

Countless children and parents are trapped in a cycle of bad behaviour. Children gain power in the home that is totally irresistible to them but makes them miserable. This book describes how all this suffering is quickly and completely reversed.

Mercury's Child - Behaviour Change System

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National Press Comments About Mercury's Child

- "Parents take one last go at solving their child's problems by embarking on Mr. Dyer's unique system of behaviour management which turns into a voyage of discovery for them all."

- **The Daily Mirror**

- "A behaviour expert with honesty....The message that it was possible to change your life for the better simply by breaking a malign pattern of behaviour made for optimistic, even moving, TV."

- Janice Turner, **The Radio Times**

- "Within weeks of the parents adopting Mr. Dyer's techniques, the behaviour of their daughter had improved. By the end of seven months their child was having less than two tantrums a month and her special needs diagnosis was being reviewed. Her mother said: 'The change has been incredible. It has all been done without Ritalin. Before I hated her. Now she is a normal child.' "

- Maxine Frith, **The Independent**

- "Three months on and Warwick's techniques appear to have done the trick. Improvements are noticed at school and at home where Georgina is calmer and more agreeable."

- **The TV Times**

- "By the end three dangerously desperate people were beginning to turn themselves into a normal family. Whatever his fee was, Mr. Dyer earned it and then some."
- Thomas Sutcliffe, **The Independent Review**
- "A humbling, chilling film for any parent to watch."
- **The Times**
- "Things began to change for the better within only a few days."
- Peter Paterson, **The Daily Mail**
- "Warwick's methods seem almost too simple to be true, but after a short time Georgina's parents begin to reap the dividend."
- **The Mail's Weekend Magazine**
- "Mercifully a behaviour expert, Warwick Dyer, was able to work with the couple and break the downward spiral of rage and recrimination."
- **The Times Magazine**
- "Warwick Dyer, an expert on child behaviour, spots the root of the problem."
- **The Independent's Information Magazine**
- "Warwick Dyer has created a unique system of child behaviour management."
- **The Express**

Mercury's Child

Warwick Dyer

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Preface

Take Your Time and Read Everything

The behaviour change system described in this book WORKS. I have never had a failure with my fee-paying clients who stuck to it—and nearly all did.

But my clients had daily monitoring from me. You will not.

If you start using the technical strategies in this book without carefully taking in the principles behind them you will not get the changes that you want and will become disillusioned. This system works. It appears simple, but don't throw it all away because you assume that you know what it is getting at without really reading it all. It will make wonderful changes to your family and your life, so don't throw these away by impatiently starting to make these changes **as you are reading it**. If you have a partner **both of you** need to read it, make your own notes, and fully agree what you are going to do. **Only then** set a day to begin your new regime.

I have tried to make it accessible to all parents whatever their educational background but I have not avoided any topic that needed covering, so if through my deficiencies or yours you do not understand what I am getting at, **keep reading**. Later chapters may well explain what you did not understand or agree with earlier. Take your time—read it a second time before you start, just to be sure.

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Countless children are trapped in a cycle of bad behaviour. They gain a power in the home that is totally irresistible to them, but which makes them miserable. Parents are completely mystified by what is going on and are equally trapped. All this suffering is quickly and completely reversible. All this is described here with the detail that you need.

A Book for Parents, Not a Parenting Book

Every parent needs to know the techniques explained here and what is happening when behaviour breaks down, but these pages do not provide a model for good parenting. **If your parenting isn't broken, don't fix it.** This book is intended to help you understand and speedily change a spectrum of bad behaviour varying from mild to very serious and then maintain that change.

When I use the inclusive term “we” in the text I do not mean “we parents,” but **“We, the parents of children with serious behaviour problems.”**

I have already had parents who have only seen the documentaries on UK television—and who have little real information—say that they are using my methods, and I have had a national paper retract an article in which I was quoted as saying that I blame the parents of ADHD children. I have already resigned myself to this book being described as a “back-to-basics” book. **Well, it is not.** Let me state categorically that the main purpose of this book is to encourage parents to **analyse** and avoid **all** polarised views of parenting.

