# Double Vision: Parent and Professional Perspectives on Our Family's Year in Crisis

by Kirsten Haugen

"Children like that become criminals."
*— comment about our son made by another kindergarten parent*

I am taking a risk — not mine alone for the taking — by sharing the following very personal and difficult story. It's only partly my story, as it really concerns our firstborn son, and his extraordinary struggles in a new town, in a new kindergarten.

As honestly and objectively as I can, I will share my dual perspective as both his mother and a special educator — at times a strange form of double-vision. In sharing, I acknowledge that others very likely have different perspectives on the events described — even different truths.

I trust you will handle our story with care and with an open mind, just as you would approach a fearful child thrashing out at a world he does not fully understand.

## Things Fall Apart

I had just dropped our son off at school on a Monday morning when the telephone rang. For the next 30 minutes, I listened, stunned and tearful, as another parent angrily told me our son was threatening and hurting her child, that he was a bully, and that we were oblivious and irresponsible parents. The previous week, the teacher had told us our son had threatened and hit a child. The conference we'd scheduled was still ahead; but in an urgent call, she suddenly and finally filled us in on problems that had been brewing since September.

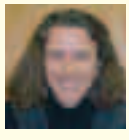
While the sudden revelation of a growing problem was shocking, we were not completely surprised that our intense, active, sensitive, and very literal son was having difficulty at school — he had never taken well to even small changes, much less our recent cross country move. During the first two months, the director and teacher had expressed occasional concerns about his mood or behavior. The other parent's phone call, however, tipped the balance from shared concern to crisis.

## The First Lesson: No News IS Bad News

*By the time everything came jolting to the surface, it was, in some ways, too late. Perhaps the teacher and director had believed they could resolve matters on their own; perhaps they did not like to deliver bad news, or possibly thought they actually had. Subsequent experiences in a different kindergarten and first grade have proven to us that, particularly when the news is bad, communicating early, clearly, and frequently, to the point of joint understanding and problem-solving, while difficult, is far more productive and healing.*

## In the Depths

Without a vivid description of our son's behavior at its worst, I cannot fully explain our journey, nor convey the magnitude of our son's healing and growth over the past year. Still, it's painful to recall the threats he made to hurt other children, or the times when another child's tease or an adult's simple request or reprimand could send him spiraling over the edge. Once revved up, he would escalate from noncompliance to explosive defensiveness, door-kicking tantrums, scattershot accusations, and threats. It seemed only time and tearful exhaustion could bring it all to a still-unsatisfying end.
As parents, we faltered between the need to drive home clear unequivocal consequences, and the powerful desire to simply comfort a small boy who at times could not even be held. Those who knew we were struggling offered endless suggestions, sometimes stirring the doubts in our own minds about his temperament, our parenting, and whether we were facing a short-term crisis or witnessing the unfolding of a life-long mental health challenge.



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## Another Lesson: The Ups and Downs of Experience

*I always believed my years of working with students with challenging behaviors and their families would prepare me to deal with my own kids' behavior, or even avoid typical parenting pitfalls. However, my professional experience has proved both insightful and confounding. On the plus side, I could understand the jargon in books and meetings, draw up data sheets and point systems, and grasp the complex pluses and minuses of our mental health and special education systems. On the other hand, I felt horribly ineffective. Was it the 24/7 nearsightedness (nearheartedness?) of parenting that made it so hard to draw on my behavioral* ***toolkit*** *when I needed it most?*

*Though revealing our crisis has been humbling and painful, my professional experience has brought one incontrovertible windfall: psychologists, teachers, and other colleagues who, as friends, have listened deeply and given generously of their expertise, objectivity, and long-distance minutes to help us puzzle through our child's needs.*

## Where to Turn

Early on, finding appropriate help was not easy. Most early childhood settings are plugged into early intervention resources with a very interdisciplinary, proactive bent. However, at age five, children come under the care of the public schools. Having bypassed public kindergarten so our boys could be together and not make a midday switch in care providers, we could not access many public resources or services. Still, I knew we had rights to a basic level of service from the public schools, and I asked for it.

