

Parenting Playbook
by Kurt Arehart - 2023

Eight children swirled in play on the Connor's driveway, ranging in age from eight to four, boys and girls. This was common, as the Connors had two popular children, they had an adjustable-height basketball goal, and the large expanse of concrete, decorated in chalk drawings, was uncluttered by cars.

Age thirty-eight Kurt crossed the Rainwater Road to the Connor's place to call age six Tyler home for dinner. It was not Kurt's way to shout across the road, but rather, to come near and beckon Tyler quietly, offering the private advice that he could play for five more minutes before they needed to leave for dinner.

But there was a problem. Age six Adam, eldest son of the Rosen's, two houses south on Rainwater, was again acting out dangerously. He had picked up a jump rope with heavy wooden handles and was twirling it with gathering speed in the center of play. The accelerating wooden handle was quickly becoming a weapon and Adam was unaware or unconcerned about the likelihood of injuring a child.

Sue Ellen Rosen barked at her son Adam on a daily basis and he long ago found her threats to be empty and ignored them with impunity. Kurt took a different approach with Adam when he was a guest playing with Tyler. The Arehart rules of conduct and play, well understood, must be observed or Adam was promptly sent home for the day without warning, threat or second chances. The next day brought a clean slate and a fresh welcome. And another dismissal if bad behavior warranted it. Adam soon learned that Mr. and Mrs. Arehart meant what they said, and behaved well in the Arehart home.

But this was different. On the Connor's driveway, Kurt had no real authority. He was not Adam's parent. This was not his home. Kurt was just an adult with the opinion that a small child was about to be hurt, maybe seriously.

Pitching his voice so Adam could hear him over the patter of playground shrieks and laughter, Kurt dropped to a knee and beckoned Adam over. Adam walked to Kurt, the jump rope trailing behind him. Kurt continued to beckon until they were eye to eye, two feet apart.

"I am afraid that jump rope handle is going to hurt someone, and that makes me angry. You can't be here anymore today."

Adam's eyes grew wide. He was not used to being spoken to in this way, one-on-one, a direct, private conversation, and he was a bit off balance.

"You have two choices: You can go home right now, and that will be the end of it. Or, I can take you home, and explain to your mom how you were endangering others and why I had to bring you home. Which would you like?"

"I want Cheerios.", proclaimed age two Tyler when asked his breakfast preference.

Nancy rummaged in the pantry and remembered the Cheerios had run out yesterday. "Sorry honey, they're gone. What else would you like?"

"I want Cheerios!", this time quite declarative, but not yet a shout.

"You know what I wish? I wish we had so many Cheerios that we could fill up the bathtub with them and you could dig down into them like at the beach. Wouldn't that be great?"

"Yeah!" A pause as Tyler imagines this image. "I'll have Rice Krispies".

When Nancy was pregnant with Tyler in 1987, she found and read a stack of books on pregnancy and delivery, and pointed Kurt to the most helpful ones, which he promptly read. When Tyler was about to walk and form words she read another stack of books, this time on child behavior and parenting. In this review, one stood out from the others: *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* - by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish.

While other books she read might dive deep into theories on the phases of child development and why a child might act out, only Faber provided concrete examples of day to day child behavior and how best to meet it. And best of all, it was based on solid communication skills. Just like adults, children respond best when they feel seen and heard, sense that they matter, and are offered a measure of dignity and respect. Parents retain clear authority as they guide the child's growth toward autonomy and reduce the sting of being corrected by adroitly separating unwanted behavior from the person.

And maybe best of all, with this style of parenting, a behavior correction, if handled skillfully, may never have to be made again.

Nancy and Kurt bought in fully, committing to parent Tyler in this style uniformly. If they backed each other reliably, Tyler would never sense any daylight between them, and never attempt to wedge them apart to his advantage.

Which brings us back to that scene with the cheerios. Nancy had read this exact scenario in Faber, and stood ready with her lines. She was "fulfilling with fantasy". She let Tyler know that his desire for cheerios was heard and understood. That his wishes matter. With this in hand, he easily settled for Rice Krispies.

