

They're nine, not lazy

A short book about expecting children to behave like small adults and being let down daily

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. You expect your child to do a thing that a sensible adult would do without thinking, remember the kit, put the coat on the hook, come off the tablet when asked, be ready by ten to eight, and they don't, and you're let down, again, and the letting down has a name attached to it. Lazy. Careless. Doesn't listen. Doesn't care. You say the name, or think it, most days.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the standard makes sense from the inside. Your child is capable, they've done the thing before, and low expectations do fail children. The second is that the abilities you're expecting, holding several things in mind, stopping something absorbing on request, planning ahead, judging time, overriding a want, are a set of mental functions that researchers have measured across childhood, and they grow steadily from about four into the late teens. A nine-year-old who forgets the kit isn't a lazy adult. They're a nine-year-old, doing what nine-year-olds do with a nine-year-old's equipment. The gap between what you expect and what they can do alone isn't attitude. It's age, and the label you've been reaching for predicts nothing and teaches them something false about themselves. The third is practical. When your child lets you down, you ask what a child their age can do alone, and you build the arrangement that gets the kit into the bag, instead of raising the standard or your voice. Chapters 18 to 21 cover how.

This book doesn't ask you to expect nothing, to do everything for them, or to believe children can't learn responsibility. They can, and the way they learn it is the last third of the book. It asks you to set the standard at the age, and to move it up as they grow rather than holding it at adult height and being disappointed daily by the distance.

Two cautions.

If your child is far outside the range for their age, at school as well as at home, if teachers are raising it, or if the gap is causing your child real distress, that's worth a conversation with the school's special needs coordinator and with your GP. Some children need more than an arrangement, and the NHS pages on attention deficit hyperactivity disorder are a place to read. This book is about ordinary children and ordinary parents. It isn't a diagnostic tool and shouldn't be used as one in either direction.

And if the letdown has become shouting, most days, at predictable times, an earlier book in this series is about that, and it's named in the notes. This one is about the expectation underneath the shout.

The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

The PE kit

It's Thursday, twenty to nine, and Sam is at the school gate without his PE kit. It's the third Thursday running. You've reminded him. You reminded him last night and this morning, and the kit is on the end of his bed where he put it after you reminded him, and he walked past it on his way out. He's nine. You'll have to go back for it, and you'll be late, and the sentence forming in your mouth is the one that's formed on the last two Thursdays, which is some version of "what is wrong with you".

At home the coat is on the hall floor, not the hook, where it's been every day since September. The reading book didn't come home. At half past seven you said it was time to come off the tablet and get ready for bed, and he said "OK", and ten minutes later he was on the tablet, and when you said it again with an edge he looked up as though he'd never heard the first one. He hadn't, in a way that matters, and I'll come to that. You were ready for bed at nine when you were nine. Weren't you?

These are invented, but I'd guess they're near. Notice the shape. You expect a thing. It's a reasonable thing. An adult would do it without thinking. Sam doesn't, and the failure lands as a letdown, and the letdown lands as a word about Sam. Lazy. Doesn't listen. Doesn't care. The word feels like a description, because you've said it so often, and it's the thing this book is going to take apart.

Some words. I'll call the adult-height expectation **the standard**. The daily disappointment when it isn't met is **the letdown**. The word that follows, lazy or careless or defiant, is **the label**. The distance

between what you expected and what a child that age can do without help I'll call **the gap**. **The kit** stands for any ordinary forgotten thing. A reminder or signal from outside the child, a list or a timer or your voice, is **a cue**, and a thing done with no cue is done **alone**. The list by the door, the bag packed the night before, the clock they can see, together, I'll call **the arrangement**. Moving a task from doing it with you, to doing it when cued, to doing it alone, I'll call **the handover**. And **the age** is what's typical for a child of that age, which is the thing the standard has been set without reference to.

Before you go on, do one thing. For a week, keep a list. Every time your child lets you down, write down what you expected, how old they are, and one more thing, which is whether an adult you know well would reliably manage it. Most parents who do this find that the list is long, that the expectations are the kind an adult would meet without effort, and that the child is nine. That's the gap, on paper.

Why the standard seems right

Before I argue with the standard, I want to be fair to it, because it isn't unkindness and the reasons for it are mostly good ones.

They can do it sometimes. Sam has remembered the kit. He came off the tablet the first time last Tuesday. He's not incapable, and a thing he's done once is a thing he can do, and a thing he can do and doesn't is a choice.

They're bright. He reads above his age. He can explain the offside rule. A child who can hold the offside rule in his head can hold a PE kit.

You did it at their age. You had your kit. You were ready. Nobody had to tell you three times. Or that's how it seems from here.

Low expectations fail children. You've seen the children whose parents do everything for them, and they're a mess at fourteen. Expecting things of children is how they become capable, and a parent who expects nothing gets nothing.

You're preparing them. The world won't remind them. A boss won't pack their bag. Better they learn now, from you, than later, from someone who doesn't love them.

Consistency matters. Every parenting source says so. If you let the kit go this Thursday, you've taught him that Thursdays are negotiable.

It's how you were raised, for many readers. There was a parent whose standard was adult height, and you met it, or believe you did, and you turned out capable, and the standard gets the credit. Chapter 7 is about that memory, and for now I'd only say that it's a reason that feels like evidence and is actually a reconstruction.

And you're tired, and you've said it three times, and the third time is the one with the label in it, because there's nothing left in you for a fourth.

There are needs under all of this. To raise a capable child. To be taken seriously in your own house. To get out of the door by twenty to nine. Not to be doing at forty what you were doing at thirty-one. Those are real, and the method later in the book is built to meet them. What I'll show is that the standard doesn't meet them. It doesn't make the child capable, because capability at nine isn't made by expectation. It doesn't get you out of the door. And the label, which is where the standard ends up every Thursday, teaches the child exactly one thing, and it isn't responsibility.

"They're old enough to remember"

Start with the kit, and the belief that nine is old enough to hold one thing in mind between the bedroom and the front door.

