

# Cain Wasn't Able

*Helping Siblings Get Along*

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# What brings you here?

- Problem behaviors?
- Problem situations?



# Common sibling problems

- Property / territory rights
- Teasing, taunting, bickering
- Physical fights, bullying
- Non-cooperative play, competition
- Harmful comparisons, roles, favorites
- When friends come over
- Inappropriate sexual interaction/ abuse

# In this Age of the Individual

- How to build sibling relationships?
- Am I my brother's/ sister's keeper?



# Siblings: A unique relationship

- “Like a brother/ sister to me”
- Usually lifelong
- Mutually interactive, dynamic, transactional
- Strong and deep feelings

# Prosocial interactions

- Emotionally charged positive interactions as common as moments of rivalry
- Most consistent and reliable playmates
  - imitation in play
  - social learning
- Social support, social agent
- Confidant, unique source of comfort
- Non-sexualized opportunity for closeness and affection

# Antagonistic interactions

- Deep and frequent conflict
- Rivalry for parent attention, love, and approval
- Teasing, insulting, competition
- Potential for serious physical or emotional harm

# Factors effecting sibling interactions →

- Birth order
- Temperament of siblings
- Multiple births
- Spacing
- Family size
- Step, adoptive, and foster families
- Chronic illness/ special needs of siblings
- Death of a sibling (effect on survivors)
- Parent temperament, behavior, history
- Family systems and relationships



# Does birth order matter?

- Effect on language development
- Effect on cognitive development
- Effect on psycho-social development

# Effect of birth order on language development

- First-born/ only- child vs. later-born
  - More time directly speaking, enhanced learning
  - More dyadic, responsive, nondirective
  - Less prolonged, complex, sophisticated, triadic
    - less opportunity to speak with other children
    - less parent-child-sibling conversational patterns
    - less turn-taking
    - less joining-in on non-preferred topics
  - So, beware myth of language delay in later-born

# Effect of birth order on cognitive development

- Highly variable results
  - Some studies say older has advantage
  - Other studies say younger has advantage
  - Probably related more to age, gender, and spacing
  - Non-shared environment can be very different and might be the most significant factor

# Effect of birth order on psycho-social development

- Other factors matter more
  - individual differences
  - parent-child interaction differences
  - non-shared environment differences
- Myth of maladjusted single child
  - single children have similar social outcomes
- But birth order can effect family emotional relationships
  - see “family systems” (to follow)

# Temperament of siblings

- Temperament
  - activity level
  - impulsivity
  - attention span
  - regularity
  - initial reaction
  - intensity of reaction
  - adaptability
- “Goodness of fit” between sibs
  - can’t choose your sib’s temperament
  - more than isolated individual traits
  - “transactional/ developmental model”
    - sibs effect each other
    - differently over time (See Brazelton, “touchpoints”)



# Multiple births

- Increase in number of multiples
  - increased maternal age and infertility treatments
  - increased risk of prematurity (56% vs. 9.6%) and cesarean delivery
- Greater family stress
  - on parents and other sibs
  - mothers less responsive, less verbal
  - time, money, energy
- Between multiples
  - increased comparison/ rivalry
  - increased shared/ positive experiences

# Spacing

- Sib interaction depends less on spacing; more on...
  - unique characteristics of parents and family
  - age, development, and temperament of other sibs
- Advantage of wider spacing (greater than 4 years)?
  - less pronounced short-term effect:
    - at 24 months, ?IQ advantage for both older/younger sibs
    - greater for verbal than math skills
    - but poorly controlled studies (and not across SES)
  - more pronounced long-term effect
    - less direct rivalry/ conflict with age

# Family size

- Decreasing average size
  - 7 in 1865
  - 3.4 in 1950
  - less than 2 now
- Larger families
  - less dyadic interaction
  - more alliances and exclusions
  - larger age range between youngest and oldest
    - more various roles including discipline, teaching and caregiving





# Modern Families

- Single parents
- Step-family
  - becoming the most common family structure in the US
  - over half of children in US experience divorce
  - over half live with a step-parent before 18 years
- Many adjustments for step, adoptive, and foster families
  - new parent, home, sibs, ordinal position
  - attention
  - uncertainty regarding permanence
- More mixed families: bio/ reproductive tech, adopted, inter-racial, LGBT