Nancy, age thirty-three and Tyler, age one were off to the food market. Tyler was seated in the large metal wire shopping cart, facing Nancy but with his back to their movement through the store. Nancy noticed Tyler was getting a bit short-tempered, judged his blood-sugar was low, and gave him a bagel to chew on. She'd pay for it at check-out, whether he finished it or not.

But there was little chance he'd have finished the bagel by check-out. Tyler was a very slow, deliberate eater. While this required extra time budgeting, he rarely brought anything back up, which was a fine trade.

So it was that Tyler still had half his bagel when they came back out into the parking lot and arrived at the Arehart's lovely new Nissan Maxima wagon with plush gray interior.

Kurt had made a hard rule that there was to be no eating in the car. At the time he reported to John McAuliffe, a brilliant if self absorbed man with a serious weight problem. John was morbidly obese and would try a binge diet followed by binge eating, much of it in the privacy of his car. Many a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken met its end this way. And Dunkin Donuts. And Big Macs.

John's car was loaded with the detritus of his obsessive eating: wrappers, stains and crumbs, and Kurt, in full business suit, was sometimes obliged to settle into this rancid mess when John would insist on driving to a meeting or sales call.

Kurt could not control John or the interior of John's car. But he could certainly control his own car. So Tyler was not allowed to eat in the car. And as a matter of fair play, Kurt and Nancy would not eat in the car either, certainly not when Tyler was along.

Preparing to lift Tyler from the shopping cart into his child seat in the back seat of the Maxima, Nancy said: "Give me the bagel. We don't eat in the car. You can have it back when we get home."

This would be a five minute drive from Wilton, Connecticut's Stop & Shop up to Kurt and Nancy's little cottage overlooking the Norwalk River valley. But when you are age one, five minutes can seem a long haul. Tyler refused to hand over the bagel. Nancy, firmly: "Tyler! Give me that bagel right now. You'll get it back when we get out of the car at home."

Tyler refused, and without another word the consequence fell. Nancy wrenched the bagel from his hand, and loaded the screaming child into the car, belting him in securely as always. Tyler kept up his outraged screaming the entire drive home. Once home, and out of the car, Nancy handed the bagel back to Tyler without a word. He quieted instantly and resumed gnawing on it.

Several days later Nancy was again with Tyler at the Stop & Shop. Again she gave him a bagel to fuel him through the shopping. Again they arrived at the Maxima with half a bagel.

“Give me the bagel. We don’t eat in the car.”

Tyler handed it over immediately and without protest.

A stunned Nancy received the bagel and handed it back when they got out of the car after a peaceful drive home. She had played it by the book, and it worked. She had issued her instruction twice, then delivered the consequence of misbehavior without a word, in this case wrenching the bagel from Tyler’s hand. Had she made a threat to enforce her demand, Tyler may have seen this as a challenge that must be met. And so often threats turn out to be hollow. Instead, Tyler learned that an instruction ignored will bring swift, rational consequence. He also learned that tactical crying was useless with Nancy. Another important lesson.

Kurt sat on a bench at the edge of a great playground in Shelley Lake Park in Raleigh. Elaborate climbing structures were coming into fashion, and this one had multiple ladders, elevated platforms and walkways and a variety of slides back down the surface sand. And it was well populated, with more than twenty children hooting and laughing as they climbed up, ran about, and slid back down, changing their routes as they pleased. Age six Tyler was among them, having a fine time. Other children were content to sit in the sand, playing with bucket and shovel. It was a fine late afternoon Sunday in autumn, a particularly lovely time of the year in Raleigh.

A mother checked her watch, stood up, and called to her age five son that they had to go.

He ignored her, and clambered up another ladder.

She raised her voice. “Ethan, you get over her this instant!”. Ethan played on.

“Ethan! If you don’t come here right now, there will be no TV after dinner!”.

Ethan was not relenting.

Moving with clear anger, the mom stalked over to Ethan, grabbed his arm sharply, and hauled him from the play structure and toward the parking lot. Mom lectured hotly all the while and Ethan wailed.

Kurt winced. Not a great outcome.

He then checked his watch and saw he and Tyler should be leaving soon. Kurt ventured across the sand, approaching a spot where he could speak to Tyler without yelling. “Hey, we need to leave soon. You can have five minutes if you want, or we can leave now.”