Susan Gathercole and colleagues, in 2004, tested children aged four to fifteen on a range of tasks that measure working memory, which is the capacity to hold information in mind and use it. They found that the different parts of working memory were already distinguishable by six, and that every part of it grew with age in a roughly straight line, expanding, in their words, sizably through the early and middle school years and into adolescence. A nine-year-old's working memory isn't a smaller version of an adult's in the sense of being the same thing with a bit missing. It's a capacity partway along a line that keeps rising for another six or seven years.

A shelf that holds four things is a fair comparison for two sentences. Put five on it and one falls off, and the one that falls isn't the one the child cares least about. It's whichever was nearest the edge.

Now walk through Thursday morning with a nine-year-old's shelf. Get dressed. Find the other shoe. Eat breakfast. Where's the reading book. Brush teeth. Your voice about the coat. The thought about the thing his friend said yesterday. Somewhere on that shelf is "kit", and it went on at bedtime, and by twenty to nine it's had eleven other things put on top of it. It didn't fall off because Sam is lazy. It fell off because the shelf is nine years old and the morning put more on it than it holds.

That's the first thing I'd like you to take from this book. Forgetting the kit is a fact about capacity, not about attitude. The standard, remember the kit alone, assumes an adult's shelf, and the child hasn't got one, and won't for years, and no amount of being told will build it faster, because it grows on its own timetable. What does work is taking things off the shelf, which is what the list by the door does, and chapter 19 is about that. The list isn't a crutch for a lazy child. It's an adult's shelf, lent.

Gathercole's study is about children in general, and children vary. Some nine-year-olds hold more than others, and yours may be at either end. But the line rises for all of them, and the standard you've set is at the top of it, and your child is nine.

"They did it yesterday, so they can"

Here's the belief that turns a capacity question into a character one. He remembered the kit last week. He came off the tablet on Tuesday. So he can, and if he can and doesn't, that's a choice, and choices have names.

Yuko Munakata and colleagues, in 2012, described three transitions in how children develop what researchers call cognitive control, the ability to break out of a routine and do the thing that's needed rather than the thing that's habitual. The first is learning to override a habit at all, in response to a signal from outside. The second is a shift from what they called reactive control, engaging the effort in the moment when something prompts it, to proactive control, engaging it in advance, in preparation. The third is a shift from relying on signals in the environment to being self-directed. Children move through these gradually, and the later ones come well after the earlier.

Apply that to the kit. The week Sam remembered it, what happened? In my experience, when parents look, there was a cue. You said "kit" as he went upstairs. It was by the door because you'd moved it. He saw a classmate with theirs on the way in. That's reactive control, engaged by a signal, and a nine-year-old can often do it. What you're expecting on the other Thursdays is proactive, self-directed control, thinking of the kit in advance with nothing prompting him, and that's two transitions further along, and he isn't there, and the fact that he managed the cued version proves nothing about the uncued one. They're different abilities on different timetables.

So "he did it yesterday" is true and it doesn't mean what the standard takes it to mean. It means he can do it when cued. It doesn't mean he can do it alone, and the standard has been set at alone. A child who's able when reminded and unable when not isn't being inconsistent. They're at a stage, and the stage is a normal one, and the way through it isn't to remove the cues and wait for character to develop. It's to keep the cues and let the development happen underneath them, which is what chapter 20 calls the handover.

I'm reaching from a review of laboratory tasks to a Thursday morning, and I'll say so. But the shape of the finding is the thing. Cued before uncued, reactive before proactive, prompted before self-directed. Every parent who's noticed that their child can do it "when they want to" has noticed the gap between those, and named it wrongly.

"They just don't care"

The tablet is where this belief lives. You said it was time. He said OK. He carried on. He heard you and chose the game, and that's not memory, that's not caring.

Adele Diamond, in a 2013 review that's the standard reference on the subject, set out what researchers call the executive functions. There are three at the core. Working memory, which is chapter 3. Cognitive flexibility, which is switching between tasks and seeing things from different angles. And inhibition, which she divides into two parts, resisting temptations and impulses, and controlling interference so that you can attend to one thing and not another. She traces how each develops, and the developmental progression runs through childhood and adolescence, and she notes that stress, lack of sleep, loneliness and lack of exercise each impair them, which is worth holding onto for half past seven.

Look at what coming off the tablet requires. A child absorbed in a game is attending to it, hard, and your voice arrives as interference. To act on your voice he has to notice it over the game, which is interference control, and then stop an activity that's rewarding him every few seconds in favour of one that isn't, which is response inhibition, and then hold "get ready for bed" in mind across the walk upstairs, which is working memory. All three of Diamond's core functions, in sequence, at the end of a day, in a nine-year-old who's tired.

"OK" and then carrying on isn't a lie. It's the first step working and the second failing. He heard you. He agreed. Then the game did what games do and the inhibition that was meant to carry him off it wasn't strong enough yet, and the "OK" was as sincere as it was useless. If you've ever said "I'll just finish this email" and looked up forty minutes later, you've done the adult version, with an adult's inhibition, and you don't think you didn't care about dinner.

Not caring would look different. It would look like a child who was indifferent to your reaction, and Sam isn't, or you wouldn't have a child who says "OK". A child who says OK cares about the asking and can't yet do the stopping, and the word for that isn't doesn't care. It's nine.

The practical answer is in chapter 19, and it's an arrangement that does some of the inhibition for him. A warning at ten minutes, a timer he can see, the tablet handed over rather than put down. None of that is giving in. It's recognising which of Diamond's three functions is being asked for and lending him the part he hasn't grown.

"They've got no sense of time"

You said five minutes and it was twenty. You said we're late and he carried on tying his shoe as if the word meant nothing. From an adult's chair, time is a thing everyone shares, and a child who ignores it is ignoring you.

Sylvie Droit-Volet, in a 2013 review, went through the research on how children perceive time. Infants have a primitive sense of it. Through childhood, the ability to judge durations changes considerably, and she draws a distinction between implicit judgements of time, which come earlier, and explicit ones, estimating how long something took or will take, which come later and keep developing. The review looks at which brain systems involved in timing mature faster and which slower to explain why children's time judgements differ from adults' in the ways they do.

