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## Expert says key to desired behavior in kids comes from habit, not will power

By DEBBIE ANDERS

According to Dr. Caren Baruch-Feldman, using sheer will power to control one's impulses and actions simply does not work. At best, will power is a limited resource in short supply. At her presentation at Edgemont High School March 19, "Helping Children Change: It's Not About Willpower," subtitled "What science tells us about forming and maintaining new habits in children," Baruch-Feldman said instead of relying on will power to "muscle in" on change, kids — and adults — can modify their behavior by adopting good habits to replace bad ones. (Baruch-Feldman recently presented the same series at the Scarsdale Library.)

Baruch-Feldman, who has a private practice in Scarsdale and is a school psychologist in Harrison, became her own test case, asking herself why she couldn't just lose weight by forcing herself to behave differently.

To illustrate the problem she played a video showing people stuck on an escalator that had stopped moving. They complained about the escalator malfunctioning and how nobody was repairing it, while they continued to stand on the same steps on the stationary mechanism. They were so accustomed to their old ways, they could not see the obvious solution to the problem: simply walking down or up to reach their destination.

Baruch-Feldman was careful to point out that with school-aged children, change can only happen if there is a positive relationship between the parent and child. She asked parents in the audience to describe changes they would like to see in their kids. One woman wished for her daughter to be more communicative. Another wanted her son to spend less time playing video games.



Caren Baruch-Feldman

### Stages of Behavior Change

Dr. Baruch-Feldman cited the five stages of behavior change from the book, "Changing for Good," by James Prochaska

1. **Precontemplation** (unaware of the problem)
2. **Contemplation** (aware of the problem and of the desired behavior change)
3. **Preparation** (intends to take action)
4. **Action** (practices the desired behavior)
5. **Maintenance** (works to sustain the behavior change)

Like the Johnny Mercer song says, "You've got to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative." Only after parents have provided a positive environment, show empathy for their child and give credit can they prepare their children for change in behavior, and Baruch-Feldman said the same is true in adults. "In our own lives, it's easier to make a change when you're getting positive feedback."

There has to be an agreement on goals — a difficult goal in itself — if a teenage boy perceives no problem if he's playing video games for hours, yet is still getting good grades in school. Getting kids to "buy in" to that goal was a particular hurdle for some Edgemont parents. Baruch-Feldman said waiting until your son is in a good mood is the time to have the conversation, and "to plant the seeds and get to work on small things. If you are always that annoying person telling your child to get off the computer, then it won't work. Parents should ask why the new behavior is going to be best for him and ask how

their children can be part of the solution," she said.

Parents think of creating a positive atmosphere for change as "putting money in the bank," she said, so that when you ask kids to do things, it is like taking a "withdrawal. Figure out when things are working. When does the daughter become more communicative?"

Using her own son as an example, Baruch-Feldman said she stocked up on a particular brand of water he liked which set the stage for changes she wanted him to make, like keeping track of his jacket and remembering to take medication.

It is a scientific fact that the frontal lobe in a child's brain is not fully formed, which affects their emotional control, impulsivity and the ability to think about long-term consequences. Because their brains are less flexible, "we [adults] have to be their frontal lobe," said Baruch-Feldman. Children are "works-in-progress" and may not be ready to change.

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# Power of habit is key to kids' better behavior

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But in reality, change is hard for almost everybody, presenting a tug of war between what feels good in the moment versus the right decision in the long run. The goal is to help make change as easy as possible. "Our brains are lazy," said Baruch-Feldman. Will power is a limited resource. Successful people bypass the attempt at will power and the "muscling in" and instead make something a habit.

Baruch-Feldman presented the "Stages of Behavioral Change" found in the book "Changing For Good" by James O. Prochaska. Those steps include precontemplative, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance. Change is a gradual process and won't likely occur if adults force kids to go from precontemplative directly to action. "If you skip or go too quickly, then it won't happen," she said.

Other tips for making a change include:

- Avoiding triggers. It is better to avoid triggers (junk food, for example) than to keep being near them and trying to resist them.
- Waiting 10 minutes before doing something undesirable (like eating the junk food) promotes planning for the long term.
- Let people know your goal and get social support.
- Writing down the change is an effective strategy, especially when kids experience anxiety.
- Choose one behavior to change instead of a whole laundry list.

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*"In our own lives, it's easier to make a change when you're getting positive feedback."*

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— CAREN BARUCH-FELDMAN

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- Keep an "advantage card." Write down the advantages of the new behavior and read it every day.

Albert Ellis, credited with founding cognitive behavioral therapy, advocates not just changing habits, but changing beliefs. A child may feel he "can't stand" something — a homework assignment or a class — but adults can try to get him to see issues more accurately. Kids tend to think in black and white. Parents can help them think more "in the gray." It is not the event itself that's making a person upset, it is how the person is thinking about it. Parents should find out, "What is the negative thinking that's getting in the way?"

A child should be reassured that her whole self worth is not based on one incident going badly. That incident should be thought of as just one action and not a determinant of who they are as a human being.

Finally, Baruch-Feldman addressed the

idea that kids with "cushy lives" have to be challenged, need to be taught to have "grit" and adopt a growth mindset instead of shying away from challenges. "Eventually students are going to hit a wall and have to work hard," she said. Other pitfalls occur when students think, "I messed up, so I might as well forget the whole thing." Stand firm, remind yourself of the whole story, not just the beginning. "One slip does not cause a downfall."

Baruch-Feldman introduced her presentation by showing a "before" picture of herself as a heavier woman who struggled with her weight, next to the "after" picture showing her trimmer self after losing 25 pounds. Although she must remind herself to stay in the "maintenance" mode of Prochaska's stages of behavioral change, she is living proof that making a habit out of eating healthier worked better than any will power ever could.

Recommended reading:

*"The Power of Habit" by Charles Duhigg, "The Willpower Instinct" by Kelly McGonigal, "Willpower" by Roy Baumeister and John Tierny, "Switch" by Chip Heath and Dan Heath, and "Raising Resilient Children" by Robert Brooks, Ph.D. and Sam Goldstein, Ph.D.*

*For more information about Caren Baruch-Feldman or to see her March 19 PowerPoint presentation at EHS, visit [dr-baruchfeldman.com](http://dr-baruchfeldman.com).*