Tyler, enthusiastically: “Five more minutes!”

“You got it!”

Three minutes later: “Two minutes to go!”

When the five minutes expired, Kurt stood, caught Tyler’s eye with a gesture and pointed to his watch. Tyler came at once and they left for home.

Again, this was right out of Faber. Kurt offered Tyler genuine choices, giving him a sense of control. And Kurt communicated in a quiet, private way that gave Tyler a measure of dignity.

Whenever Kurt beckoned Tyler, it might be a quiet correction, like: “I noticed you were a bit rough passing that little girl up on the ramp. I know tag is super fun, but please be more careful around the little ones.”

Or just as often it might be quiet, private praise: “Hey, I saw how you chose to share your bucket with that other boy. That was a kind and generous act, and I love it.”

Age six Coleman prepared his breakfast, poured milk over his Cheerios, then carried his bowl and spoon carefully to the table.

Ten minutes later, Kurt noticed the milk still sitting out, and knew with certainty that Coleman was the culprit. “Coleman, I see the milk sitting out. If it doesn’t go back in the fridge it will spoil and we’ll need to buy more. Waste like that really bothers me.”

Without a word, Coleman got up and put the milk away.

“Thanks, mano.”

A few days later, Kurt noticed the milk had again been left out by Coleman. “Coleman, milk.”

Coleman got up and put it away. “Sorry.”

Faber teaches parents to separate the behavior from the child and inform while correcting. Kurt expressed how he felt about the behavior, without personalizing it as Coleman’s defect. This is much easier for the child to receive.

Very importantly Kurt did not ask Coleman if he had left the milk out. That might invite a panicked lie. Instead, Kurt simply described the situation and how he felt about it, without accusation.

And the next time, Kurt skipped the lecture and issued the briefest possible reminder. No need to push Coleman’s nose in it by repeating the full lecture. Growth with dignity.

Faber touches on much more, and you really should consider buying and reading *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* - by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish.

Here are a few more broad concepts that informed our parenting, some from Faber, some gleaned from long years of successfully working with individuals and teams professionally.

Modeling Respectful Communication

Kids, and everyone else, will pay more attention to what you do than what you say. So it is vital to model the behavior you expect from your children.

I was always keen to model open, gregarious communication when out in public with my sons. In a store I would approach a staffer with a friendly tone and smile and ask for help in a respectful way, so my sons could see the positive results of connecting with people who can help. I did the same with neighbors and my in-laws, who lived with us. So much more powerful to show children how to interact with respectful attentiveness, rather than just lecture on the subject.

Treat Children Like Little Humans

Children understand far more than many adults presume. Speaking in front of them in the third person as if they are not there suggests that they are less-than, that they don't really matter.

Ralph, my father-in-law, at the dinner table, directed to Kurt: "So, is Tyler going to play baseball again next spring?", this while age six Tyler is sitting right across from him.

Kurt: "Well, let's ask him. Tyler, how do you feel about baseball next year? Or would you rather give soccer a try?"

Ralph eventually caught on and related directly to his grandsons more often, and Tyler got the boost of being taken seriously as a person whose ideas matter.

Cringe-worthy are parents who treat a child like she is not there, not listening.

Alma, as her age two Sophie is at her side: “Sophie is a wild-child. She basically does whatever she wants and I can’t stop her. She’s driving me crazy. I have to bribe her with candy to get her to do anything.”

Alma clearly thinks Sophie is not listening and understanding. Alma has handed over the keys to the castle, and a terrible home experience is brewing for both mother and child.

The Truth, Always

Children are very good at tracking who in their lives can be trusted, and who has been caught in falsehoods. Nancy and I always went to great lengths to speak truth to our sons, even when a “little white lie” seemed the tempting, easier path. Being truthful takes more work, but consider it another wise investment in a strong relationship. Consider this example with Kurt and age six Coleman in the car, coming home from soccer practice:

Coleman: “I want to go to McDonalds.”

Some parents, perhaps in a rush to get home and check on some work issues, might resort to the quick and easy “I don’t have any money.”