I won't put ages on it, because the review doesn't give thresholds and I'd be inventing them. But the direction is plain. A nine-year-old's sense of what five minutes is, and of how far away twenty to nine is from half past eight, is not an adult's sense with a bit of carelessness added. It's a developing judgement, and "we're late" is a sentence that requires it. To act on "we're late" a child has to know what time it is, know what time they need to be somewhere, work out the difference, compare it to how long the remaining tasks take, and feel the urgency that the difference implies. Adults do all of that without noticing. Children do it slowly, badly, or not at all, and the last isn't defiance.

There's a second thing in "five minutes". To a child, five minutes said by a parent means "not now, later", and later is a place rather than a duration. When you say five minutes and come back in five, you're keeping a promise in a currency the child doesn't yet hold, and their surprise that the time has gone is genuine.

The arrangement for this is the simplest one in the book and it's in chapter 19. Make time visible. A clock they can see, a timer that counts down where they can watch it, and "when the timer goes" instead of "in five minutes". You're not lowering the standard. You're converting a thing they can't yet perceive into a thing they can see, and a child who can see the time run out is a child who can act on it.

"I did it at their age"

You remember being nine. You had your kit. You were dressed and ready. Nobody had to tell you three times, and if they had, you'd have listened, because that's the sort of child you were.

Two things about that memory. The first is that it's a memory, made now, from fragments, by an adult, and what it's missing is exactly the thing this book is about. You don't remember the reminders, because the reminders weren't events. Your mother saying "kit" as you went upstairs isn't a thing you'd have stored. The bag she packed the night before, the list on the fridge you never noticed was a list, the way she stood at the bottom of the stairs at twenty past eight every day so that you couldn't leave without passing her. All of that was the arrangement your parents built, and from inside it, it was invisible, because that's what a good arrangement is. You experienced yourself as a child who remembered things. You were a child in a house that had been set up so that you would.

The second is that you can check. Ask your parents, if you can, what you were like at nine. Ask them whether you remembered your kit. In my experience the answer is a laugh and a story about the recorder, or the swimming things, or the time the whole class went on a trip and you were the one with no packed lunch. Every parent believes they were more organised at nine than their child is, and every grandparent knows better.

There's a version of this belief that's true, and it's worth separating out. Some children are more organised than others at the same age, and you may have been one of them. Children vary, and Gathercole's line has a spread around it. But the spread is around a line that rises with age, and even the most organised nine-year-old is a nine-year-old, and the comparison you're making is between your child and a reconstruction of yourself that has had the reminders edited out.

There's one more thing in the memory, which is that it was a different house. Fewer things on the shelf, probably. No tablet at half past seven. A school that started later or a parent who didn't leave for work at the same moment. The nine-year-old you remember being was operating in conditions you can't fully recall and probably wouldn't recognise, and comparing a child in this morning to a child in that one is comparing two mornings and calling the difference a boy.

The standard has been set against a child who never existed. The real one had a mother at the bottom of the stairs.

"If I don't expect it, they'll never learn"

This is the belief that makes lowering the standard feel like giving up on the child. Expectation is how children rise. Take it away and they stay where they are.

John Best and Patricia Miller, in a 2010 review that deliberately looked at studies spanning wide age ranges rather than just preschoolers, traced the development of the executive functions, inhibition, working memory and shifting, from early childhood through adolescence. Their conclusion was that these functions emerge in the first few years of life and then continue to strengthen significantly throughout childhood and adolescence, with the different components on somewhat different timetables. Significantly and throughout. The growing isn't finished at nine and it isn't finished at fourteen.

Now ask what does the growing. Not expectation. Expectation is a thing in the parent's head. The functions grow with age and with use, and the use that grows them is doing the thing, with enough support that it gets done and little enough that the child is doing some of it. A child who's expected to remember the kit alone at nine and can't, and fails every Thursday, isn't practising remembering. They're practising failing and being labelled. A child who has a list by the door and ticks the kit off is practising the thing itself, remembering-with-help, which is the stage before remembering alone, and the stage that leads to it.

So the belief has the mechanism backwards. The standard, held at adult height, doesn't teach. It sets a task the child can't do and records the result. What teaches is the handover, which chapter 20 describes, and the handover keeps the expectation exactly as high in the long run. The child will remember the kit alone. The question is whether they get there by a route with steps in it or by being dropped at the top and blamed for not being there.

And notice what "they'll never learn" is a prediction about. It's a prediction that a child who's helped at nine will still need help at nineteen. Best and Miller's review says the functions strengthen throughout adolescence regardless. The nineteen-year-old will have the equipment. Whether they've had years of practice using it with support, or years of being told they're lazy for not having it, is what you're deciding on Thursday.

"They can do it for their teacher"

Here's the observation that seems to settle it. At school, Sam remembers things. He sits still. He's ready for PE. His teacher says he's lovely. So he can, and he chooses not to at home, and that's a choice about you.

Go back to Munakata's transitions in chapter 4. The first was learning to override a habit in response to signals from the environment, and the third was moving from environmental signals to being self-directed. A classroom is, from a child's point of view, one long environmental signal. The bell. The timetable on the wall. Thirty children doing the same thing at the same time. A teacher whose whole job is cueing, who says "pencils down" and "line up" and "PE kit on your peg" at the same moment every day, to everyone at once. A child in a classroom is a child being cued from every direction, and a nine-year-old with reactive control can do a great deal in that setting.

Home isn't like that. Home has one adult doing eleven things, a tablet, a brother, the television, no bell, and a request that arrives once, from the kitchen, while something more interesting is happening. The setting has none of the cues, and so it asks for the self-directed control that the classroom never needed, and the child hasn't got it yet, and you conclude that the difference is attitude, when the difference is the room.

The teacher's report isn't evidence against the child. It's evidence for the arrangement. It tells you that with enough cues, your nine-year-old does everything you want, and that's the most useful thing

you could know, because cues are buildable, and chapter 19 is a description of how to build at home a fraction of what the classroom does by default.

There's a version of this that's about respect, that Sam does it for the teacher because he respects her and not you. I'd only say that respect isn't what makes a child line up when the bell goes. The bell does. And the teacher, if you asked her, would tell you that the same children who are lovely in her room are exactly the ones whose parents say "you'd never know it at home", and she'd tell you that it's every child, and that the difference is her room.

"It's laziness"

The label arrives at the third Thursday, and it feels like a diagnosis. Lazy. Not a description of the morning, a description of the child.