## The Third Lesson: To Label or Not to Label

*From the beginning, we had very mixed feelings about approaching professionals in the system such as the school psychologist (who, it turns out, has been very positive and helpful). Again, my insider's view was both helpful and agonizing. Getting into the system might be the only way to access needed support, but it could potentially label our child with special needs, or worse, a behavior disorder — and a sticky reputation. Months later, we would pursue the possibility of an outside evaluation. If he needed an evaluation or even a label to get appropriate help, better that we access resources proactively, rather than waiting for him to experience more failures, and then get added to a waiting list for an assessment.*

## Crossing a Chasm

By late November, we were seeing a private family therapist, had invited the public school psychologist to observe our son, and filled out long, laborious parent questionnaires ("Does your child fight with his/her siblings?" What child doesn't?!). Our son was doing better at school and home, but significant challenges remained. I asked for a team meeting with the teacher and director, our therapist, and the psychologist to share perspectives and discuss next steps.

At that meeting, just days before the winter holidays, we were finally told our son was not welcome to return after the break. The chasm was too wide, and though we had failed to see them, red flags had been planted all along the way. Among other things, the other parent had written in a letter to the school's leadership that our son did not belong in the school, that he was a future criminal, and most likely a victim of abuse.

## Lesson Four: Don't Wait for Failure

*This kind of failure was, I believe, avoidable. One way families and professionals can work toward success is to plan ahead. Invite all families to share any challenges, concerns, or struggles, and express your willingness to work with them. Know the age-specific resources available to you and to families. Intervene early when you observe challenging behaviors, and involve the family. Make social skills and problem-solving part of your curriculum by inviting children to role play relevant scenarios, first as a bad sport and then as a good sport. When a crisis arises, hold a meeting with the parents to discuss the problem and possible strategies. Develop a specific plan and, most importantly, set a check-in date (in a week or a month) to monitor its effectiveness. You won't need a total failure or meltdown to prompt the next meeting, and if the plan has worked, you'll have a chance to celebrate!*

## Moving On

Following the meeting, I desperately began making school visits during what any educator knows is one of the most chaotic weeks of the year. In January, more visits revealed few schools with openings for both our boys. At one, the teachers invited our son to join circle time, called on him by name, and immediately conveyed a sense of belonging. We spoke with them honestly about our recent experiences

and our son's challenging behavior, and they assured us we could work together. We had found a new school.

Our challenges were not over. Our son had a hard time making inroads with peers who'd been together since September. Three months into his new kindergarten, despite two wonderful teachers gifted with patience, humor, compassion, and teamwork, he still anticipated that other kids would be mean and his teachers unfair; he was averaging one aggression per day; and our therapist wanted him evaluated for depression and social anxiety. I carried my cell phone everywhere, dreading its ring, and I entered the school parking lot each day with trepidation.

## Lesson Five: Parenting 101, Revised

*What have we learned about parenting (and teaching) intense children like our son? First off, many traditional or popular approaches don't work well. Also, like many parents or teachers of bright, verbal kids, we have probably expected too much and negotiated too much.*

*By necessity we are now more reflective of how — and when — we talk or act. We spend a great deal more effort trying to respond to small or partial successes or even neutral behavior, rather than attempting to teach good behavior by strongly reacting to its most glaring and challenging opposites (Glaser and Easley). "You haven't hit or yelled for the past ten minutes. Look at that amazing tower you've had time to build." "I know you're angry, and I can see you're trying not to throw that block. That's using your self control." Still, once our child has begun to amp up or melt down, communication of any kind often either goes unprocessed or simply provides fodder for escalating arguments. We've adapted strategies from Phelan's book* ***1-2-3 Magic*** *to quickly, predictably, and unceremoniously point out an offense and proceed to a timeout if needed.*

## A New Course

We approached first grade with a great deal of apprehension, as we considered possible evaluations, diagnoses, and even medications. Meanwhile, my former clinical supervisor gave us the single best piece of advice from anyone: "Right now, success isn't about your kid doing well in school. It doesn't mean he's gonna be popular or make friends! He can be a bump on a log. Success right now means nothing more than 'not getting kicked out of school.' If you can avoid that, you've accomplished something."

Humbly armed with this new goal, I met with the new principal and teacher before school began to lay our story bare. I asked for a point system at school that we would reinforce at home. The teacher diligently and discreetly marked a smile or frown on his card four times a day. At home, we recorded the points earned, and doubled them if there were three or more smiles. We forsook the luxury of anti-materialism to clearly reward our son on his terms for simple successes at school. We now have a startling collection of Legos® and model trains to prove it. But though the cards keep coming, we have gradually switched over to a more conventional allowance system not directly tied to school points.