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Yes, this is essentially a technical book that will tell you **what to do**, but if you continue to think about your child's behaviour in the same way, it will not change. This book does not tell you to just be more consistent, impose punishments, be stricter. If, when you have finished it, you do not understand the difference between a sanction (punishment) and an "interpersonal sanction," then your child's behaviour will not change.

Once you and your partner have both read this book carefully, sit down and agree on a "Start Day"—a day when you will begin to reclaim your child.

Introduction

The whole aim of this book is to set out for parents of seriously badly behaved children the precise strategies and responses that will quickly transform their child's behaviour. After reading it carefully you will need to decide upon a day to begin your new regime. You can use this book to guide you through the changes as they occur. Start on a particular day by sitting down with all your children, not just the targeted child, and explaining the way things will now be for **all of you**. Parents may well have tried and discarded much advice and many strategies in the past. Much of what was discarded may well have been necessary for any change to occur, but not sufficient by itself to produce the change. This is why I urge you to understand why each of the strategies given here is needed. Each one of them is so important that if you misunderstand or misapply any one of them the house of cards will fall.

There is not a parent anywhere in the world who believes it is a good idea to punish good behaviour and reward bad, but I can tell you this happens all the time.

Scene one

A father and mother, new clients of mine, never agreed about the handling of their son. Their twelve-year-old boy would produce home-wrecking tantrums when he did not get his own way. One evening, after refusing to eat his dinner, he goes out, arguing about the time (8 p.m.) that his mother has insisted he should come back. At 2 a.m. he returns home and rings the bell. The parents already have a sanction (punishment) in place when he arrives home late so the father reminds his wife just to open

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the door and come back to bed. The mother opens the door but then prepares something for the boy to eat and chats with him in his room before coming back to bed. The next night the boy refuses to turn the T.V. in his room off even though he has school the next day. His mother tells him that he will lose a portion of his computer time for the time the television stays on, and she leaves his room. He calls her back with, "You have not given me my goodnight kiss." His mother tells him that she has not given him his kiss because the T.V. is still on. He says that she does not really love him, and that all he wants is a kiss. He continues to persuade, and the mother eventually gives him his kiss with the T.V. blaring in the corner of his room.

Scene two

I am standing with a friend in the garden of her house watching her children play when her four-year-old pushes off the top of a slide and deliberately slams into the back of his 18-month-old sister who is yet to clear the bottom. His mother is angry; she takes him aside. "Why did you do that?" she asks. This response is so common and we have heard it used so often that we have probably never thought what a very strange question it is. How is the child supposed to respond? Both of us had seen the deliberation on her son's face when he pushed off with sole intention of hurting his sister. It is not difficult to work out that jealousy was the motive for this behaviour. There is only one honest answer possible: "Because I wanted to," but my friend did not really want to hear the truth; in fact, if the child had said this, my friend would have been horrified.

Scene three

A client of mine, also a behaviour professional, had a 13-year-old daughter with whom he was having serious problems. His daughter's problems were compounded by her refusal to go to

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sleep at a reasonable time. Today she is getting herself ready to go to social event at her old primary school and is self-conscious about her appearance as she will be meeting her old primary school friends. She comes to her mother for a dab of make-up to cover a spot on her forehead. Her father chooses this moment to point out that she also has very large dark rings under her eyes.

Many of us only *think* we understand the principles of punishments (sanctions) and rewards.

The parent in the first scene, because of misguided parental instincts and fear of her son's tantrums condones and rewards her son when he breaks her rules. The parent in the second scene thinks an angry question that her child cannot answer honestly is a sanction. In this third scene the father takes the opportunity to score a discipline point and sanction his daughter at a time when she is not behaving badly and when he is most liable to hurt her self-esteem.

Each of these accounts describes responses that will, if not changed, only make the behaviour worse. Each of these parents desperately needs to understand what is wanted so as to appropriately respond to their children in ways that stop bad behaviour **without** harming the child's self esteem.

If we are not clear what to do in response to our children, then bad behaviour can become entrenched and chronic within the family. Our children will suffer because of our lack of clarity, while at the same time they will milk it for all it is worth.

I had been encouraging a client to use small sanctions rather than angry shouting. He told his eight-year-old daughter that

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she must stop being so rude, saying, “I don’t want to take some of your computer time away.” She said, “Well if you don’t want to take it away, don’t do it.” Of course, she had not really misunderstood what he meant. She must have understood very well to deliberately misinterpret in this way. Our children are quite capable of understanding our reasons and our rules, but they are also capable of using them against us.

Why is it that they continually search for counter-arguments? Why are they so defiant so much of the time? Why are they so strong-willed that they never seem to tire in their attempts to wear us down? In particular, why do they get so **indignant**? Where on earth does all their **anger** come from?

Look at this list of behaviour problems that parents have told me about in just the last few months. The first comment is about a child of two, and the last is about a child of fifteen—with all the ages in between. (See a larger extract of what they said in Appendix 1)

“He **nags** for hours over anything. He hits me and always says No!”

“She flatly **refuses** to do anything I say. She just refuses to stay in her bed at night.”

“My four-year-old is being very rude and **sarcastic** towards us...lashes out.”

“When **asked** to do a task, he will only do it if he wants to...screams, throws things.”

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“My daughter, six, refuses when **told**...had to leave play centre for hitting the teacher.”

“My daughter, seven, **interrupts** the teacher when **told** to stop...screams and hits.”

“He is **rude and cheeky**, **says** hurtful things, punches me in passing.”

“He does nothing **asked** of him. He steals whatever I will not provide for him.”

“My nine-year-old is constantly defiant, **compares** everything I do with her to her sister.”

“He **back-talks** at me all the time. He screams and throws things.”

“Parenting my 11-year-old is like **working with a politician**. He punches holes in walls.”

“She throws really nasty tantrums, then **(when asked)** cannot remember why”

“He is 13, smokes, continues to **ignore** rules and requests. He has low self-esteem.”

“My 14-year-old is **verbally abusive** and at times physically aggressive.”

“We have stayed off his back like **he has asked**, but at 15 do we allow him to ruin his life?”

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Now look at the highlighted words and you will begin to see that the real problem for parents is **not** with their children's behaviour—i.e., what they do— but rather with the negotiations **about** what they do—in other words, the

nagging

refusing

sarcasm

asking

telling

interrupting

rudeness

comparing

back-talking

ignoring

verbal abuse

Why Is There So Much Ineffective Talk?

Talk is at the heart of every one of these problems. These parents have tried asking their children, reasoning with them, nagging them, telling them, shouting at them, only to be met with ignoring, interrupting, rudeness, back-talking, and even louder shouting. Parents have tried distracting them; putting them in “time out” in their rooms; grounding them; taking away toys, privileges, pocket money, food-treats, computer time; and anything else they can think of; even spanking them. Only to be met with even more anger and determination not to change. Nothing works. Why? Well, the answer is a simple one. Many parents just do not realise that when behaviour has deteriorated badly what the child thinks is happening in these interactions is completely different from what the parents think. Interacting with badly behaved children is effectively like dealing with a

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different species from a different world. The children have become alien beings in an adult world.

Chapter One

Mercury's Child

Of course all parents know from the beginning that their child is from an alien world. Nothing is as alien as a new baby to new parents. The difference is so clear that it often causes no problems and the parents usually fall hopelessly in love with the tiny new life-form. Without ever seeing their new child they set off on the nine-month return journey to bring the child from Mercury to Earth. The journey involves great hardship and discomfort, but the growing need to save and protect the tiny Mercurian creature drives them both. The life-form is collected and landed safely back on Earth with much joy. The couple are not disappointed but rather amazed by the life-form's strangeness and by how much work and how much tiredness the tiny creature creates.

At first it is easy for them to remember that the tiny being is not at all like them and came from a completely different planet. The creature is so clearly different. It does not talk, but makes noise to communicate its basic needs. Its parents realise their job, if the life-form is to survive, is to provide for these needs. Mercury's baby is a natural dictator—its survival depends on it—and its new parents become its willing slaves.

