced a deep connection with her. I was also quite certain that she was making a connection with me that was comforting

to her. As I gazed into her big brown eyes, which were no longer flooded with tears, I experienced a real person there, a consciousness that was capable of far more than her present diagnosis was suggesting. Her official diagnosis—which I would learn about only later—was indeed quite dire, pointing in the opposite direction of what I was feeling.

The medical explanation was that she had “global brain damage.” This was years before MRIs and other brain scans were widely used for diagnosis, so doctors could say little more than that something was terribly wrong. That much was clearly evident in my experience of holding her. For example, there was very little sense of her musculoskeletal system operating in any coherent or purposeful way: The muscles of her left side were very spastic, her eyes were severely crossed, and there was little to indicate that the baby was aware of her own body.

At the time I met Elizabeth and her parents, a traditional physiotherapist had been working with her for approximately six months, with no encouraging results. Similarly, the prognosis of two leading pediatric neurologists was distressing: One had suggested that the baby be institutionalized for life. The medical community offered no hope of her ever enjoying any degree of autonomy. The parents were devastated, but they still clung to the belief that there were happier alternatives; they were unwilling to accept these opinions or recommendations. They were not giving up on her.

I recall Elizabeth’s father saying that when he looked into his daughter’s face he was certain he detected an intelligence there, trapped and unable to express itself. My experience of holding Elizabeth in my arms and gazing into her face convinced me that he was right. I fully agreed with him. This was when we began our work together. The deep inner knowing that I shared with Elizabeth’s parents proved to be both accurate and extraordinarily fruitful.

Elizabeth's First Session

As Dr. Feldenkrais returned to the living room after his talk with the parents that day, all three of them noted how baby Elizabeth was nestling in my arms, quite content, quiet, comfortable, and alert. Dr. Feldenkrais watched with great interest, then asked me if I would come with him and hold the baby while he worked with her. I carried Elizabeth into the next room and held her in my lap as I sat down on the edge of a low table, similar to a massage table, that had been set up there for him. Dr. Feldenkrais took his place in a straight-backed chair, facing us so that he could easily reach out and touch his tiny student.

To an untrained observer, I am sure Dr. Feldenkrais would have appeared to be doing very little. He was not forcing Elizabeth into a supposed correct position or movement. He was not massaging her muscles or adjusting her back. At first an observer might have noticed only his unusual concentration and attentiveness. For a few moments he just watched Elizabeth with a deep, focused attention and presence that was virtually palpable, so characteristic of him when he was conducting what he referred to as a “lesson.” After a while he reached out and touched the baby’s upper back; later, he gently, and very briefly, moved her legs in various ways, then lightly touched his finger to her hands and arms and face.

As he worked I was acutely attuned with his intense focus and quiet intentionality. I began to experience confirmation of the hidden intelligence that Elizabeth’s parents and I felt was there. This first revealed itself almost magically in one hopeful and unmistakable way: Elizabeth was *paying attention*. A connection between her and Dr. Feldenkrais was being established. The changes in how she felt in my hands were ever so subtle, yet profound and definite, confirming that her hidden intelligence—her awareness—was awakening.

That entire first session with Dr. Feldenkrais took less than an hour,

including the conference with the parents. It was agreed the parents would return the next day for a second lesson. The next day I met them at the door and, just as before, Elizabeth was crying very hard, a very unhappy baby. Again she quieted down in my arms before I carried her into the next room for her lesson. With her sitting limply in my lap, her back resting against my chest, Dr. Feldenkrais reached out and gently held her head between his hands and began ever so lightly to pull her head up. I noticed that her pelvis was not moving, which was a valuable observation: Normally, when a child's head moves up, the brain "knows" to arch the lower back and roll the pelvis forward. It is a whole pattern that is formed in the brain over time, though quite early in children's lives, as they develop. I placed my hands on either side of her pelvis, pressing it ever so slightly in the forward direction as Dr. Feldenkrais was gently pulling her head up, as if to awaken her brain to these parts of herself so that she could begin synchronizing these two movements. Then I pressed ever so gently on her pelvis, providing her with the feeling that she could roll it backward as Dr. Feldenkrais lowered her head a bit. After doing this for a while, Elizabeth began moving and rocking her pelvis, coordinating it with her head movements. Her brain had figured it out! I felt Elizabeth's whole being awakening in my arms.