But Coleman will soon see that Kurt does indeed have money, and that he lied about it. What else is Kurt lying about?

Instead:

“I want to go to McDonalds.”

“OK, I hear that. But I really don’t want to.”

“Why?”

“Because Mom has prepared a good dinner for us and we should respect her effort.”

“Yeah, but I want to go to McDonalds.”

“Well, if I rushed home from work to make dinner for us, and you and Mom went to McDonalds instead, I know I’d be pretty upset, maybe even a little hurt. Let’s not do that to her.”

“Maybe next week?”

“That might work out. Let’s see about that.”

That was a lot more work than a quick lie. Yet Nancy and I always made the extra effort. If we never lied to Tyler or Coleman, even little white lies, then we had the right to expect the same from them. And that’s what we got.

Unpacking Advertising

I worked in various marketing roles through my working career, and so was sensitive to the manipulations of advertisers. I resisted being told what to desire and purchase, and I wanted my sons to take up this resistance too. While sitting with age five Tyler watching a football game, an advertisement for Pepsi aired, with twenty or so beautiful, fit and tanned friends at a beach party laughing and enjoying life immensely, and with a cooler full of Pepsi at the center of it all.

Kurt: “They’re trying to tell us that if we drink Pepsi we’ll have loads of pretty friends and go to beach parties and laugh all the time. Do you think that’s true?”

Tyler: “No.”

Kurt: “Yeah, Pepsi is just water with cola flavor and some burnie carbonization pumped into it.” (Tyler deeply disliked carbonized anything.) “The Pepsi folks are trying to connect a good feeling to Pepsi so we’ll want to buy it, but I don’t believe it.”

Again, and again, Kurt would unpack some ad for little Tyler. Then one day, as an ad for a Chevrolet Impala was airing, loaded with beautiful, smiling twenty-somethings, age six Tyler said: "They're trying to make us want that car."

Bingo.

Growing Toward Autonomy

Nancy and I always viewed good parenting as the process of working ourselves out of a job. We wanted our sons to grow resourceful and independent as quickly as they could handle it. Each development curve will be different, but most children can handle far more than we demand of them.

Coleman attended the Montessori School of Raleigh, and at age six he had one recurring homework assignment: he had to make his own lunch each day. We were to shop in the makings of something he wanted that was nutritionally acceptable. He wanted peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. So we provided peanut butter, jelly and bread, plus ziplock bags, then stepped back.

A six year old's first attempt at a peanut butter and jelly sandwich is a terrible thing. He got peanut butter and jelly all over the kitchen, and took twenty minutes doing it.

As I looked on, being a little obsessive about neatness and order, I nearly vibrated with the strain of not stepping in, finishing the job and cleaning up. But I clenched my teeth and held on. We would be a bit late today. And the kitchen could be cleaned later.

Coleman enjoyed his sandwich quite a bit, because he had made it himself.

The next day he was a little faster, and contained his mess to some degree.

By the end of the week he was neat and efficient. A miracle.

Building on this, we introduced other things he might make for himself when our dinner offerings did not excite him. At age eight we taught him to make pancakes from Bisquick. Then waffles. At ten he was whipping up pots of mac cheese when he felt the urge.

We never forced him to eat what we had prepared for dinner, and we allowed him to make his own alternative afterwards, provided that he cleaned up after himself.

We introduced the alarm clock at age six. That which wakes you from a sound sleep will not be popular. Better to thrust the alarm clock into this unhappy role. Both Tyler and Coleman became responsible for waking, dressing and preparing breakfast and their packed lunch. We just got out of the way.

Laundering one's own clothes came at age twelve.

Perhaps the cruelest exercise in learned autonomy was inflicted on Tyler at age seven. This was in 1994, and the Arehart clan was gathering for a family reunion week in Ocean City, New Jersey. There would be days on the beach with the possibility of ice cream, or pizza or fresh-cut french fries from the boardwalk vendors. There would be nights on the boardwalk with the possibility of amusement park rides, more ice cream, and maybe some caramel popcorn. And then there were the many toy stores to tempt a seven year old.