# Chronic illness/ special needs of sibs

- Limited time, money, and energy
- Increased marital, family, and sibling stress
  - depression, anxiety, resentment, aggression, acting-out
- Expecting more of “well” siblings
  - more attention to sib with special needs
  - self-sufficiency/ independence
  - excessive responsibilities for care of sib or home
  - long-term care issues: “What about when parents are gone?”
- But, greater capacity for empathy, care skills, resilience, problem solving
  - special needs; sometimes, special bonds

# Death of a sibling

- Surviving sib
  - parents treat as vulnerable
    - overprotection interferes with normal development of self-reliance and independence
  - sib feels anger, guilt

# Parent temperament, behavior, history

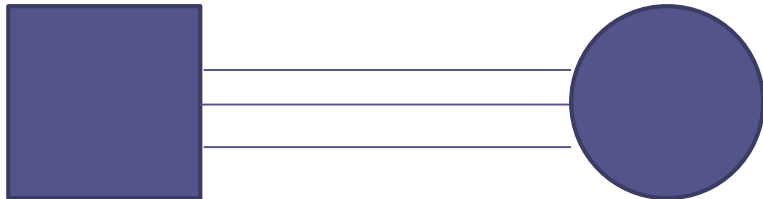
- Goodness of fit between *parents* and children
- Parents have different levels of insight/ skill
- Parent's own sibling history effects how they treat their children
  - “Ghosts from the Nursery” (Fraiberg)
  - Parent birth order, family role, sibling relations

PARENT

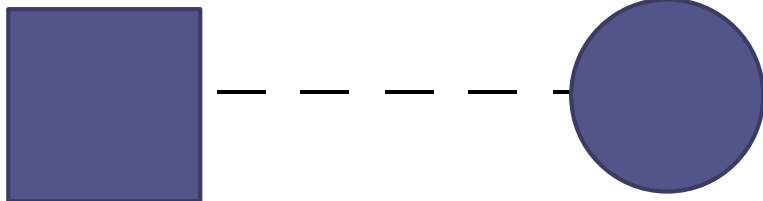


CHILD

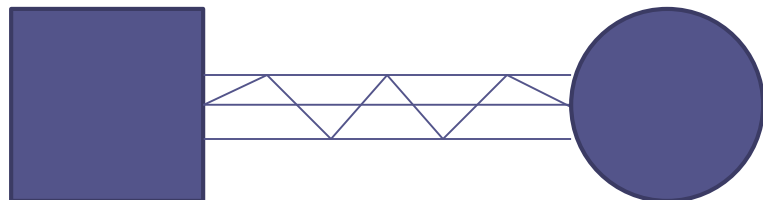
# Bowen: Family Systems and Relationships