Ask what laziness would have to mean for a nine-year-old. It would have to mean that he can do the thing and prefers not to, in order to avoid effort. So look at the effort. Remembering a kit takes no effort if you have the shelf for it, and considerable effort if you don't, and chapter 3 is about which one a nine-year-old has. A child who forgets the kit isn't avoiding effort. He's failing at something that would cost an adult nothing and costs him more than he's got at twenty to nine.

The NHS, in its guidance on difficult behaviour in children, says that often the reason is simply that the child is tired, hungry, overexcited, frustrated or bored. It's a list written for younger children and it holds at nine. Look at the letdowns on your list from chapter 1 and mark the time of day. In my experience most cluster at two points, the morning before breakfast has settled and the evening after a day's school, and those are the points where a child's executive functions, in Diamond's account, are most impaired, because tiredness and hunger impair them in everyone. The child who can't come off the tablet at half past seven is a child at the end of his resources, and the word for that is tired, and tired is a state that passes, where lazy is a character that doesn't.

That's the trouble with the label. It predicts nothing. A child who's lazy on Thursday should be lazy on Saturday, and Sam will spend Saturday morning building something in the garden with an

attention that would shame an adult. Laziness that switches off for Lego isn't laziness. It's a mismatch between the task and the child's current equipment, and the mismatch is worst for exactly the tasks the standard is about, the dull, adult, self-directed ones.

And the label produces something. A child called lazy learns that his parent thinks he's lazy, and that's a fact about the parent that he stores, and chapter 17 is about what he does with it. It doesn't get the kit in the bag. Nothing about the word makes Thursday better. It's a verdict on a morning that's already gone, delivered to the one person in the house who couldn't have made it go differently.

Drop the word. Not because it's unkind, though it is, but because it's inaccurate, and you're a person who cares about that.

"They're being defiant"

Sometimes the letdown comes with a no. Not a forgotten kit but a refused one. Not carrying on with the tablet but "I'm not coming off". That's not capacity, you'd say. That's a stance.

Two things. The first is what a nine-year-old's no is made of. In my observation it's rarely a considered position on parental authority. It's an in-the-moment response to a demand that arrived while the child was doing something they wanted to do, and it comes out of the same place as the carrying on, which is that stopping is hard and the words for that at nine are "no" and "in a minute". A child who says no to coming off the tablet at half past seven and then comes off it at twenty-five to eight without further incident wasn't making a stand. They were finding the stopping hard and saying so badly.

The second is for the older ones, and it's worth having in view even if yours is nine, because nine becomes thirteen. Laurence Steinberg, in a 2008 review, set out what developmental neuroscience suggests about why risk-taking and impulsive behaviour rise in early adolescence and fall again in the twenties. The account is that around puberty, the brain's systems for seeking reward, especially in the company of peers, undergo a rapid change, while the systems for self-control develop more slowly, through adolescence and into young adulthood. The two are on different timetables, and mid-adolescence is where the gap between them is widest. A thirteen-year-old is a person with an adult's wanting and a child's braking, and the no of a thirteen-year-old is that gap speaking.

So defiance, in the sense of a considered refusal of your authority, is rarer than it looks. What's common is a child or a teenager whose wanting outruns their stopping, saying no because the stopping is hard and no is quicker than explaining that. That's a timetable, not a stance, and it's answered by the arrangement, a warning, a visible timer, a handover of the tablet, rather than by a contest of wills, which is a contest the arrangement makes unnecessary.

There's real defiance, and there's a chapter about children whose behaviour is far outside the range in chapter 22. But most no's at nine are tired children who've been asked to do a hard thing at a bad moment, and the word defiant is the label from chapter 10 with a sharper edge.

"They're so bright, they should know better"

Some readers will feel that the capacity argument doesn't apply to their child. Sam reads two years above his age. He beat you at chess. A child who can do that can remember a kit, and the fact that he doesn't is more damning, not less.

Diamond's review addresses this directly, as one of the controversies in the field. The relation between the executive functions and what psychologists call fluid intelligence, the ability to reason and solve new problems, is contested, and the contest exists because they don't line up neatly. Children can score highly on tests of reasoning and be at the age norm, or below it, on tests of inhibition or working memory, and the reverse. Being able to see the solution to a chess problem is a different thing from being able to stop a game when asked, and the second doesn't follow from the first.

This is one of the commonest patterns parents describe, in my experience, and one of the most puzzling to them. The bright child who forgets everything. The child who can explain how the tides work and can't find their shoes. The puzzle dissolves when you separate intelligence from organisation. They're different equipment, on different timetables, and a nine-year-old can be far along on one and exactly where you'd expect on the other. Brightness doesn't pull the executive functions along with it. If anything, a bright child spends more of their attention inside their head, where the interesting things are, and less on the hall floor, where the coat is.

"They should know better" also confuses knowing with doing. Sam knows the kit should be in the bag. Ask him and he'll tell you. Knowing is a fact in his head. Doing it alone at twenty to nine is inhibition, working memory and time judgement working together under pressure, and chapters 3 to 6 are about why those are still growing. The brighter the child, the wider this gap can feel, because the knowing is so evidently there and the doing so evidently isn't, and the parent concludes that the only thing missing is will.

What's missing is age. The chess will still be there at fourteen. So will the kit, in the bag, if the handover has happened.

"I'm just being consistent"

Every parenting source says consistency matters, and you'd say the standard is you being consistent. Kit every Thursday. Tablet off at half past seven. Coat on the hook. If you let it go once, you've taught him that rules bend.

The NHS says children need consistency, and it says why. If you react to your child's behaviour one way one day and another way the next, it's confusing for them. Notice what that's about. It's about your response. Consistency, in the NHS's sense, means the same behaviour meets the same reaction. It isn't a claim about how high the standard should be. A parent can be perfectly consistent in expecting a nine-year-old to do an adult's task and perfectly consistent in being let down, and the consistency doesn't make the standard right. It makes the letdown reliable.

There's a difference between a consistent standard and a consistent response, and the habit has fused them. The standard is what you expect. The response is what you do when the expectation isn't met. You can move the first and keep the second. If the standard becomes "kit in the bag with the list", and the response to the list being skipped is the same every time, calm and small and certain, you're being exactly as consistent as before, and the standard is now one a nine-year-old can meet, and the response is one that teaches.