At this time, Elizabeth was thirteen months old, an age at which most children would be sitting up by themselves; however, she was not able to do this on her own. Nevertheless, it was *not* our intention here to exercise her sitting abilities or to make her sit up. In fact, getting her to sit up wasn't even a consideration in our minds at the time. What I was acutely aware of was that somehow Elizabeth didn't seem to even know she had a back, a pelvis, or a head; her brain had not yet formed any relationships with these or other parts of her body. She wasn't sitting up because her brain was not creating the rich web of connections to her body, and the interconnections between the different parts of her body, from which her ability to sit up would emerge.

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Once her brain had formed this intricate, dynamic web of connections, Elizabeth would have the resources to figure out how to sit up all by herself. Her brain would then be using the background information it received to create patterns that would tell her muscles what to do to sit up. Her brain would also be able to use these same background resources for creating and refining many other future skills.

The whole point of these sessions was for Elizabeth's brain to become a *learning brain*—that is why we call our sessions lessons rather than therapy. The focused attention, intention, and awareness of the teacher, coupled with the focused attention of the child as the flow of new information comes to her brain, is how the remarkable transformations occur.

When this second lesson was over I got up and handed Elizabeth over into her father's arms. He had been watching the whole lesson. Something had changed in Elizabeth's demeanor and it was significant. As her father held her against his chest Elizabeth was now able to control the motions of her head. She began intentionally arching her back, throwing her head back and looking at me upside down, then bringing her head back up, noticeably delighted with the game she'd just discovered. In that moment, she had the experience of controlled, intentional, and pleasurable movement for the first time in her life. She was being *playful*—and playfulness, as we know, requires a feeling, thinking, functioning brain! It requires awareness of one's *self* and the world around her.

As basic as Elizabeth's movements might have seemed to a casual observer, these intentional motions of her head and back, the remarkable change in her demeanor, and her playfulness, were all cause for great celebration, signaling us that Elizabeth's globally damaged brain was capable of learning, capable of organizing itself to produce deliberate and voluntary control of her body and her mind, and ultimately of her own life.

Upon my return to Israel after my introduction to Elizabeth, the

focus of my practice began changing almost immediately. Within weeks, Dr. Feldenkrais was referring other special needs children to me. A whole new world, filled with new possibilities, opened up to me. Elizabeth's parents wanted her to continue her work with me, beginning an association that would continue for twenty-plus years. She would face many challenges in the years ahead, but she never stopped progressing; she never stopped working and learning. Over time she gained abilities that defied all the odds.

When I recall our work together, there were many memorable breakthrough moments, but one in particular comes to mind because it beautifully illustrates the dynamics of the process I would come to call the Anat Baniel Method (ABM).

The Little Girl Who Made Tissues Fly

During my sessions with Elizabeth my whole focus was on her, giving my full attention to what she was doing and feeling and thinking. At the same time, I was looking for any opportunity I might use to help her discover her own present abilities, refine these abilities, and learn new ones. I am at one with the child even as I become a resource for her. Often, the opportunities we found together were ones that because of her special needs she might have never otherwise discovered on her own. Here's an example: When Elizabeth was seven years old, she was able to stand up and walk by holding onto something but was unable to walk on her own. Anytime she tried, within a step or two, she'd abruptly lose her balance and, like a drunkard, fly off in any direction and fall flat on the floor. I'd been racking my brain for months, searching for what it was she needed to walk independently. I knew she was very close.

At the time Elizabeth was still unable to catch a ball, an invaluable

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form of play that contributes to complex coordination, something seven-year-olds usually do quite easily. When a ball was thrown in her direction, Elizabeth would reach out with her hands and hold them in front of her in a fixed position. The moment the ball was thrown her way, her eyes would freeze so that she was unable to track the ball and coordinate her movements to catch it. I had found a large, light-weight inflatable beach ball which moved slower when I threw it, but still she couldn't catch it.