very close



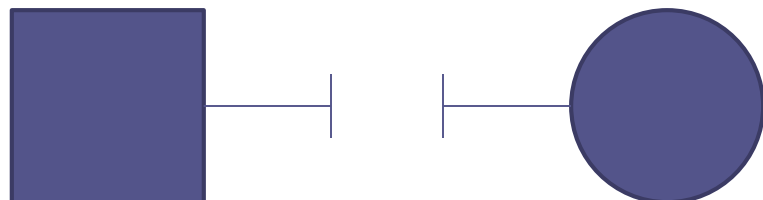
distant



fused and conflicted



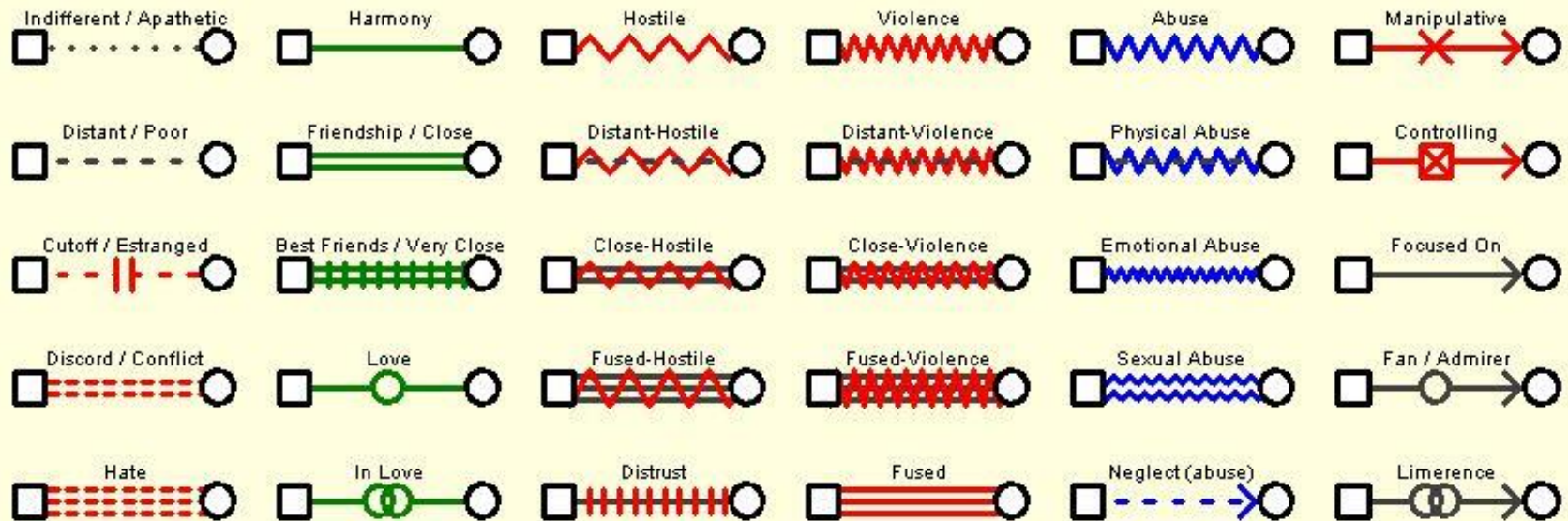
conflicted



estranged or cut-off

# Complex genograms

## Emotional Relationships Legend



# Bowen: Parent roles and consequences

- Parent A: Overly responsible → controlling
- Parent B: Dependent → helpless → depressed



# Bowen: Family Systems

- Child with the least emotional separation from parents is most vulnerable
- Child responds anxiously to the tension in parents' relationship
- Symptoms mistaken for a problem in the child
- Attention and protectiveness are shifted to the child
- Child symptoms may become chronic, psychosomatic, intergenerational



# Bowen: Intergenerational effects

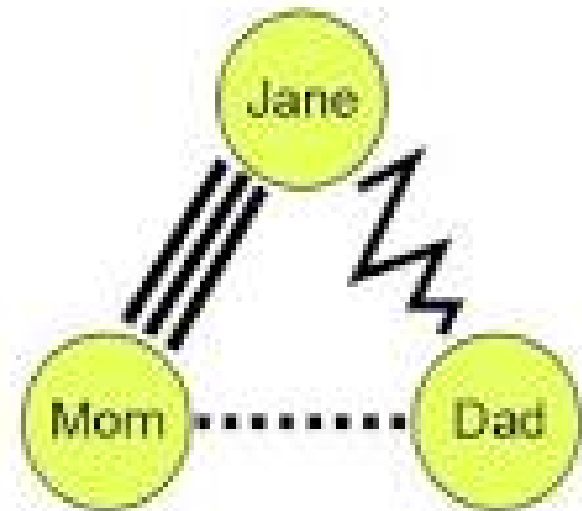
- Maintain contact or emotional cut-off
- System of emotional relationships transmitted from one generation to the next
- Bowen family analysis usually includes 3 generations





# Bowen: De-triangling

- Goal: reduce emotional reactivity and chronic anxiety
- Act on the basis of more awareness of relationship process
  - not blaming self or others
  - just seeing the part each plays



# General parenting principles —————>

- Remember positives of sib relationships
- Learn to recognize, accept, and nurture different temperaments
- Do not under-react or over-react



# Remember positives of sib relationships

- Get off the negative
- Recognize, notice, and encourage positive sib interactions