What you've been consistent about, if the list from chapter 1 is honest, is the letdown. Every Thursday the same expectation, the same failure, the same sigh, the same word. That's consistency, and

it's the wrong thing to be consistent about, because what a child learns from a perfectly consistent cycle of expectation and disappointment is that they disappoint, reliably, and chapter 17 is about what that lesson does.

There's a version of consistency that's about the other parent, and chapter 22 covers it. Here I'd only say that two adults holding different standards is the inconsistency the NHS is warning about, and that agreeing the columns together is what fixes it, not one parent winning.

Move the standard to the age and keep the response steady. That's consistency doing what the NHS meant it to do, which is give the child a world that makes sense, and a world in which you're asked for what you can do and helped to do it makes a great deal of sense to a nine-year-old.

"Other children manage"

At the school gate on Thursday there are children with their kits. Sam's friend has his. The girl from number twelve is always ready, always tidy, always on time. Other children manage, and yours doesn't, so the difference is yours.

Two things. The first is what you can see of other children. You see them at the gate, dressed, with kit, for ninety seconds. You don't see the morning behind it. The friend's mother packed the bag last night and put it by the door. The girl from number twelve has a list on the fridge and a father who stands at the bottom of the stairs. The children who manage are, as far as you can tell from the gate, children in houses with arrangements, and the arrangements are invisible to you for the same reason your own parents' were invisible to you, which is that a working arrangement looks like a child who just does it.

The second is the range. Gathercole's working memory line has a spread around it at every age. Some nine-year-olds hold more than others. Some are early on Munakata's transitions and some are late, and all of them are normal. The friend who remembers his kit may be at the top of the spread for nine, and Sam in the middle, and both of them will be at the top of the spread for fifteen in six years, because that's how development works. Comparing your child to the most organised child at the gate is comparing him to the top of a range and calling the distance a fault.

There's a version of this that's worth taking seriously, and it's chapter 22's. If your child is far below the range, not at the middle or the lower end but well outside it, and the school sees it too, that's a conversation to have with the school and the GP. But "other children manage" is nearly always a comparison with the visible end of a normal range, and the invisible end is at the same gate, going back for its kit.

And notice what you're doing to your own child by comparing. He's at the gate too, and he can see the friend with the kit, and if the comparison is said aloud he learns that he's the one who doesn't manage, which is the label with a witness. The friend's arrangement is worth learning from. The friend isn't worth measuring against, and the child can tell the difference between the two even when the parent can't.

Ask the friend's mother, if you know her well enough, how the kit gets into the bag. In my experience the answer is a laugh and a description of an arrangement, and the arrangement is what you're about to build.

"I'll be doing it for them at eighteen"

Here's the fear that keeps the standard high. If you pack the bag, you'll always pack the bag. If you make the list, you'll be making it at university. Help now is help forever, and the standard is the only thing standing between your child and a lifetime of being done for.

Munakata's third transition is the answer to this, and it's the most hopeful thing in the research. Children move from relying on signals in the environment to being self-directed. The move is developmental. It happens. What the signals do, in the meantime, isn't prevent it. They're the thing being moved from. A child who's cued at nine isn't a child being held back from self-direction.

They're a child at the stage before it, using the cues that the stage requires, and the self-direction comes as the underlying functions grow, which Best and Miller say they do throughout adolescence.

So the picture of an eighteen-year-old still being packed for by a parent isn't the result of packing at nine. In my experience it's the result of two other things. Either the parent went on doing everything long after the child could do it themselves, which is a failure of the handover in chapter 20 and not a consequence of having helped. Or the child was never helped, was labelled instead, and arrived at eighteen with a belief that they're the sort of person who can't, which is chapter 17's cost, and which does more to produce a helpless adult than any amount of packed bags.

The handover is the method, and it works like this. With you at first, then cued, then alone, one task at a time, moving each one along when it's been managed at the current step for a few weeks.

The list by the door at nine becomes a list the child writes at eleven, becomes a habit of checking the bag at thirteen, becomes nothing visible at sixteen, because it's in their head now, where the shelf has grown to hold it. That's not doing it for them at eighteen. It's the only route I know to their doing it for themselves, and the standard, held at adult height from nine, isn't a route at all. It's a place you've asked them to be and called them names for not reaching.

You won't be packing the bag at eighteen. You'll have handed it over at twelve, and you'll only have been able to because you were packing it with them at nine.

What the standard costs you

I've argued the mechanism. This chapter is the bill, and you've been paying it in the mornings.

The letdown itself. Daily, at twenty to nine and half past seven, the same small drop, the same sigh. A year of that is three hundred and sixty-five occasions of being disappointed by a nine-year-old for being nine, and disappointment repeated that often stops being about the kit and becomes a weather that you live in.

The anger. The standard's third failure is the one with the edge, and the edge is where shouting starts. An earlier book in this series is about the shout and I won't repeat it here, except to say that most of the shouting it describes sits on top of a standard set at the wrong height, and that moving the standard removes most of the occasions.

The label, and what it does to you. A parent who calls their child lazy most days comes to believe it, and a parent who believes their child is lazy treats them as lazy, and expects less, and the expecting less is the low expectation you were afraid of, arriving by the back door. The standard that was meant to raise the child has produced a parent who's given up on him in a specific way while still demanding everything.

The relationship. Every Thursday the child sees your face when the kit's not there. Three hundred faces a year. A child who meets that face most days learns something about what he is to you, and it isn't what you'd want him to learn, and it's built out of mornings.

The mornings themselves. Twenty to nine with a standard at adult height is a scene, most days. Twenty to nine with an arrangement is a list by the door and a child who ticks it, and the difference is forty minutes of your life, every day, that were being spent in a small war.

The sleep, if half past seven has become a nightly contest. A bedtime that begins with a fight is a bedtime that runs late, for both of you, and Diamond's list had lack of sleep on it, for the child's functions and for yours. A parent who's short of sleep holds the standard higher and the temper lower, and the child who's short of sleep meets it worse, and tomorrow's twenty to nine is made tonight at half past seven.