The life-form's behaviour is seen to be natural. It is clear that this new being has no conception of the adult earth-world and how things function. It cannot speak so cannot ask politely. If it wants something, and at this age it is overwhelmed by the

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strength of its needs, it has only one method—to demand. This is the first, the primary, state of the relationship between the Mercurian baby and its parents. It is quite natural and quite healthy and, like a light-switch, has only two positions:

“I feel good,”

and,

“I **do not** feel good—I demand—**notice me—make me feel better!**”

Leave Primary Mode Behaviour Behind

Primary Mode behaviour is perfectly healthy and natural for the Mercurian baby, but parents need to gradually train Mercury’s child to leave it behind and become an Earth being. Primary Mode behaviour in an older child is very unpleasant to live with, but if we are honest it is not really “bad behaviour”; it is merely immature and misplaced.

They Talk Like Us

Gradually all memory of the child coming from another planet is lost and the problems start. The parents begin to mistakenly assume that the Mercury’s child has, or should have, the same way of looking at the world as they do. Earth parents understand that the child has to learn to become an Earth adult, but think this knowledge is gained along with the Earth language. They do not realise that the creature from Mercury still retains his original Primary Mercurian view of the world and that view has to be trained away. Parents need to remember

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that Mercurian behaviour for a baby is instinctive survival behaviour, which works because **it has to work**. Toddlers have no mechanism for knowing when demanding is no longer needed. They will only leave it behind when it stops working, and if it continues to work they continue the behaviour. Mercury's child has no power to control whether this behaviour is effective; only parents can stop Primary Mode behaviour from working.

The confusion begins when the Mercury's child starts to learn to speak Earth language. The Mercurian way is to demand, and the child needs to be shown by continuous example that asking works but demanding does not. The often-heard entreaty to the toddler, "Say please" is no mere sweet old-fashioned tradition. The parent puts something in between the demand and its supply, the request and its gratification. Here should begin the mantra that parents should hold onto well into the child's teens.

Give them what they want but under your terms.

This is crucial if the child is to leave behind its Primary Mode "demand" behaviour. "Please" and "thank you" mean that a calm non-aggressive action has to be performed **before** the need is met.

Mercury's child continually asks his or her parents for reasons but does not really set much store by them; they are merely words. The child is only really influenced by what actually ends up happening—in other words, **consequences**. Mercury's child may become old enough to be capable of reasoning but will never let words or reason stop him or her from fighting for what he/she wants. Life-forms everywhere survive by controlling consequences. Mercury's children are no different; for them

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there is only one priority: to get the outcome they want. Coming to Earth and learning how to talk does not change this. If they discover that a particular action brings them what they want **they repeat it**. The Mercurian child is never changed through the use of reason but only by the **very careful control of outcomes**, by giving them predictable **consequences**.

It is not possible to **persuade** Mercury's child of anything. They will never be persuaded that what they want to do at this minute is not in their long-term best interest. They will never accept that they should not **want** to do it. Earth parents often mistakenly think they can persuade their children by **just using words**, and without any other consequence, of the greater **maturity** of the adult Earth view. This is just not possible. Mercury's child only appears to be persuaded by this argument. In reality all he or she can accept is the **inevitability of the outcome**.

Mutual Agreement

Men and women may be from Mars and Venus but children are very definitely from Mercury. They are mercurial, developmentally designed to be interested in **now**—this precise moment. As parents we love our child so much we are sure that they know it. We are sure that they will **understand why** we have to disappoint them. When we have to tell them...

- **now** is the time to go to bed
- no, you **can't have the cake** two minutes before dinner

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- you have to stop what you are enjoying and **come in now**
- your homework needs to be **done now**
- what you just said **was rude** and must not be repeated

We are sure they will trust us enough to accept disappointment. But Mercury's children are inexperienced and egocentric. They are never going to be convinced that **our** bedtime for them on a school night is reasonable. It is dishonest to hint that we will ever accept their time since—unless it accords with our own—we will not. Functioning families only **appear** to get mutual agreement in these areas. Mutual agreement in these areas would mean that a child's view had a chance of being accepted even though it was unhealthy or unsafe.

Don't expect them to *want to do it*.

Our children are reluctant to accept our long-term reasons and we often cannot accept their **now** reasons, but when the Mercurian view of the world does not coincide with ours, it is quite possible to get our children to agree **to do it**.

What is not fair or realistic (in fact it is cruel and unnecessary) is to expect them to agree, against all their Mercurian instincts, that they should **want** to do it.