# Learn to recognize, accept, and nurture different temperaments

- Comment on sibs as unique individuals with their own desires
- Do not assign roles; male/ female, gifted/ disabled, nerd/ jock, shy/ outgoing, youngest/ oldest, emotional/ difficult, etc.
- Do not compare or show favoritism
- Equal is not fair/ fair is not equal
- Spend “special time”/ “time-in” with each child
- Myth of togetherness; ok to allow some separation
- Encourage “horizontal/ second family” relationships

# “*Just-right*” reaction



- Do not under-react
  - do prevent serious or repeated injury
  - do not allow sibling bullying or teasing
  - do prevent both physical *and* emotional harm
  - do teach self-resolution and collaborative problem-solving
- Do not over-react
  - allow minor injury
  - avoid protecting by scapegoating, blaming, or unintentionally reinforcing “playing the victim”
  - allow opportunity to practice self-resolution, collaborative problem-solving, and learning from mistakes

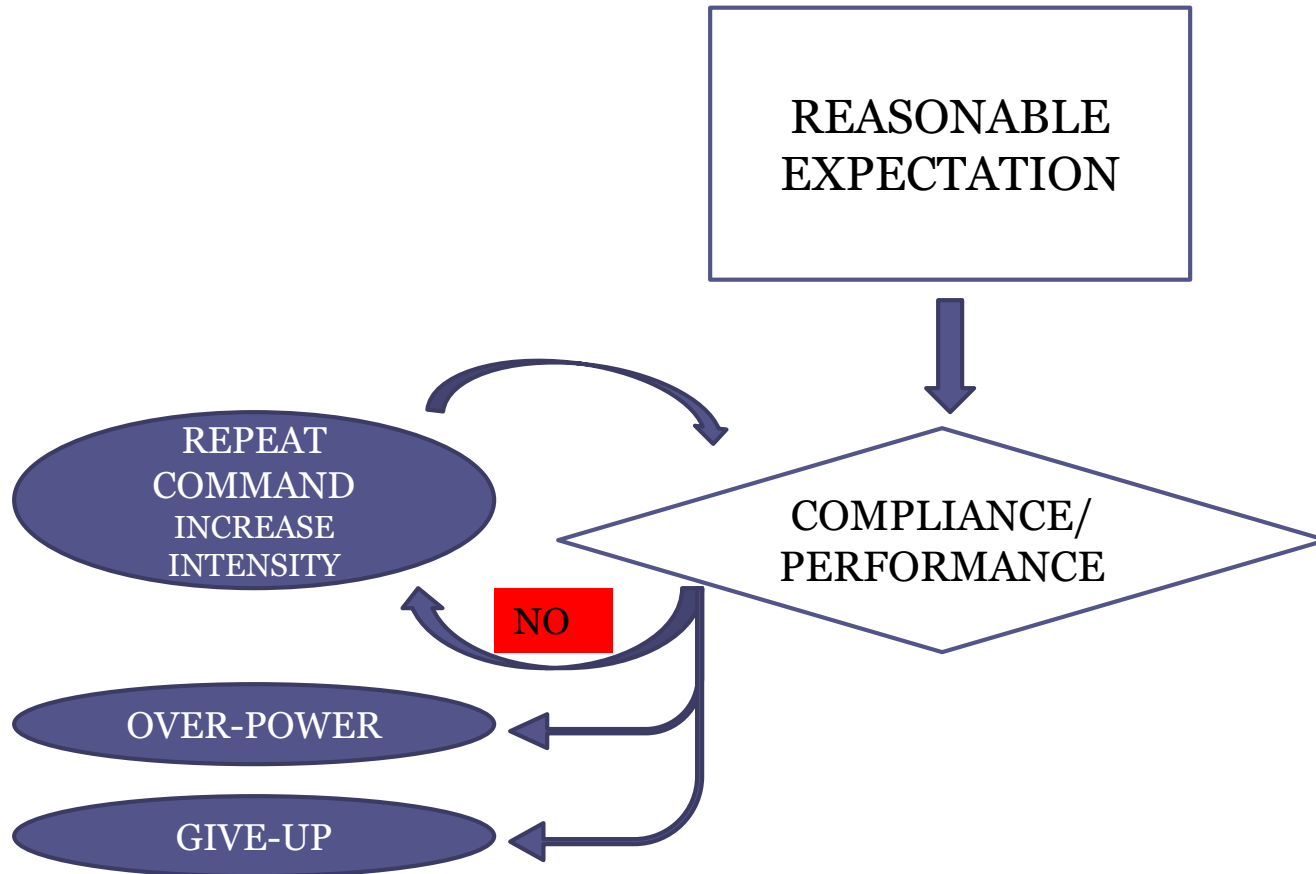
Parent self-control allows  
strategic thinking and effective management