And the thing you're not seeing. A parent scanning for the kit that isn't there doesn't see the child who fed the cat unasked, who was kind to his sister, who did the reading without being told. An earlier book in this series is about that scan. Here I'd only say that the standard has a direction to it, and it points at what's missing, and a nine-year-old is mostly made of what's there.

What it does to them

The standard is quiet for the parent, who's only disappointed. It's loud for the child, who's told.

A child told most days that he's lazy learns that he's lazy. Not as an opinion he might dispute, but as a fact about himself, delivered by the person whose account of him he trusts most. He can't check it against Gathercole's line or Diamond's review. He's nine. He has a parent's word and a morning that seems to confirm it, and he takes the word into himself and carries it, and when he's fourteen and can't find his football boots he'll think "I'm so lazy", in your voice, and the thought will be as unhelpful to him then as the word was on Thursday.

There are two ways a child goes with that, in my observation, and both are bad. One stops trying. If you're lazy anyway, and the kit will be forgotten anyway, and the face will happen anyway, there's no point putting the effort in, and the effort was the thing that was going to grow the function. The other becomes anxious about it. This child checks the bag four times and still forgets the kit, because anxiety impairs the very functions being asked for, and now there's a child who's frightened of Thursday mornings and forgets more because he's frightened. Diamond's list of what impairs the executive functions had stress on it.

What the child doesn't learn is how to remember the kit, because nothing about the label carries that information. The child who's helped, who has the list and ticks it, is learning the thing itself, and

is also learning something about himself, which is that he's a person who manages when he's got the right set-up, and that's a true and useful thing to believe at nine and at forty.

And there's the small stuff, which is most of the day. A child who's scanned for failures learns to hide them. The reading book that didn't come home gets not mentioned. The kit that's forgotten gets a story. The child who could have said "I forgot, can we go back" says nothing and does PE in his pants, because saying invites the face. You've raised a child who manages you, and that's a skill he didn't need at nine and a distance you didn't want.

None of this is what you intend. You intend a capable child. But from where the child stands, the standard arrives as a daily verdict that he's failed a test he couldn't have passed, and the verdict is the only part of it he takes in.

Set the standard at the age

The next three chapters are the method. This one moves the standard. The next builds the arrangement. The third hands it over.

Three columns. Take the list from chapter 1 and sort each letdown into one of three. Alone, meaning your child can reliably do this with no cue. With a cue, meaning they can do it when reminded, or when a list or timer prompts them. With you, meaning it gets done when you do it together. Be honest, and use the evidence of the last month rather than the evidence of the best day.

Most of it goes in the middle. For a nine-year-old, in my experience, the alone column is short and the middle column is long. That's not a failure. That's the age. Munakata's transitions put most nine-year-olds squarely in the cued stage for most self-directed tasks, and sorting the list this way is the first time many parents see the gap as a stage rather than a fault.

The standard is the column, not the task. You still expect the kit in the bag every Thursday. What changes is which column you expect it from. Kit in the bag, with the list by the door, is a standard a nine-year-old can meet, and meeting it is what moves the task toward the alone column over time.

Move nothing to alone that hasn't been cued for a month. This is the rule that stops the standard drifting back up. A task earns its place in the alone column by being done reliably with a cue for

four weeks, and then having the cue removed and being done anyway. Until then it stays where it is, and forgetting it there isn't a letdown. It's information that it wasn't ready to move.

Adjust for the day. Diamond's list of what impairs the functions was stress, lack of sleep, loneliness and lack of exercise, and the NHS adds tired, hungry, overexcited, frustrated and bored. A child at the end of a bad day is a column lower than the same child on a Saturday morning. The standard moves with the state, and a parent who knows that asks less at half past seven than at half past four.

Write the columns down. On the fridge, if you like, or in your phone. The point is to make the standard a thing you've decided, at the age, rather than a thing the morning decides at twenty to nine.

Build the arrangement

The arrangement is the set of cues that let a child in the middle column meet the standard. It's what the classroom has and home hasn't, and it's not complicated.

The list by the door. Five things, in pictures or words depending on the age, at the child's eye level, by the door they leave through. Kit, book, coat, water bottle, lunch. The child checks it on the way out. Not you. Them, with you watching at first, then not. This does for the shelf what chapter 3 said needed doing. It takes the items off the child's working memory and puts them on the wall.

The bag packed together the night before. At nine, with you. You say "what do we need for tomorrow?", they answer, you both put it in. The bag goes by the door. The morning has one less thing on the shelf, and the child has practised the planning, which is the proactive control Munakata described, in the only way it can be practised at nine, which is alongside someone who has it.

The timer they can see. For the tablet, for getting dressed, for leaving. A kitchen timer or a sand timer, set where they can watch it, with the words "when it goes" rather than "in five minutes". Chapter 6 is why. Time becomes a thing they can see run out, and a thing they can see they can act on.

The warning. "Ten minutes and then it's bedtime" at twenty past seven, "two minutes" at twenty-eight past, "time" at half past, with the tablet handed to you rather than put down. Three cues instead of one, spaced, so that the inhibition that's being asked for at half

past has been prepared for since twenty past. This is what a good teacher does before every transition, and it's why the classroom works.

One instruction at a time. "Shoes, then coat, then bag" is three things on a nine-year-old's shelf. "Shoes" is one. Say the next when the first is done. An earlier book in this series is about asking once, close and quiet, and the same applies here, and the reason is Gathercole's line.

Cue, don't nag. A cue is a signal that arrives once, at the right moment, from a list or a timer or a single word. Nagging is the same signal repeated with rising heat. The first builds the function. The second builds resentment and teaches the child to wait for the heat, and the NHS's "try not to overreact" is about exactly this.

The visible clock. A clock the child can read, in the kitchen and in their room. Not a phone. A face they can glance at. Time judgement develops partly by being checked against a clock, and a child who can see the time is a child who can begin to hold it.

Be specific about what went right. The NHS says to be positive about the good things and to be specific. "You checked the list without me asking" tells the child what he did and that it was seen. It's the opposite of the label, and it's the thing that makes him do it again.

Hand it over slowly

The arrangement isn't the destination. It's the route. This chapter is how a task moves along it until the child is doing it alone, which is the standard you started with, reached by steps.