Serendipitously, Elizabeth asked for a tissue during one of these sessions. As I picked one out of the box I thought, aha! The tissue might offer exactly the opportunity I'd been seeking. I held the tissue in front of my face and blew it in Elizabeth's direction. The tissue, being almost weightless, and presenting a fairly large, soft mass, floated toward her like a leaf on a gentle breeze. And it proved to be exactly what she needed. Instead of Elizabeth's eyes becoming frozen, as they usually did when the ball came sailing toward her, she was able to track the slow, wavy, moving tissue and catch it. When I recall this moment, knowing what we now know about the human brain's organizational capacities, I picture a highly active process going on in her brain. Millions of new connections are being formed between various neurons, creating whole new constellations in her brain as she performed the very complex activity of following the tissue and catching it.

The lesson did not stop here. Elizabeth was just delighted with the game and thrilled with her newfound ability to catch the tissue. She laughed as if she'd just discovered the most wonderful game in the whole wide world. She suddenly stopped to catch her breath and held the tissue up in front of her own face. I could see what she now had in mind. She had decided that she was going to blow the tissue back to me!

Elizabeth blew on the tissue but her exhalation of air was not strong enough to propel it all the way to me. The tissue fell on the floor next to her. She bent down, picked it up, and blew on it again. This time, something quite extraordinary occurred: She followed behind the tissue,

walking and blowing on it again and again, keeping it in the air until it reached where I was sitting. All this time she was walking independently, blowing the tissue and laughing hilariously. The tissue was very forgiving since it was slow to fall to the floor, so she had time to blow on it repeatedly. At that time I was well aware of the enormity of the moment. Elizabeth had just walked independently for the first time in her life. She'd been so involved in the game with the tissue that she hadn't even realized it. All that she had learned to date, combined with her newfound ability to use her eyes to track the tissue, had somehow come together to give her another new skill—walking.

Through the years that I worked with Elizabeth we always made a point of identifying and building upon *present abilities* rather than focusing on her disabilities, transforming the abilities we had identified into greater abilities, again and again. Over time Elizabeth learned not only how to walk but to talk, read, write, make friends, and socialize. Fast forward to her teenage years—to her Bat Mitzvah celebration where the enormity of Elizabeth's accomplishments suddenly hit me so profoundly that I was moved to tears. I wept joyfully and openly. I was not alone; many others in the audience were crying, too.

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Some years later, I received an invitation to her wedding. I recall seeing her at the ceremony, radiant in a beautiful white gown and her dark flowing hair, surrounded by admiring and loving guests. Today, in her early thirties, Elizabeth has master's degrees from two excellent universities, is happily married, and runs her own successful business. Recently, in a phone call, she enthusiastically told me about her family and her work.

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She said, “Anat, I have found my passion in life. I am happy.” Elizabeth’s processes and successes have become living benchmarks for me as well as for hundreds of other children and their parents, constant reminders for us all to *go beyond limitation to the miraculous*.

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What’s Possible for My Child?

At one time or another most parents ask themselves, What’s possible for my child? My answer to that question, whether the child has special challenges or not, is always the same: Expect miracles. The nature of change is such that we can’t see or accurately predict the future from our present perspective; if we try to, we have a tendency to see a limited picture of the future through the lens of what’s there in front of us right now. Thirty years ago, when Elizabeth was a small, severely challenged and very unhappy baby, few could have predicted or imagined her future.

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The nature of change is such that we can’t see or accurately predict the future from our present perspective.
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When we closely examine what we call the miraculous, we often find that it wasn’t the result of mere happenstance or luck but that it came about through a series of events—sometimes large, sometimes small, sometimes deliberate and well reasoned, and sometimes through creative efforts that brought about transformational change. The willingness to entertain the impossible becoming possible may very well be where

remarkable changes begin. This is true even in science and medicine, which are based on knowledge that we think of as solid and unchangeable, built on exhaustive study and incontestable evidence. And yet, both science and medicine are constantly changing. For instance, even twenty years ago the medical profession did not consider autism real; most people viewed attention deficit conditions (ADD and ADHD) as “bad behavior” rather than as neurological conditions requiring special help. And when a child had a stroke, causing damage to some part of the brain, it wasn’t understood that other parts of the brain could take over and organize actions they do not ordinarily do.

Today we know that the brain can change itself. It is the part of us that is, in fact, most capable of change. We are developing an increasingly large and sophisticated body of knowledge about how to make better use of the brain’s capacities, thanks in part to the science of *neuroplasticity*—that is, the brain’s ability to reorganize itself and gain new skills by forming new neural connections. It is this field of study that supports and helps us explain the practices I describe in this book and that have been so successful with children with special needs over the past three decades.