*“Human freedom involves our capacity to pause between the stimulus and response and, in that pause, to choose the one response toward which we wish to throw our weight.”*

- Rollo May, *The Courage to Create*

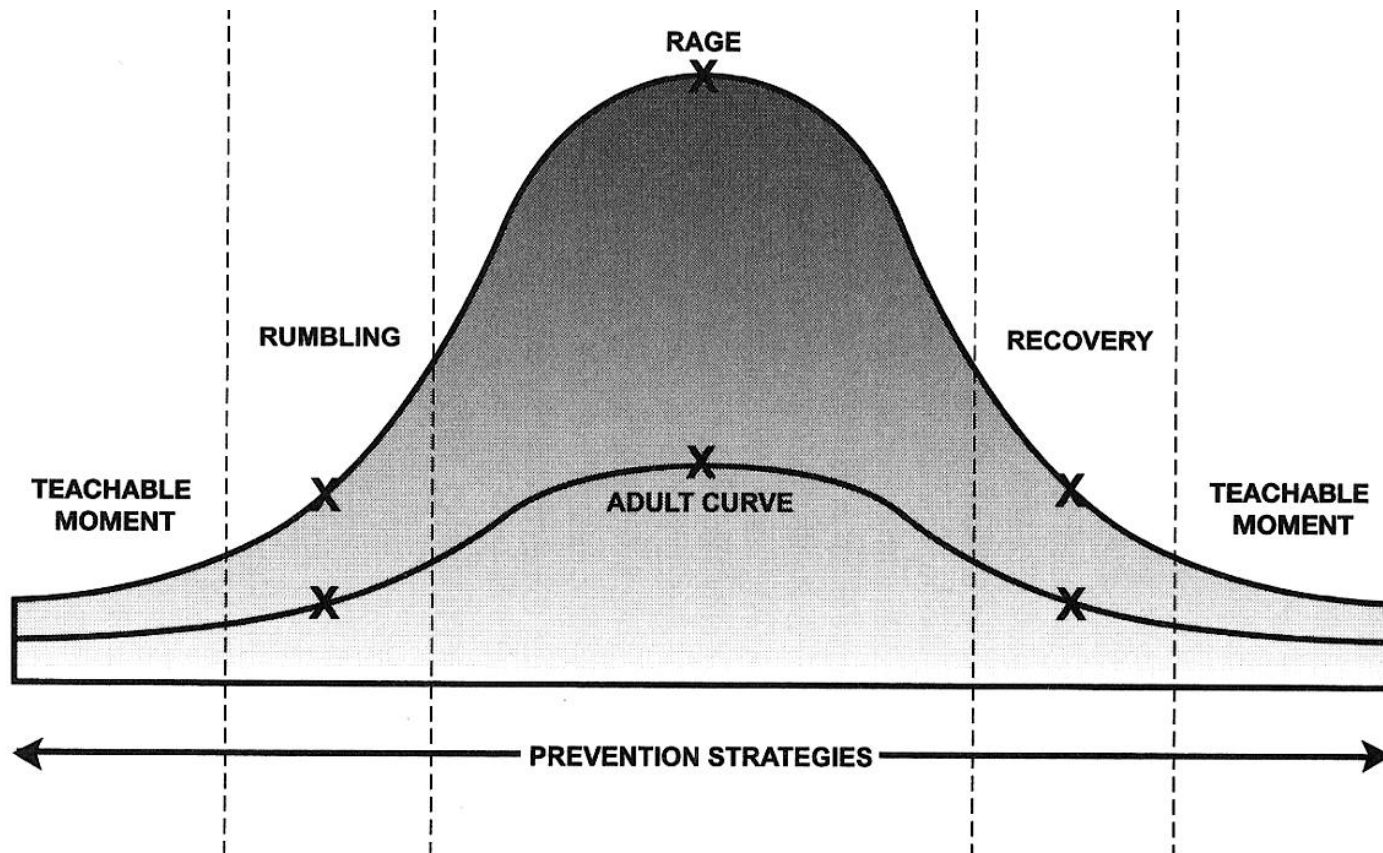


# Power Struggles Never End Well



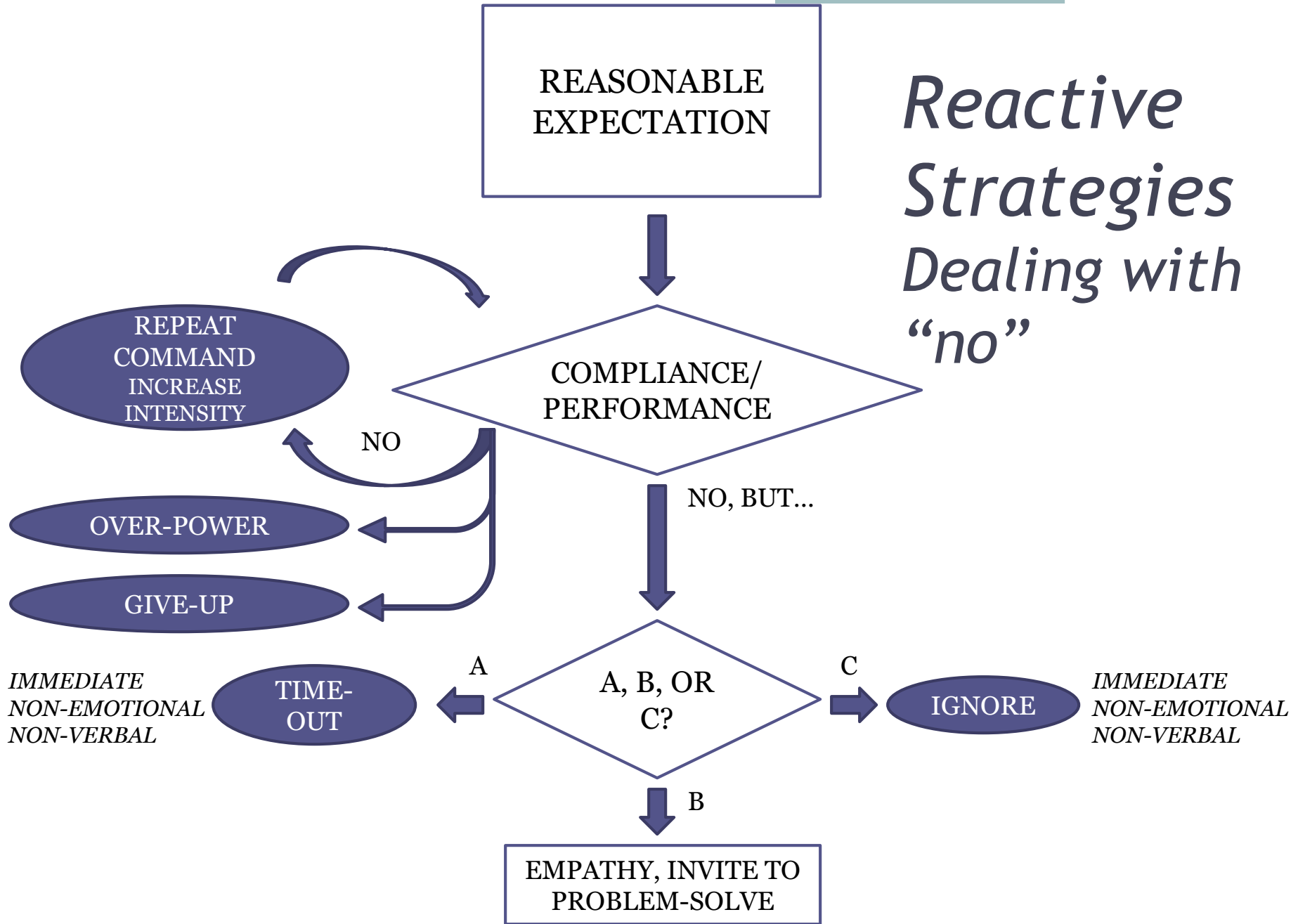
(See Russell Barkley, The Defiant Child)