I foresaw a week of Tyler tugging on my sleeve constantly, asking for money for all these things, and decided to get ahead of it. I told Tyler that he had a special allowance of twenty dollars for the week to spend as he liked. (Twenty dollars in 1994, for an age seven boy, was a princely sum, ample for one's entertainment for the week with a bit of planning.) And, at the end of the week, if he had any money left over it was his to keep.

So began a very stressful week for the poor boy. He agonized over each purchase decision, deciding if there was sufficient value. He continually calculated how much he would have left before making any purchase. He decided he wanted a hermit crab with cage and feed, and this would consume eight of his twenty dollar budget. Things got tight as the week wore on, and Tyler passed on taking amusement rides with his cousins because he could not part with his money.

Tyler survived the week and got his hermit crab. And he learned a lot about money and planning. I felt a little badly for creating so much stress in his life, but grow he did.

Payoff Moments

Selling The Benefits

Age seven Coleman was in the car with me driving home from a museum visit in the middle of a Saturday afternoon. Coleman wanted to stop at McDonalds, yet knew well that I was wary of fast food in general and McDonalds in particular because of their marketing lure and suspect food.

Coleman: “You know Dad, if we were to stop at McDonalds, you could get a coffee and relax while watching me in the play structure. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

My eyes went wide. And I thought: “That little devil is selling the benefits to ME of stopping at McDonalds. This is beautiful! The pitch is a little awkward, but I love the idea, the attempt to see it from my side.”

I said aloud: “Huh! You think their coffee is any good? And how long might I enjoy watching you play?”

Coleman: “I think thirty minutes would be nice for both of us.”

I thought to myself, “This is great! I need to encourage this sort of thought process, of trying to understand someone else’s needs and interests.”

And to McDonalds we went. And I resolved that, whenever possible, I would roll with Coleman's well made suggestions that artfully sold the benefits of a thing to me.

The Soapy Problem

When Tyler was age six I was leading a company bicycle race team, and the team was away for a weekend of training on the Blue Ridge Parkway. This was a family affair, and many folks brought spouses and kids since there was plenty of room in the mountain house we had for the weekend. Nancy was on the team, and another adult watched all the kids, Tyler included, as we went off for thirty beautiful and hilly miles of riding Saturday morning.

When the twelve riders returned, we started working our way through the three available showers. Nancy was in the first wave, and was all soaped-up when the power failed. Since the house was on well water, and the pump stopped working, Nancy was soapy in the dark, and with no way to rinse off.

"Hey you guys! I'm stuck in the shower with no water! I need to rinse off!"

We heard her and let her know, but did not know how to help. We had no water access anywhere in the house.

Nancy: "So what's the status? What are we going to do?"

Nobody had any ideas.

Then little Tyler spoke up: "You guys have water bottles on your bikes, right? Is there water left in any of them?"

Three of my co-worker / teammates and I just stared at each other. Did Tyler just beat us to the answer?

I said, “Um, yeah... I know I have some left in my bottles. Anybody else?”

Bob: “Yeah, I’ve got loads! Way to go Tyler!”

And so we gathered up the bike bottles, and Nancy was saved.

And then we lavishly celebrated Tyler’s creative solution. I wanted to make sure this was a great moment for Tyler: to be the guy with the great idea!

And so it was for both Tyler and Coleman. We encouraged creative thinking and problem solving always, and took time to celebrate these great moments when they came. And they came because we listened, and welcomed good ideas from everywhere.

To wrap up, let’s return to young Adam Rosen. Recall we had left him on the Connor’s driveway with a decision to make.

Kurt, down on his knee, eye to eye with age six Adam: “You have two choices: You can go home right now, and that will be the end of it. Or, I can take you home, and explain to your mom how you were endangering others and why I had to bring you home. Which would you like?”

Adam stood transfixed for a moment. This was different. Adults did not speak to him in this way. A new experience. His indecision flicked across his face. His mouth worked for a moment but nothing came out. After five seconds with nothing more from Kurt, Adam dropped the jump rope handle, spun and walked himself home.

Kurt had offered Adam some control, some self-determination, if within hard limits acceptable to Kurt.

Adam felt empowered to choose his path, and he chose well.