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Because of my formal background in clinical psychology and statistics, I am of a scientific mind. But for many years there was very little in the scientific literature that confirmed both my theory and my repeated experience that under the right conditions the brain can and does change itself very readily. This remarkable ability of the brain has helped explain the results I have continued to get for over thirty years with children who have special needs.

A Significant Departure from More Traditional Modes

The process I describe in this book is a significant departure from traditional systems of teaching, therapy, and medical intervention. For instance, many traditional systems tackle the child’s special needs by attempting to force the child to conform to a standardized model or to otherwise try to have her do what she “should” be doing to keep pace with her age group or *developmental stage*. Rather than imposing what the child is not yet able to do on her on, we first look at her present abilities and needs and then seek ways to provide whatever information her brain needs to progress to her own, unique next ability.

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For the child to change and grow we need to communicate with her brain; neither the problem nor the solution is to be found in the muscles.
.....

For the child to change and grow we need to communicate with her brain; neither the problem nor the solution is to be found in the muscles. The muscles are doing what the brain tells them to do. The mind—that part of us that forms speech, solves math problems, and thinks—is also organized by the brain. If the leg doesn’t move it’s because the brain hasn’t figured out how to do it; the brain isn’t telling it to move because it doesn’t yet have the information it requires to be able to form the necessary pattern that would bring about the desired movement. When a child is having difficulties with speech, problem solving, or thinking clearly, the same principle applies. Our brains can change themselves—and there are ways to help the brain of the child with special needs function better—a realization that was revolutionary when I started this work thirty years ago.

The Anat Baniel Method is a proven way of connecting and communicating with the brains of children with special needs to form patterns

of movement, thought, and feeling by taking advantage of the children’s innate abilities. Through employing these methods we provide experiences that lead children to discover themselves, to learn the next thing they are able to learn, regardless of how large or small, simple or complex it might seem. Our goal is always for children to awaken to themselves and develop their underlying fundamental ability to *learn and grow*. They experience their bodies in new ways, moving in ways they were not previously able to do; they learn to feel what is going on inside them and around them. They wake up to themselves. Through this awakening they become more comfortable and more capable, feeling better about themselves.

.....
Our goal is always for children to develop their ability to awaken their brain’s fundamental ability to *learn and grow*.
.....

Parent Power

Never underestimate the power of parental love. This is especially important if your child has special needs. It is your love and your desire to have the best for your child that motivates you to seek the opportunities that will provide him or her with the highest possible quality of life. I see this with all the parents I meet. Their willingness to take a stand for new possibilities for their child as they seek to unlock their child’s hidden capabilities takes courage and is inspiring. There’s power in this determination and love teaming up with science and skill. It expands the child’s opportunities beyond the limits of clinical diagnoses, commonsense reasoning, and past experience. It is often the first step on the pathway to the miraculous.

2

From Fixing to Connecting

There is no surprise more magical than the surprise of being loved. It is God's finger on man's shoulder.

—CHARLES MORGAN

A child is born. It is perfection, a miracle. Without knowing any of the details, and often long before the birth, we have begun creating a vision for that child's future. He will grow up to have a full and satisfying life, independent and whole. Then comes the shock. Something is wrong with my child! Sometimes this moment comes all at once, at birth or even before. At other times the realization unfolds gradually. The diagnosis and cause might be clearly defined, at least in medical terms, or it might remain uncertain.

As the realization that *something is wrong* sinks in, it can bring with it overwhelming fear, confusion, and deep

grieving (sometimes unconscious) and often a disquieting sense of guilt. But the overriding part of the experience is a powerful desire to do anything and everything we can to help our child. We want to help him grow up to be “normal,” to be able to walk, talk, think, and feel and to have an independent, rewarding life. The questions we must ask ourselves are, How do we get there? How do we go about helping the child grow beyond his present limitations?

.....
**We must ask ourselves, How do we go about helping the child grow
beyond his present limitations?**
.....