With you, then cued, then alone. Every task on the list starts wherever it honestly is. Packing the bag starts with you. Checking the list starts cued, with you standing there. Coming off the tablet starts cued, with the timer. Each moves one step at a time, and only forward when the current step has held.

One task at a time. Don't move everything at once. Pick the one that's most reliable at its current step, and move that. The kit, say, from with-you to cued, by stepping back from the packing and asking "what do you need?" from the doorway instead of the bedside. When that's held for three weeks, step back further.

Three weeks at each step. This is a rule of thumb and not a finding, and the notes say so. It's long enough for a routine to settle and short enough that the child isn't stuck at a step they've outgrown. If three weeks passes without a slip, move it. If there are slips, stay.

Remove the cue, keep the standard. When the kit has been ticked off the list for three weeks, take the kit off the list and see. If it goes in the bag anyway, it's moved to alone. If it doesn't, put it back on the list without comment, and try again in a month. Neither outcome is a letdown. Both are the handover working.

When it slips, back one step, not to the label. A task in the alone column that gets forgotten one Thursday isn't proof that the child can't. It's a slip, and the response is to put the cue back for a fortnight and then remove it again. What it's not is a return to "what is wrong with you", because nothing is, and chapter 23 is about the days when the word comes out anyway.

Let the child own the arrangement as they grow. At nine you make the list. At eleven they make it. At thirteen they decide whether they need one. Each of those is a handover, and the last one is the child taking over the arrangement itself, which is what self-directed means, and it's what Munakata's third transition looks like from a kitchen.

Expect the alone column to grow slowly and then fast. Little moves between nine and eleven, more between eleven and thirteen, and then, in most children, a great deal, as the functions Best and Miller described catch up with the tasks. The parent who's kept the standard at the age through those years arrives at fourteen with a child who does most of it alone and a relationship that wasn't spent on Thursdays.

The decision

You've got the argument and the method. What's left is to decide, and I'd like the decision to fit in one sentence.

When my child lets me down, I ask what a child their age can do alone, and I build the arrangement instead of reaching for the label.

Three parts.

The first is the question. Before the word, at twenty to nine, the question. What can a nine-year-old do alone? If the answer is "not this, not yet", the letdown isn't a letdown. It's a task in the wrong column.

The second is the arrangement. The list, the bag, the timer, the warning, the clock, the one instruction. Build it this week, for the three tasks that go wrong most.

The third is the handover. One step at a time, three weeks a step, cue removed when it's held, cue restored when it slips, the standard kept and the label dropped.

There's a form of planning that helps with rules like this, and it's been tested many times. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran reviewed ninety-four studies of it in 2006. You decide in advance what you'll do and when, in the form "when this happens, I'll do that", and people who plan that way follow through much more often than people who only hold the intention. So write three.

When I feel the word "lazy" or "careless" arriving, I'll ask myself what column this task is in, before I say anything.

When it's the evening before a school day, I'll ask my child "what do we need for tomorrow?" and pack the bag with them.

When I've asked my child to stop something, I'll have given a ten-minute warning first and a timer they can see.

What to expect. This is my expectation and not a finding. The first week, the list will be ignored twice and used three times, and the three will feel like nothing and the two will feel like the old Thursday. Keep it up. By the second week the child will be checking the list without being told to check the list, because it's by the door and it's got pictures on it and children like ticking things. The timer will work from the first night, mostly, because a thing you can see running out is easier to act on than a voice from the kitchen. Around the third week you'll have a Thursday with the kit in the bag and no reminder from you, and you'll notice that you'd have called that character and it was a list. By six weeks the mornings will be shorter and quieter and you'll have said the word fewer times than you can count on one hand. The child won't have become a different child. They'll be nine, in a house set up for nine, which is what they should have been all along.

Toddlers, teenagers, homework, the other parent and when the gap is too wide

The rule holds at every age. The columns move, and a few situations need a paragraph.

Toddlers. Almost everything is in the with-you column, and the standard that fails most is expecting a three-year-old to stop a thing on request. Diamond's inhibition is barely started at three. The arrangement is warnings, distraction, and doing it with them, and the NHS list of tired, hungry, overexcited, frustrated and bored explains most of what looks like defiance.

Teenagers. The wanting has grown up and the braking hasn't, which is Steinberg's account of adolescence, and it means a fourteen-year-old can be trusted with a great deal alone and still can't come off a screen at eleven at night without a cue. The handover accelerates through these years, and the label becomes more damaging, because a teenager believes what they're told about themselves with an adult's conviction. The arrangement for a teenager is agreed with them rather than built for them, and that agreeing is itself the handover.

Homework. The task with the most adult-height standard attached to it. Sit down alone, at a set time, and do forty minutes of something dull. That's proactive, self-directed control sustained over time, and at nine it's in the with-you or cued column for nearly everyone. A place, a time, a parent nearby doing their own

dull thing, and a timer, and the homework gets done. Alone at the kitchen table with a parent shouting from the next room, it doesn't, and it isn't laziness.

The other parent. If one of you holds the standard at adult height and the other builds arrangements, the child has two houses in one and the NHS's point about consistency applies to the two of you. Agree the columns together. Show the other parent the list from chapter 1 and the three columns from chapter 18 and let the evidence make the case.

Grandparents and "in my day". Chapter 7 is the argument. Their memory of you at nine has had the reminders edited out too. Ask them what you were actually like, and let them tell you.

When the gap is too wide. If your child is far outside the range for their age, not at the lower end of normal but well beyond it, and the school sees it too, and the arrangements that work for other children don't work for yours, that's worth taking further. The school's special needs coordinator is the first conversation, and the GP is the second. The NHS pages on attention deficit hyperactivity disorder describe what an assessment involves. Nothing in this book replaces that, and the arrangement in chapter 19 is often exactly what such a child needs more of, not less. The book's claim is only that most children who look like this are ordinary children with adult-height standards, and the way to find out is to move the standard first and see.

When the letdown has become the shout. The earlier book in this series on shouting at children is the one to read alongside this. This book removes most of the occasions. That one deals with the ones

that remain.

When you called them lazy again

It'll happen. A bad morning, a third reminder, the kit on the bed, and the word will be out before the question has arrived. You'll see his face, and then you'll remember the columns.

