

How to Apply Ideas from 'Clear Thinking' to Parenting

Most people read *Clear Thinking* to improve their own thinking. But when you're considering parenting and your kids, you're now shaping someone else's thinking.

A few of the core concepts in *Clear Thinking* come up repeatedly in my household with two boys, now 14 and 13. And while you'll have to tailor these to the age and situation of your own children, I think you'll find these ideas useful.

Positioning

Are you playing on Easy Mode or Hard Mode?

So often, we consider the moment we are required to think as all that matters and we fail to consider the position we find ourselves in. When I talk about positioning to my kids, I use the terms "easy mode" or "hard mode" to highlight the position they put themselves in.

An example may help illuminate. At the start of grade seven, one of my kids came home and handed me a test with one of the lowest grades he'd ever received. I looked at him as he said, "I did my best," shrugged his shoulders, and walked away.

When I sat down with him later that night, we discussed what it means to do our best.

Doing your best is often about the position you put yourself in rather than the result you get.

I asked him what it meant to put himself in a good position for success on a test. He listed factors like sleeping well, eating a healthy breakfast, avoiding arguments with his brother, and studying effectively. At that moment, he realized he hadn't done his best.



Too often, when people say they did their best, they mean they did their best at the moment with little regard for what came before it. We think the same way when it comes to decisions. (“I made the best decision I could given the circumstances,” and we don’t consider our contribution to those circumstances.)

In my son’s case, I have no doubt he gave his best in the hour he wrote the test. But he was playing on Hard Mode.

If you don’t prepare for a meeting and someone asks you a question that you should know the answer to but don’t, you put yourself in a poor position for success. Sure, you might luck out, but you didn’t do your best. If things don’t work out, it’s easy to walk away and tell yourself (and others) you did your best, given your position. Had you really done your best, you never would have found yourself in such a poor position.

Doing your best isn’t about the result.

Over the long term, the average person who constantly puts themselves in a good position (easy mode) beats the genius who finds themselves in a poor position (hard mode).

What looks like talent is often good positioning. And the best way to put yourself in a good position is with good preparation.

Of course, this isn’t just for test-taking.

- When you’re not kind, you’re choosing to play on hard mode.
- When you’re not helping around the house, you’re choosing to play on hard mode.
- When you’re choosing to stay up late, eat junk, and not take care of your body, you’re choosing to play on hard mode.
- etc.

The kids resonate with the language “Easy Mode” and “Hard Mode.”



Managing Defaults

The Gas or Water

A common scenario parents with multiple children find themselves dealing with is bickering.

When I catch the kids bickering, I used to intervene and tell them WHAT to do. I'd say "Stop that," or "We don't do that." That helped establish norms, but it wasn't effective at getting them to exercise judgment.

Around that time, I switched to asking a simple question: "Is this behavior moving you closer or further from the things you want?" (Positioning - without calling it positioning).

That proved very effective. But it was cumbersome to say in the moment. We shortened it to "Gas or Water"? Which are three simple words that allow them to catch themselves in the moment and allow them to respond consciously.

If this sounds similar to easy mode and hard mode, it is. I use it when they're escalating. A few of my friends have adopted it not only with their kids - but in their relationship. It's proved very effective when one partner just says water or gas?

Another effective thing I've used with the kids to help them manage the urges that get others in trouble is creating rituals that become second nature. When they first went into grade 7 they had quite the shock - not only did they go from zero homework to about 90 minutes a night but they went to school in a language they barely knew (French). Every night was an argument to get homework done. We'd argue about when and where it happened. Often we'd argue about whether it should happen at all. I decided to use a ritual (which is a form of Automatic Rule) to change the behavior.

The ritual looked like this – come home – shower – snack, and homework.

Simple. And powerful.

It took about a month of consistency to cement the ritual, but now they follow it



like clockwork.

You can create automatic rules/rituals for the kids anywhere they use willpower to do something they could do by default.

Handling Mistakes

Mistakes are as tricky for kids as they are for adults. The first step is dropping the victim mentality and establishing ownership.

One effective way to do this with kids (and adults!) is to ask them what their contribution to the current situation is ... this helps them avoid all the blame and sets the stage for learning.

Then I get them to write it out in what we call a “learning journal.” The learning loop looks like this: Experience → Reflection → Compression → Action.

The mistake is the “experience.” If you want them to learn, you need them to “reflect.”

Your contribution is about opening the pathway between the experience and reflection (which you can’t open if you don’t see your contribution).

Once the pathway is open, I want them to reflect. It’s time to write it out and make the invisible visible.

When the kids make a mistake, my playbook looks like this:

- It might not be your fault, but It’s your responsibility to do something about it.
- I remind them that what you do in this moment will make the future easier or harder. (This is especially effective if they are lying and about to lie again.)
- Tell me your contribution to this problem.
- I want you to write it out.



Our learning journal is a few simple questions:

- What was the situation?
- What did I choose to do?
- What happened?
- What would I do differently next time?

These are only a sampling of the ideas in Clear Thinking and how to implement them. It's time for you to dive into the book!

Email shane@farnamstreetblog.com and tell me how you use the ideas with your kids!

These ideas are from *Clear Thinking: Turning Ordinary Moments into Extraordinary Results* by Shane Parrish.

Ever wondered why the world's most successful individuals seem to have an uncanny ability to be in the right place at the right time? It's not luck; it's positioning. They are rarely backed into a corner by circumstances, and you don't have to be either.

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