When we learn that something is wrong, whatever it might be, the natural thing to do is to focus on the limitation, on what the child *can't do*, or on what he is doing *wrong*, and then we try to conquer, stop, or otherwise overcome it. We want to *solve the problem*, and *fix* the child so he will sit up, talk, read, write, relate to others, and reason the way he would if it weren't for his special needs.

The desire to fix what is broken or malfunctioning is tremendously important and useful. There are times when fixing is exactly the right approach—for example, when doctors need to surgically repair a hole in the heart, when an antibiotic is used to combat an infection, or when a blood transfusion is needed. When they're necessary and when appropriate treatment is available, those fixes need to be carried out. At the same time it is important to understand that fixing is but one way of approaching problems, one that has great limitations and can at times even be counterproductive. The Nine Essentials presented in these pages are intended to guide us beyond the limits of the fixing approach, providing new opportunities for the child's own brain to create the solutions it requires.

Looking More Closely at the Fixing Model

Most of us have an understanding of fixing as *repairing* what is broken, or *restoring* the way something is supposed to look, function, or be structured. When we're talking about a mechanical object, such as a car or home appliance, we generally know what to do: If we can't fix it ourselves, we hire an expert who does know. When we have a flat tire we have the leak repaired; when the car's engine misfires we have a mechanic replace worn parts and get it running smoothly again. The repair person employs her brain, her experience, and available resources, such as replacement parts, to restore the machine to its original design and functionality.

Unlike the child, a car or other machine can take no active part in the repair process. It has no mind of its own, no self-healing ability, and it doesn't possess the capacity to learn, grow, and evolve. The car mechanic's role in replacing parts and tuning up an engine is the essence of the fixing paradigm. And how natural it is to want to use this same paradigm for a child with special needs! We want to replace any missing parts or parts that aren't working well. We want to find somebody who knows how to adjust this or that so that everything will be working just right.

.....
Unlike the cars or kitchen appliances, your child is not a finished product. Children are living, feeling, and experiencing beings; *works in progress*.
.....

Unlike the cars or kitchen appliances, your child is not a finished product. Children are living, feeling, and experiencing beings; *works in progress*—growing and evolving; in the process of figuring out and continuously forming the abilities to move, think, understand themselves, and relate to the world around them. At the center of all this unfolding

potential is that most remarkable of all organs, the brain. Regardless of his special needs, your child possesses a brain that must be actively involved in creating new connections and patterns for overcoming the limitations and difficulties he may have. This is what every brain is designed to do. And this is where our hope lies.

.....
At the center of all this unfolding potential of your child is that most remarkable of all organs, the brain.
.....

To make full use of the brain's remarkable potentials, we need to make a shift in our thinking, away from the fixing paradigm. To be truly helpful, we need to know how to focus our attention on what we can do to awaken and strengthen the capacities of the child's brain to do its job well. We are not alone in the process of trying to help the child with special needs; our greatest resource and our best partner in helping our child overcome challenges is the child and the powers of his own brain.

Making the Transition from Fixing to Connecting

To be truly helpful to the child with special needs, we need to back off from trying to *make* the child do what he can't do. We need to more fully recognize the fundamental role the child's brain plays in learning and refining new skills. The brain has the ability to figure itself out and, amazingly, to create successful solutions to problems. No matter how much we may want to help, and no matter what our expertise, we are 100 percent dependent on the child's brain to make the necessary changes.

Through the Nine Essentials we move quickly beyond the limitations of the fixing paradigm to help the child's brain do its job better, providing the underlying process by which all skills and all learning emerge. *The*

Nine Essentials will help you to get your child's brain working brilliantly.
Yes, you read that right. In the pages ahead you will discover how your child's brain can evolve to function in remarkable ways despite the very real challenges he is facing.

.....
The Nine Essentials will help you to get your child's brain working brilliantly.
.....

Whenever we ask the child with special needs to do what he cannot do, that's the fixing paradigm in action. Let's say he cannot sit up; we put him sitting up, and we do this again and again, hoping that after repeating this enough times he will somehow *get it* and do it himself. If he cannot talk, we ask him to imitate certain words or sounds, over and over again, hoping that with enough reiterations his speech deficiencies will be fixed. Sometimes this approach produces the desired results, and sometimes it completely fails. If we instead focus our attention on awakening and strengthening the process by which the child's brain can create and discover its own solutions, the results that become possible are of a completely different order.