One word isn't the childhood. The list will show a month with more Thursdays that went right than any month before, and one morning is one morning. What happened is that the standard is old and the question is new, and the old thing is faster for a while.

Put it right the same day. An earlier book in this series calls this the repair and gives it a chapter, and the short version is three sentences, said to the child, that day, without a "but". "I called you lazy this morning. That wasn't fair, you're nine and I should have had the list by the door. I'm sorry." A child who hears that learns something more useful than the word taught, which is that the adult can be wrong about him and say so, and that the label wasn't the truth.

Work out which standard got through. Was it a task that's moved to alone too early? Put the cue back. Was it a time of day when the child had nothing left? Ask less then. Was it a task you've never sorted into a column, so the adult-height standard was still on it by default? Sort it tonight.

No streaks. Don't count mornings without the word. Count Thursdays with the kit, and let one bad morning be one line in a list that's mostly ticked.

There's a slip that's quieter than the word, and it's the sigh. You didn't say lazy. You breathed out through your nose and looked at the ceiling, and he saw it, and it did the word's work. The repair is the same. "I did a big sigh at you this morning, that wasn't fair." Children read the face as well as the word, and a repair for a face is a thing they'll remember longer than the face.

And notice the child's face when you say sorry. In my observation it's surprise the first time, and then something like relief, and then, over months, a child who's less braced at twenty to nine, because the worst that happens now is a word that gets taken back.

The PE kit, again

It's Thursday, twenty to nine, some months on. The bag is by the door because it was packed last night, by Sam, while you asked "what do we need?" from the doorway and he answered without looking up. The kit is in it. On the way out he glances at the list, taps the kit picture, taps the book picture, and goes. You didn't say anything. You'd have called that character six months ago. It's a list with pictures on it at a nine-year-old's eye level, and a bag that gets packed at bedtime, and a boy who's had three months of practice at the step before alone.

The coat is on the hook, mostly. Not always. It's in the cued column and it moves back to with-you on the days he's had a bad one, and you've stopped minding, because you know which column it's in. The tablet went off at half past seven last night when the timer went, and he handed it over, and said "one more minute" and you said "the timer's gone" and he sighed and went, and the whole thing took forty seconds and nobody's voice went up.

The word hasn't been said for three weeks. You said it a month ago, on a morning with a dentist's appointment in it, and put it right that evening, and he said "it's OK" in a way that told you it had been. The list from chapter 1 is in the kitchen drawer with the three columns on it, and the alone column has two things in it now that weren't there in September, and the with-you column has one thing fewer.

None of this is a transformation. He's nine. He'll forget the kit again, probably next month, and the response will be to put it back on the list without comment. The mornings are twenty minutes shorter and a good deal quieter. And he told you last week, unprompted, about a thing at school that had gone wrong, and you noticed that he'd told you, and that six months ago he'd have said nothing because saying invited the face.

If you take one thing from this book, take this. Tonight, put a list of five things by the door at your child's eye level, and tomorrow, when they leave, say nothing and watch. That's the whole method. Everything else is detail.

Notes

This book gives general information about an everyday habit. It isn't medical, psychological or educational advice, and it's no substitute for a teacher, a special needs coordinator, a health visitor or a GP who knows your child. The NHS guidance I mention is for England as I found it in September 2026. The book takes no position on any diagnosis.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction or correction notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 2, 7, 14, 16, 18, 20, 23 and 24. Sam, the kit, the coat, the reading book and the tablet are invented. The three columns, the three weeks and the arrangement are my suggestions and haven't been tested as a method.

Before you start. The NHS pages on attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, as fetched for earlier books in this series. The earlier book on shouting is Not in front of the children.

Chapter 3. Gathercole, Pickering, Ambridge and Wearing, "The structure of working memory from 4 to 15 years of age", *Developmental Psychology* 40, 2004, pages 177 to 190. The summary gives the shape of the growth and not spans at particular ages, so the chapter says "fewer" and no more. The shelf and the Thursday morning are mine.

Chapter 4. Munakata, Snyder and Chatham, "Developing cognitive control: three key transitions", *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 21, 2012, pages 71 to 77. A review of laboratory research, and the chapter says the application to a Thursday is mine.

Chapter 5. Diamond, "Executive functions", *Annual Review of Psychology* 64, 2013, pages 135 to 168. A review. The account of what coming off a tablet requires is mine, using her three core functions.

Chapter 6. Droit-Volet, "Time perception in children: a neurodevelopmental approach", *Neuropsychologia* 51, 2013, pages 220 to 234. A review. No ages are given in the chapter because the summary doesn't give thresholds. What "five minutes" means to a child is my observation.

Chapter 8. Best and Miller, "A developmental perspective on executive function", *Child Development* 81, 2010, pages 1641 to 1660. A review. The claim about what does the growing is my reading.

Chapter 9. Munakata and colleagues as above. The description of a classroom as a set of cues is mine.

Chapter 10. The NHS page "Dealing with child behaviour problems", for tired, hungry, overexcited, frustrated and bored. Diamond as above, for what impairs the executive functions. The rest is mine.

Chapter 11. Steinberg, "A social neuroscience perspective on adolescent risk-taking", *Developmental Review* 28, 2008, pages 78 to 106. A review, about adolescents rather than nine-year-olds, and

the chapter says so. The account of a nine-year-old's no is my observation.

Chapter 12. Diamond as above, for the controversy over executive functions and fluid intelligence. The pattern of the bright child who forgets is my observation.

Chapter 13. The NHS page as above, for consistency and why it matters. The distinction between a consistent standard and a consistent response is mine.

Chapter 15. Munakata and colleagues, and Best and Miller, as above. The account of how helpless adults are produced is my observation.

Chapter 17. Diamond as above, for stress impairing the functions. The rest is mine.

Chapter 19. Gathercole and colleagues, Munakata and colleagues, and Droit-Volet as above. The NHS page as above, for not overreacting and for being specific about the good things. The earlier book on asking once is Not in front of the children. The earlier book on noticing what's fine is Thank them now.

Chapter 21. Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The rule hasn't been tested as a package, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 22. Steinberg as above. Diamond as above. The NHS pages as above. The earlier book on shouting as above.