## The Sixth Lesson: No Comfort in Nature versus Nurture

*We've been congratulated by some for surviving our son's challenges, and for the wonderful gains he's made over the last year. In the end, I find myself both proud and humbled. One of the oddest things I've learned from our ordeal is this: well meaning professionals and parents alike are quick to give other parents credit for well-behaved children, to blame those we don't know well for their children's problems, and to attempt to comfort those we do know well with reassuring words such as "It's not your fault."*

*If we are not to blame for our child's angry outbursts, can we take credit for his gains? I cannot swap nature for nurture as a matter of convenience! However, "the complexity of a child's development gives us numerous windows of opportunity … to help him or her find new ways to cope, new skills, and a growing sense of humanity." (Greenspan, p. 10). Or, in the words of a very dear friend, "You become a good parent when you stop parenting the kid you thought you'd have and start parenting the one you've got."*

## Returning to "Normal"

As I write, we're nearing the end of first grade. Thanks to the support of his teacher and principal, and his own determination, our son is doing great. Our *bad* days now seem much more *normal.* He still has more intense energy than we or he know what to do with, and a boyish fascination with things that go "pow" or "zing." He still approaches new people and situations with some trepidation. But we have few meltdowns anymore, and we usually resolve them with a short timeout

and maybe a drawing rather than angry, fitful tears that melt into sleep. He's doing well in school, and enjoying it. He expresses his feelings more appropriately. He plays soccer and runs about the neighborhood with an ever growing cadre of friends. Most joyfully of all, his hugs and smiles are back, and better than ever.

One silver lining of our experience is learning to cherish what many people take for granted — witnessing an unprompted apology or sharing a case of the giggles. I no longer feel a jolt of dread when the cell phone rings. We listen with joy when he declares to his younger brother, "You think you go to a good school now — just wait 'til you come to my school next year — it's the BEST in the WORLD!"

In the aftermath of a crisis, the greatest challenge remains trying to understand when — or if — things have in fact returned to *normal.* Is an angry outburst over another child's insult the sign of a setback, or what one would expect from any child? Do we still need to avoid certain activities or forewarn the people in charge of camps, clubs, or sports that our son has a history of explosive behavior? It's been a long and difficult road, and we are still working on answers to these and many other questions, but I would never have dared expect or even hope for the progress he's made since last year. Martin Seligman, in his must-read book on learned optimism, comments, "If we as parents and teachers, promote the 'doing-well' side of self-esteem, the feeling-good side, which cannot be taught, will follow." (Seligman, p. 35).

## References

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## Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

**Risking Honesty:** The risk Haugen took in sharing her story illustrates the beautiful gift of reflection — looking back at experiences for insight and lessons to guide problem-solving in future crises. Use her story as a springboard by looking among your faculty for your own stories to share — reflections on professional experiences, accomplishments and disappointments, challenges, fears, and frustrations. When offered with the reverence of insight like this story was, the result is certain to be increased connections and collegiality among teachers.

**Don't leave communication to chance:** Haugen courageously bares her family's soul as she shares her story. The legacy of her courage is for each of us to commit to enhance, expand, increase, and facilitate candid, authentic, and honest communication with the families we serve. Work together to assess the communication strategies your school employs along with a careful assessment of whether the current approaches are working and adequate. If they aren't, make a plan to improve teacher/family communication, particularly about behavioral concerns.

**Who's at risk:** Work with teachers to identify families who might benefit from "early, frequent, and collaborative" communication about issues or emerging behavior problems. Commit to initiating increased communication until teachers feel that each family is working in partnership in the child's best interest both at home and at school. If there's a way that educators don't need to (and shouldn't) wait until something becomes a "big" problem to communicate with families. If done thoughtfully and proactively (e.g. with an offer to work with the family), families will most likely appreciate the teacher's caring and observation skills.

**Who can help:** Do you know who can help teachers and families when difficult challenges arise? Commit to finding out before you need to know by creating a local directory of resources, inviting mental health professionals to visit your school to talk to teachers and parents, connecting with community agencies that know what to do with mental health issues and behavior problems, and making initial contacts with resources at neighborhood schools. Make connections now and explore ways to collaborate before the need arises. (*Author's note:* The one thing I might highlight, in this last section, is that those who serve kids five and older need to understand services beyond early intervention and need to connect/communicate with the public schools in the process, since legally, much of the services associated with a "free and appropriate public education" are only available through public school channels. This was a big road block for us — the director did hand me a collection of resources and even pointed out her favorites, but they were all for birth-to-five services and not for our son who'd turned five several months before.)