.....
Whenever we ask the child with special needs to do what he cannot do, that's the fixing paradigm in action.
.....

In the pages ahead I describe how to move beyond the fixing paradigm, guided by the Nine Essentials, into a partnership with your child and the creation of a roadmap for awakening the potentials of his brain. At the heart of learning how to best help your child is this basic truth: *If he could, he would; if she could, she would.* If he could sit, he would sit; if she could talk, she would talk. Discerning and respecting what your child can or cannot do at any given moment is a key factor in helping them

move beyond their limitations. Accepting the basic truth that if he could, he would; if she could, she would, becomes an exciting and inspiring opening when applied in light of the Nine Essentials.

The Nine Essentials are tools that your child's brain, and every brain, requires to wake up, become a powerful learner, growing and evolving on all levels. The Nine Essentials help you establish the ideal internal environment for your child's brain to do what it must do to develop and grow, creating the unique patterns and solutions that his particular special needs require.

.....
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.....

Everything we do—walking, talking, thinking, feeling, relating to others—is made up of the millions of random experiences that we have had since the moment of our conception. All of our activities are made possible because our brains organize our experiences as dynamic, ever-changing patterns that direct those activities, whatever they might be.

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.....

The Necessity and Purpose of Randomness

When a child has a special need, that condition itself will limit his opportunities for having certain *experiences*: physical, emotional, and intellectual. For example, when a healthy infant is lying in the crib awake, his arms, his legs, his back, and his belly will twitch and move from time to

time. These movements are unintentional; they are what I call *random movements*. When a baby's arms are tight, immobile or spastic, spontaneous and infinitely rich and varied random actions cannot take place. Those random movements of the more typical baby may not seem like much at the time. But for the child's brain, they provide a rich flow of experiences and information that are absolutely necessary for the brain to eventually develop controlled and effective movements and actions. These random experiences would ordinarily be generated through the child's own random actions; they are in fact required for every child's brain to form itself as fully as it might. It thus becomes our challenge to figure out ways for the child with special needs to get those random experiences that his condition otherwise prevents or limits him from getting on his own. Along the way, we need to remember that these experiences will become rich sources of information for his brain.

The good news is that we can create opportunities for children to have these random experiences. When forcing them to do the actions that they are presently unable to do—the fixing paradigm—we deny them the richness of information their brain needs to learn that which we'd like them to learn. By introducing randomness to the process we make it possible for the child's brain to ultimately create better, more organized patterns for moving his arms or doing what he would otherwise not have the information to do. The child can only do this by starting with where his abilities are at the present moment.

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Moving Beyond the Fixing Paradigm

For a person wanting to help a child who is unable to crawl, it might seem perfectly logical to get down on the floor with him, put him up on his hands and knees, support him in that position, and then try to assist him in making crawling motions. To some extent, we might be successful, but just as often this doesn't work, or at least not well. Why doesn't it work? To put it simply, by focusing on the end result we want the child to achieve, we rob him of opportunities for having the myriad random experiences his brain requires to form the inner patterns to do that activity well; note here that these are experiences that the healthy child *does get*. We are thankful there's an alternative, which I describe as the Nine Essentials in the pages ahead. By using the Nine Essentials we provide the child with the *opportunities* to get the random experiences and wealth of information his brain requires. The rich body of experience that the child then gathers, like a veritable galaxy of knowledge, provides that brain with what it needs not only to figure out and perform certain actions but to refine and enhance them, in short, to become an exquisite learner.

.....
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.....

What we know from the science of neuroplasticity—that is, the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections—is that the brain uses every bit of information that it possesses in an infinite number of ways, surprising and unpredictable in their ingenuity. This underlying galaxy of knowledge, the billions of connections and patterns that the brain creates, will become the source of information to create skills and

refine abilities from now into the future. The experience of crawling, of babbling, of listening to music, of catching a ball or recognizing the difference between cold and hot, will come into play in everything we do, be it physical, emotional, or intellectual. It can be helpful, in this respect, to consider everything we think, do, and feel as movements organized by our brains.

From Fixing to Connecting

The Nine Essentials move us quickly beyond the limitations of the fixing paradigm, helping any brain do its job better, and providing the underlying process from which all skills and learning emerge. The Essentials help get your child’s brain to work brilliantly, as well as, or even better than, other children’s brains, which the child with special needs will require to problem solve and figure out ways to make the impossible possible.

The Nine Essentials are tools for you to feel, see, notice, and create; more important, they will increase your own capacity to connect with and work with your child, whatever his special needs may be. You’ll expand your ability to experience the world from your child’s point of view, often-times lending him the capacities of your own brain to feel, to think, to differentiate, to move, and to listen.

.....
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.....

The purpose of connecting with your child through the Nine Essentials isn’t just about being more compassionate. Nor is it about doing for your child what he cannot do himself. On the contrary, it is about providing your child with the greatest opportunity to develop real skills and a

strong sense of self, to feel good about himself and to have the ability to continue to learn and grow, with a genuine sense of accomplishment and pride.

Children Learn What They Experience

Connecting in the ways described in the Nine Essentials builds on the knowledge that all children *learn their experience*; they don't necessarily learn what we intend them to learn. When we *drill* a child in our efforts to teach him to do something he can't presently do, the child learns his own experience of those efforts. This may very well include learning to fail at what he is attempting, or acquiring bad habits at what he does learn to do. Added to this are the possible feelings of fear, inadequacy, being bad or wrong, and even anger or resentment and a sense of failing to meet another's expectations. Any skills the child might learn in the process of being drilled include the child's *whole experience* of that effort. Limitations the child experiences in this way may support his belief that he cannot move beyond those limitations.

Every child is a living, feeling, sensing, thinking, and actively learning participant in any and every ability he ever develops in his life. The effectiveness of any help we might offer depends on how successful we are at assisting the child's own brain in creating its own unique solutions. Instead of trying to impose these solutions, as a car mechanic does when she replaces worn parts, we need to provide the child with the richness of experience he needs to feel, and from which he will form every ability, every movement, every action for himself and within his own brain. It is important to remember that these experiences have to begin *where the child is right now* in terms of what he can already do; only then can the child connect with what he is doing, as well as to his own self, if he is to make sense of the experience and progress beyond his present limitations.

.....
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.....

Any time we try to take the child away from where he currently is in terms of his present abilities, both parent and child will immediately experience the loss of connection with the other. When that connection is lost, it is usually a signal to us that we have slipped into the role of *fixer*; little will be accomplished until we reestablish that connection. For instance, if I see that it is very difficult for the child to sit up, I need to pull back, at least for that moment, and stop trying to force him into a sitting position. I then go back to something that he is actually able to do. Through the Nine Essentials you will be able to better recognize what your child is experiencing and work with his present capacities whatever they may be, even as you are facilitating their next breakthrough.

.....
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.....

In the pages ahead you will discover how to make this profoundly important shift, from *fixing* to *connecting* with your child. As elusive and challenging as this shift might seem, it will make a huge difference in your child's life and in yours. Parents often remark that the possibilities that open up often border on the miraculous. Through the parents' work with the Nine Essentials a child who seemed oblivious to his surroundings suddenly takes great interest in the people around him; a baby with brachial plexus injury (injury involving nerves to the shoulder, arms, and hands) suddenly begins moving and using his arm; a child who has great difficulty solving math problems begins to understand the meaning of

numbers, and to everyone's surprise starts loving his math class. The shift from fixing to connecting, which comes about through the skills of the Nine Essentials, will provide your child with rich new opportunities to feel and connect with himself and for his brain to function more and more effectively.

Through the Nine Essentials, you will learn to focus and awaken the underlying process of your child's discovery and creation of self, which is at the heart of successful growth and development. You will learn to shift your focus away from what your child "should" be doing now according to age and known developmental stages. You will become an astute observer of the smallest changes that occur in your child and develop an increasing appreciation for these changes and how it is that from the smallest of changes the big solutions grow. We'll examine how and why this shift is transformational for you and your child and look into the science that presently supports it.

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.....

As you practice the Nine Essentials with your child, you will find yourself stepping beyond your own fear, shock, confusion, guilt, and myriad other feelings you may have. As you already know, your child's out-of-the-ordinary needs call on your out-of-the-ordinary potentials, beyond your own expectations and aspirations. The Nine Essentials make accessible what might otherwise seem beyond your reach, making the impossible possible for both you and your child, and making your time together more pleasurable and rewarding.