Compliance Before Agreement

It is natural for Earth parents to use reason with their children and to want agreement in areas of dispute. It is right that they

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explain their reasons to their children, but only up to a point. This desire becomes counter-productive when Earth parents think the child's agreement is **more important** than his or her compliance. The uncomfortable truth is worth repeating that often when Mercury's child **appears** to accept our argument and appears to agree, he or she has just accepted that they cannot **change the outcome**, that the outcome is inevitable.

Look at the difficulties this parent gets into by attempting to get agreement:

My son will be eleven this year. He is not badly behaved at school and doesn't cause his teachers any problems. The problem we have is at home with his defiance! For example, he doesn't think it is fair that he has to do homework, as he works for six hours at school and doesn't see why he has to do more work in his free time (his words!). He finds it difficult to do his homework, and his concentration span is approximately five minutes. If we try to force him to do it we are looking at least an hour or two of battling and then he gets himself in a state and doesn't do it properly anyway.

Agree That I Am Right

After two hours of verbal battling with this Mercurian child, the parent is no nearer to getting this problem resolved. It is clear, since he quotes his son's reasons, that this father wants his son's **agreement**. This is the wrong target, because the words **insist** and **agree** are not compatible. The father cannot insist on something that he wants his son to agree to. He certainly cannot punish his child for **not agreeing**. If agreement is the target, this

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obstinate child becomes invincible, and the father is stripped of the moral right to provide consequences.

The real target is not agreement but his son's **compliance**. This father has completely failed to make clear what the **consequence** will be if his son does not complete his homework. He can't even mention consequences while he is seeking agreement.

Children in dispute are interested only in outcomes. The outcome for this child is that he has not done his homework properly, which is what he wanted in the first place. So he has got what he wanted **without** any consequence being applied. His father's **angry attention is not punishing**, because attention, even negative attention, is rewarding. Doing or not doing homework should be a **non-negotiable area**, but it is the father, not the son, who continues to negotiate and who has not accepted that homework is non-negotiable, and this is the reason the father is frustrated. He cannot work out if the fault lies with his ability to explain **or** his son's willingness to understand.

Truth is, there is no fault—at least not here. If you look you will see that the father states exactly his son's position, although he does not accept that his son is entitled to **believe this**. This is why the interactions are never-ending. The son is perfectly entitled to believe he should not have to do homework and the father should respect his view. His son is not entitled **not to do it** and only really needs one piece of information from his father—what the consequences will be.

The Need for Consequences

Mercury's child needs consequences. Not only as a means for parents to make sure the adult view of behaviour prevails but because when children are trained to accept small consequences for their own inappropriate behaviour they are being trained to accept—not dwell on—the natural disappointments that life brings without getting angry or blaming others. Without the positive loving application of consequences children will firstly behave badly towards others and secondly will blame others for any disappointment, including those stemming from their own bad behaviour. Without training to accept consequences children revert to—or fail to leave—their Primary Mode behaviour. They continue to say right on into their teenage years and beyond, **“I do not feel good—I demand—make me feel better.”**

Will We Ever Convince Them?

Do this father and all parents of defiant children really think that we can persuade those children? When I talk to audiences of parents of seriously misbehaving children I often ask them if they continue with their verbal battles because this is what they want their child to eventually say:

"Oh, yes I see, Dad or Mum, what you are trying to tell me. You want me to do my homework now.... I'm so sorry I did not understand you before, but I now see what you mean! Of course I will do it now and every evening from now on. "

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I say this and the response is for all the parents to laugh. It is laughable. There is no way that our children are ever going to say this. Children never ever say this in years of these interactions and the laughter shows that the parents know it. We all know deep down that this is never going to happen. So, why do we keep trying? Do we really think the reason our child does not accept what we are saying is that they need us to explain just that little bit better? Do we really think that, miraculously, the hundredth time it will sink in? Do we really think the problem is in our ability to explain? We must know it is not. The problem is that we are trying to do something completely impossible. We are trying to resolve these disputes **democratically**.

Countless children and parents are trapped in a cycle of bad behaviour. Children gain power in the home that is totally irresistible to them but makes them miserable. This book describes how all this suffering is quickly and completely reversed.

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