# Smith Myles' Rage Cycle (It takes two to tango)



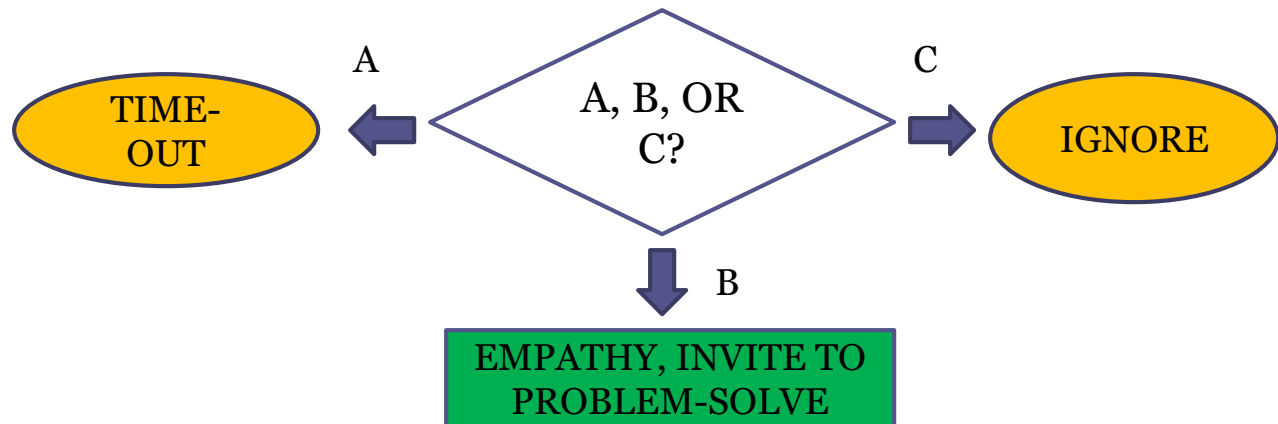
(See Brenda Smith Myles, Difficult Moments)

# Reactive Strategies Dealing with "no"



# A Developmental Perspective

- For older children, adolescents and adults:
  - Less A and C
  - More B



# Anticipate and plan

- Proactive strategies
  - preview rules
  - structure up unstructured time
- Reactive strategies: which basket? (Ross Greene)
  - A. ignore and allow natural consequences
  - B. separate/ cool-off time/ time-out
    - immediate
    - non-verbal
    - non-emotional
  - C. empathy/ invitation to problem solve

# General Principles of Collaborative Problem Solving

*(Cognitive Behavioral Therapy)*

- Empathic/ reflective listening
  - validate feelings of *each* child
  - *including* negative emotions
- Teach *collaborative* problem-solving
  - “STEPS”

# “*STEPS*” TO PROBLEM SOLVING

- Say what the problem is.
- Think about all possible solutions.
- Examine each possible solution.
- Pick the best solution.
- See how it works.

## Say what the problem is

- *Avoid pessimistic generalizations*
  - *“3Ps”: permanent, personal, pervasive*
- *Define the problem situation in solvable terms*
  - *specific, limited, short-term*
- *Avoid irrational thinking*
- *Think in shades of gray*



# Think about all possible solutions

- *Brainstorm*
- *Anything goes*
- *No comments*

# Examine each possible solution

- *Predict outcomes*
- *Rate possible solutions*
- *Be realistic*
- *Accept different opinions*

# Pick the best solution

- *Encourage self-determination*
- *Seek consensus*

# See how it works

- *Anticipation*
- *Experimentation*
- *Evaluation*
- *Modification*
- *Re-evaluation*

# Resources

- Brazelton and Sparrow, Understanding Sibling Rivalry – The Brazelton Way and Touchpoints
- Faber and Mazlish, Siblings without Rivalry
- Crist, Siblings: You're Stuck with Each Other So Stick Together
- Kerr and Bowen, Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory