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The Kid Tamer

When the Dixons signed a family coach, they already knew they had a good life and good kids. They just weren't sure, in these uncertain times, that good was good enough.

By Karen Houppert Sunday, December 21, 2008; Page W08

Sheila and Ernest Dixon are perched uncomfortably on the edge of a couch in Lisa Carey's Springfield home office. Parents of three boys -- Damon, 11, Dorion, 9, and Darron, 3 -- the Dixons are describing their chaotic home life. They offer up examples like weary travelers laden with suitcases, hoping Lisa will take a few and lighten their load. There is Dorion's exasperating inability to ever locate his shinguards in time for soccer practice. There is the lunch appointment an overwhelmed Sheila completely forgot about. There is Damon's shyness. Darron's reluctance in potty training. Worries about the boys' future.

SLIDESHOW

Previous Next



Family coach Lisa Carey, far right, stands with the Dixon family: from left, Dorion, 9, Darron, 3, Sheila, Ernest and Damon, 11. (Copyright Rebecca Drobis 2008)

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It gets worse, they say.

Sheila explains that Ernest, who works the night shift as a pharmacist at CVS, will be opening his own pharmacy later in the fall. He'll be working doubletime -- one shift at each place. She worries about how she will manage the kids' complicated schedules and whether she can simultaneously be a good parent and run her own growing business providing information and networking opportunities to women entrepreneurs. Sheila tells Lisa that she is concerned about what will become of her family as they all struggle with the more chaotic pace. She feels overstressed already, and the hard part hasn't even begun. "I'm just tired," says Sheila.

Lisa sits forward in her desk chair and listens as this tale of woe unfolds, nodding sympathetically. She is a round woman wearing dark slacks and a white polo. Inscribed on the shirt's upper left side, below an embroidered lighthouse, is her company motto: "Carey Coaching: Lighting the way to success."

Lisa Carey is a "family coach" -- the latest offshoot of the

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coaching industry that has penetrated every nook and cranny of our culture -- and she is meeting with the Dixons for the first time to offer advice on how to streamline their lives and fine-tune their parenting. Her system is based on the "Parent as Coach" method created by Diana Sterling, author of a book of the same name and proprietor of the Parent As Coach Academy, run out of her New Mexico office. The premise: Sterling trains family coaches like Lisa, who in turn coach couples like Sheila and Ernest to be better parents, while those parents coach their kids to be better people. As Lisa meets with the Dixons that first morning in May, she is sympathetic about the challenges of parenting, as she shows them a copy of Sterling's book and explains how it changed her life.

"My daughter, Joanne, was about 11 years old when she decided she wasn't going back to school after seventh grade," Lisa tells them. Joanne, who is now 19, had a visual-processing disorder. Trying to get her through 20 vocabulary words a week was brutal, Lisa recalls. Frustrated, her daughter would melt down in tantrums. Lisa didn't know how to help her. Then one day, Lisa heard a broadcast of Sterling discussing her parent-as-coach dogma.

"The hair stood up on my arms," she says. A week later, Lisa was flying out to take Sterling's workshop.

"Joanne is now a student at [Penn State](#)," Lisa says proudly as she hands the Dixons their personal copy of "Parent As Coach."

Sheila, who has been nervously fingering her handbag straps, grasps the book as if Lisa has tossed out a lifeline. But Lisa cautions that the parent-as-coach program she offers will take some serious elbow grease. Are they ready for that?

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Both Ernest and Sheila nod; they are. In her gut, Sheila knows her boys are low maintenance, compared with some children. But a vague unease suffuses Sheila's parenting, which is what drove her here in the first place. Is that flightiness a character flaw she must nip in the bud or just a stage her middle child is passing through? Should she downplay the solitary B that Damon got in math last year because he is so hard on himself, or are his worries justified? Will little things become bigger things that grow till they jeopardize the boys' later success? Sheila finds herself anxiously wondering. *Am I*

*the best mom I can be?*

\*\*\*

Such deep-seated anxiety among modern parents, combined with unprecedented affluence, has spawned a \$2.1 trillion "mommy market," according to BSM Media, a marketing firm specializing in the field. The market bulges with everything from DVDs that promise to teach your infant genius sign language to Music Together groups for the 1-year-old wunderkind to etiquette classes for a polished, ivy-primed preteen. And worried parents buy.

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Family coaches are on the cutting edge of this parenting industrial complex, part of the booming coach industry that took off in the early '90s and now includes personal coaches, business coaches, financial coaches, fitness coaches and life coaches. The International Coaching Federation reports that it experienced a 585 percent growth in credentials awarded from 2004 to 2007, with an average of 300 to 400 new members worldwide joining the federation each month last year. An October 2008 Marketdata Enterprises Inc. report notes that personal coaching pulled in almost \$1.3 billion in revenue nationally. According to ICF, the coaching industry is holding steady for the moment, and the industry is choosing to see the silver lining in the current economic cloud. Even more so with the recession, "clients are looking to reduce stress in their lives," says ICF marketing manager Ann Belcher.

SLIDESHOW

Previous Next



Family coach Lisa Carey, far right, stands with the Dixon family: from left, Dorion, 9, Darron, 3, Sheila, Ernest and Damon, 11. (Copyright Rebecca Drobis 2008)

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The fees and methodology of family coaches can vary tremendously. Dara Stieglitz, who has offices in Washington and New Jersey, charges \$2,500 for a six-month session of weekly family coaching and carries about 40 clients at any given time. She has done everything from working with a 5-year-old who speaks rudely to her parents -- "Her parents wanted to be proactive and to make sure she would be ready for the future and for conversing politely and productively in discussions at work someday," she explains -- to helping a couple who could not understand their 8-year-old's inability to keep his room clean draft an agreement with the child. ("The definition of clean was different in the eyes of this 8-year-old and his parents," Stieglitz discovered.) By contrast, Lisa Carey, who handles about 25 clients at a time, charges \$450 a month for weekly, 45-minute sessions that she conducts in person, or \$350 a month for weekly, 45-minute phone sessions.

In a country that has shown an increasing willingness to outsource the mundane tasks of private life, some parents

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have been happy to part with money if it means more parenting peace of mind. But why would parents like the Dixons -- so obviously levelheaded, devoted and competent -- feel so anxious?

Author and social critic Barbara Ehrenreich argues that parental anxiety is growing in lockstep with economic anxiety. "One thing cranking up the anxiety at this moment is that the pressure on the educated middle class is growing," says Ehrenreich, whose books include "For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts' Advice to Women" and "Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class."

"Today, it's very hard to get a good job without a degree from a good college and hard to get into those good colleges. We look at our kids and say, 'Gee, it's fun just hanging out with you, but you better get busy. You're going to have to get into a good nursery school, prep school, college.' " Ehrenreich sees this mad scramble as the reflection of today's abiding question for the middle class: "How does this class reproduce itself?"

Coaches, in effect, say: "There's nothing systemic holding you back. Just think positively," according to Ehrenreich. It's an appealing but empty message, she says. While family coaches offer "the illusion of control, the systemic problems are not going to be solved by any amount of ingenious child-raising . . . And that's a hard thing to realize."

Arlie Hochschild, a sociologist and professor at the University of California, Berkeley, speculates that parents may be driven to family coaches because of a societal "push to be a really perfect family." With an array of new technologies and services at their disposal, Americans feel like they don't have to settle for just okay anymore, Hochschild says. For example: You liked your skin just fine, but discovered a face cream -- call it Retin A -- that promises to give you perfect skin. Now, you look at your skin in the mirror. "Is it perfect?" you wonder," Hochschild says. "And it's easy to transfer that way of thinking from our physical appearance to intimate life. Commercial interests have moved in on the abiding American ethic of self-help."

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"A family what?" Ernest asked when Sheila brought up the idea of hiring a family coach in early May. Sure, he was familiar with fitness coaches and business coaches, but family coaches? "What is that, some kind of psychologist for families?" He was surprised Sheila would feel the need. Family life got a little crazy sometimes, but he didn't think it called for professional help.

No psychologists, Sheila assured him: "This is just somebody who would help us get organized and on track with our

goals." Several women from her entrepreneur networking group had hired Lisa Carey and found her helpful. "Her clients loved her," Sheila coaxed. "She's very down to earth."

Ernest couldn't quite visualize what a family coach would do. And why now?

Consider the changes coming down the pike, Sheila explained: the new pharmacy opening, her own business expansion plans, the older boys entering puberty, Darron moving to full-time day care. It's important to make sure these upheavals don't throw us, Sheila explained.

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Page 3 of 5 < Back Next >

The Kid Tamer

Ernest was easy. Whatever. And so, less than a month later, they found themselves in Lisa's office.

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Previous Next



Family coach Lisa Carey, far right, stands with the Dixon family: from left, Dorion, 9, Darron, 3, Sheila, Ernest and Damon, 11. (Copyright Rebecca Drobis 2008)

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"We can all improve our parenting," Lisa tells the Dixons during the first meeting. When Lisa reveals that she served in the Navy for 20 years before retiring and becoming a family coach, the pieces fall into place: Like all good military officers, she has been steeped in a culture of systems and processes -- sure that the keys to success are identifiable, quantifiable and transferable. Never a scold, Lisa maps out the parameters of good parenting with neighborly parables, cautionary tales (in which her own daughter, Joanna, surfaces with Zelig-like frequency) and plenty of positive reinforcement. She draws on the master's degree she has in management, the classes she has taken that certify her as an associate coach by the International Coach Federation and her own common sense to solve problems for her clients.

After Sheila tells Lisa that the opening of the new pharmacy is imminent, Lisa asks how that will affect the children. "We may be tired or exhausted, but it doesn't matter, if our kids don't suffer," Sheila says. "And we're doing this for them. This is their legacy."

Lisa commends Sheila on her dedication to family. "One of the most important things is for kids to have their parents there -- whether it is at a soccer game or a parent-teacher conference," she reminds Sheila. Her advice is light on evidence and heavy on anecdote. She volunteers: "I haven't missed a single one of my daughter's regattas in four years."

Sheila agrees in concept. Making sacrifices to be present is "huge," she says. "Whereas, when we both had careers, when I worked in corporate America -- well, that would have been too hard." She started her own Internet-based company "to make sure my work is in alignment with my children's growth."



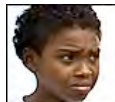
SHEILA DIXON

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But Lisa's practical yardstick for measuring the quality of one's mothering -- have you attended every one of your child's sports events? -- stokes Sheila's anxiety. Sheila still feels bad months after she missed one of Dorion's soccer games when a workshop she was conducting at her church ran long. And Damon milks such lapses: "Remember that time I almost died at soccer practice and you weren't there?" he asked on the way back from the mall one day, three years after the incident. (In fact, he got winded and couldn't catch his breath but was fine soon after.) "I remember," she told him, listening patiently and apologetically.

Lisa outlines the Dixons' "homework" for the week. Sheila and Ernest are to read the first chapter of Sterling's book and reflect on it. The book urges them to try to empathize with their children. "We must appreciate their unique points of view no matter how fragile or bold, tentative or insistent they (or we) may be," the author writes. "And we must acknowledge their ideas no matter how tired, frustrated or overwhelmed we may feel at the time. These are the tasks of the parent-coach."

Lisa asks them to add a color-coded "family calendar" to the Outlook calendar that Sheila already keeps, with each family member's activities in a different color. Post it in the kitchen for everyone to see, Lisa suggests. Then, because Sheila and Ernest have never tied their business plans to family life -- nor to each others' business plans -- Lisa tells them they really need to sit down and look at their respective schedules side-by-side. She assures them this will provide a measure of control over the hectic pace of their lives.

Sheila tells Lisa that her main goal for the family coaching sessions is to shift some of the household work to the older boys -- so that they learn responsibility and so that the tasks of family life don't weigh Sheila down after the new pharmacy opens.

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"Tell me about your kids," Lisa says.

"The older one is very responsible," Sheila says. "The middle one, he is my free spirit." Sheila tracks the dynamics between the two boys. Damon is a perfectionist who is always on top of the details. Dorion can barely keep track of the paraphernalia of his life -- can't remember where he left his bike, his homework, his shoes. Sometimes Damon speaks for Dorion, who is beginning to chafe at this. Then again, Dorion can be so disorganized, it's hard not to jump in and manage him. "Every day, it's like: 'Dorion, did you brush your teeth? Did you do

your homework? Did you make your bed?' " And this is as he is running out the door to the school bus, wearing two different colored socks, Sheila laughs.

"So, let's see if I can word this correctly," says Lisa. "Dorion is pushing his boundaries a little bit. So if he doesn't make his bed, what kind of problem is it?"

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The Kid Tamer

"I guess that goes back to the fact that his mom's a little anal," Sheila acknowledges, laughing. "But that's the way I was raised. You get up; you make your bed; you do what you're supposed to do."

SLIDESHOW

Previous Next



Family coach Lisa Carey, far right, stands with the Dixon family: from left, Dorion, 9, Darron, 3, Sheila, Ernest and Damon, 11. (Copyright Rebecca Drobis 2008)

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"Well, the biggest thing you can do is keep reinforcing your values with the kids," Lisa says.

"But does this mean the standards you had when you were little?" Sheila asks. This is something she really grapples with. She is not one of those people whose parenting is a negative reaction to the way she herself was raised; she was brought up very well, she believes, but it was a different time. She explains that her mom, an immigrant from Mauritius, an island off the coast of Madagascar, had a no-nonsense, never-question-authority, do-what-I-say attitude that didn't really take into consideration those contemporary touchstones of parenting: nurturing, flexibility and creative conflict resolution.

"For instance, with our older guy, there was a time when he wanted his hair longer, in cornrows, but Ernest said, 'No way!'" Sheila explains. The Dixons are anti-cornrows, anti-dreadlocks, anti-low-slung trousers and anti-rap because they believe those fashion and music preferences make a poor impression. (Sheila didn't even like it when Damon wrote rap during a poetry unit at school last year.) "I said, 'Ern, I understand that, because of the way we've grown up. But he's 9, and it's summer time. Can't he use this time to see if this is the right thing for him?'"

"But it was horrible," Ernest interjects. He hated the unkempt look of his son's hair as it grew out.

"Yes, but he realized it," Sheila says. "I took him to the barber at the end of the summer and said, 'How do you want it done?' and he told the barber, 'Shave it all off. That will make Dad happy.'"

Lisa tells the Dixons that they can use the power of "natural

Profile cards for Sheila Dixon, Ernest Dixon, Dorion, Darron, and Damon, each with a photo and a short bio.

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consequences" to teach their children to reconsider their choices. "Part of what he's doing is just normal, trying to push some boundaries," she explains. "And some of that is good. But the children have to learn some of these things by themselves. Have you ever heard the term 'helicopter parents?'"

They have not.

"These are parents who hover around, and any time the kids have trouble, they go and rescue them," Lisa says, invoking the parenting crime du jour. She offers up her own cautionary tale, highlighting the beauty of natural consequences for kids who step outside the norm. "When my nephew was growing up, he wanted to get his ear pierced. And my sister and her husband kept telling him, no. But being a kid, he pushed and got it done." At least, she tells the Dixons, the piercing was on the "correct" side, the one indicating he is heterosexual. "When my nephew's girlfriend saw it, she said, 'You look stupid in that.' And he took [his earring] off and never wore it again."

The Dixons nod.

"Sometimes," Lisa says, "you have to let them fail, so they can learn things." She nods sagely. "Natural consequences."

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Page 5 of 5 < Back The Kid Tamer

Four days after the Dixons' family coaching session with Lisa, Sheila is standing in the kitchen in her bathrobe at 6:45 a.m. watching Dorion shovel a bagel and scrambled eggs in his mouth before he runs out the door to school.

SLIDESHOW

Previous Next



Family coach Lisa Carey, far right, stands with the Dixon family: from left, Dorion, 9, Darron, 3, Sheila, Ernest and Damon, 11. (Copyright Rebecca Drobis 2008)

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"Did you make your bed?" Sheila wants to know.

Dorion is a beautiful child, a cap of dark curls on his head and long lashes framing guileless eyes, but his mother isn't seeing this now. She is watching him ignore her. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Dorion!" she says, sternly.

"What?" he asks. He genuinely doesn't know what he's done.

She decides to skip the scolding about napkin use and returns to her question. "Have you made your bed?"

Dorion shrugs -- an indecipherable answer -- and Sheila just looks at him. She glances at the clock and wonders if he has enough time to run back upstairs and make his bed. "Do you have your homework ready?" she asks.

Lisa's conversation about helicopter parents is fresh in Sheila's mind. She doesn't want to be one of those parents who micromanage and never teach their kids responsibility. Why does Sheila still have to remind Dorion to clean his room? To use a napkin? To remember his homework?

"Dorion?" she prompts.

He tells her his homework is ready.

"Run upstairs and make your bed, then," she says.

He looks at her a second, as if trying to decide whether to argue, then jumps up and thunders up the stairs to his room, where he pulls up the blue comforter imprinted with



SHEILA DIXON

The mom is worried about how she'll nurture her home business while doing the lion's share of parenting. She has hired Lisa to help shift some of the responsibility to her older sons. But can she trust that her boys will rise to the challenge?



ERNEST DIXON

The dad, a pharmacist at CVS, is about to open his own pharmacy. That will mean he can't help as much at home. Will family chaos ensue?



DORION

The nine-year-old is extremely social and often runs off to play without cleaning his room. Will

Lisa's suggestion that he sign a contract with his mother work?



DARRON

The three-year-old is a bundle of energy who is giving his mom a hard time with potty training. But right now, Lisa Sheila and Ernest have bigger fish to fry.



DAMON

The 11-year-old is very responsible, although he can sometimes get bossy with Dorion. Is Lisa right when she tells Sheila that Damon is ready to start doing his own laundry?

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basketballs, baseballs, soccer balls. It is the same blue comforter that already neatly covers his brother's bed a few feet away .

For Sheila, the made bed is a symbol -- it means the family has standards it maintains, that order has been imposed and that responsibility has been taken for the ephemera of one's life -- and over the next three months the boys' bedroom will emerge as Dorion's Waterloo. The boys clash in concrete ways in their bedroom: Part of a miniature odd couple, Damon is immaculate, while Dorion's a slob. There's conflict when they play there, too: The charming and athletic Dorion unknowingly attracts Damon's friends away, and an impatient Damon often speaks for Dorion.

Sheila's been around the block before when it comes to Darron's issues, such as potty training. She believes she can go it alone. But tidying up the older boys' room, and their relationship, could solve a lot of problems, Sheila figures. She'll ask for Lisa's help with it.

After all, the Dixons' insistence on order triumphs in the rest of the household. No boots or soccer cleats or shoes clutter up the cavernous entry hall of their Chantilly house. No dirty glasses, teaspoons or bowls from late-night ice cream edge the sink. No [Legos](#) surprise the bare feet in the family room where toys are piled in tidy plastic bins.

This is not just Sheila's doing; Ernest spends one morning every two weeks vacuuming the house from top to bottom, and, because he finds their carpet steamer/floor washer inadequate, he uses a dust mop and spritzer bottle of disinfectant to sanitize every inch of tile and wood laminate. The older boys are both conscientious about picking up after themselves downstairs, though Dorion sometimes needs a reminder.

At 6:03 a.m., Ernest had been the first to rise in the Dixons' very clean house, padding around the kitchen in pajama bottoms and a gray henley, moving from the fridge to the stove to the center island in the vast kitchen, making a special breakfast for his boys: Pillsbury crescent rolls. He was intentionally steering them from the sugary Honey Nut Cheerios they typically opt for because he figured they needed to be focused when they took their annual standardized tests later in the day. As he laid out the crescent rolls in tidy, perfectly even rows on a cookie sheet, he ran through his day in his head. First, make breakfast. ("I made you crescent rolls, special," he would tell 11-year-old Damon as he entered the kitchen a few minutes later. "You've got your tests today." "That was yesterday, Dad," Damon would correct him with a hint of get-with-the-program impatience.) Then Sheila would get the older boys out the door by 7 a.m. Then he would drop Darron, the 3-year-old, at nursery school by "circle time" at 9 a.m. Then he would have meetings with wholesalers at 11 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. to discuss supplying his new pharmacy. He will come home and do some work toward opening the pharmacy. He'll pick up Darron from nursery school at 4. He'll have dinner with the family, take a nap, then go to work at the CVS pharmacy in Manassas, leaving the house around 9:30 p.m. for his overnight shift.

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At the moment, Ernest works seven days on (a 10-hour shift from 10 p.m. to 8 a.m.) and then has seven days off. When he and a partner open their own pharmacy in the fall, he will drive directly from his night shift at CVS to work from 9 a.m. till 1 p.m. at his pharmacy, then he'll come home, catch about six hours' sleep and go back to his CVS night shift. On his seven days off from CVS, he will work a regular day shift at the new pharmacy.

It is a daunting schedule.

"I've had worse," Ernest says with a shrug. He's sure he can handle it.

Sheila, standing in her jade bathrobe unloading the dishwasher, weighs in. The one with the flexible schedule, she knows, will be the one to pick up the slack. "Tomorrow will be my 10th official year at home," she says. She freezes, the clean glass she has just removed from the dishwasher forgotten, and does the math. Yes, it has been a decade since she left her job as a systems manager for Hecht's department stores shortly after Dorion's birth.

In the adjacent family room where Dorion had turned on the flat-screen and promptly forgotten about it, [Jimmy Neutron](#), boy genius, is doing a science experiment. "It is going to explode!" one of Jimmy's sidekicks warns. "Think. Think. Think," Jimmy says to himself in this race against time.

Sheila verbally runs through her day, committing it to memory as she returns to unloading the

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dishwasher, multitasking. Kids on bus by 7 a.m. Glass in the cupboard. An appointment with a client at 12:30 p.m. Glass in the cupboard. A phone appointment with a client at 3 p.m. The clink of spoons in the silverware drawer. Another at 3:30 p.m. Forks in the silverware drawer. Dorion to soccer at 5:30 p.m. Knives.

"Think! Think! Think!" a frantic Jimmy Neutron warns from the other room, as he casts about for a solution.

At 6:59 a.m., Dorion tears back down the stairs, gives his mom a kiss on the cheek and walks out the door to the bus stop with his brother.

\*\*\*

Ernest goes upstairs to get ready for his day while Sheila moves into the breakfast nook with her mug of Gevalia and curls up on a stuffed chair for a few quiet moments. It is sunny and pleasant looking out at the back yard right now, but Sheila acknowledges she finds it a bit isolating here. Three years ago, the Dixons bought their brand-new house, and the neighborhood, being so recently manufactured, has yet to develop into a community.

The homes here rise up out of the fields on either side of the road in tidy lines -- as if one inspired farmer planted rows of brick in the spring and reaped McMansions in the fall. A few saplings, ready to take flight for more hospitable woodlands, have been staked and tied to the ground. An apron of carefully tended grass surrounds each home like a moat.

"People seem disconnected here," Sheila says. Before they bought the house, the Dixons lived in Alexandria in a townhouse complex, where parents of young children gathered in the park to let the kids play. Neighbors socialized more and got to know each other. "Most people here have play sets for their kids in their back yards," Sheila says. "Around here, a lot of people just stay in their homes."

Sheila says she doesn't really have any close friends to talk to about parenting issues. She knows the parents of her sons' friends, but conversations usually take place on the fly and tend to focus on logistics -- who's picking up whom and when, etc. "Plus, being here, you don't have family around," she says.

It's exactly this kind of social isolation that Berkeley sociologist Hochschild sees as another cause of parental anxiety. "We are each other's audience," Hochschild notes, explaining that spouses, friends and neighbors offer "the gift of being seen parenting." Family coaching might serve that same function now, she says. "It's a social vacuum into which commercial interests have moved."

With no sounding board, Sheila says that she is caught in a circle of worry. She elaborates. "There is this sense of chaos because of all the activities we have going on," she says. "The kids, the household, his business, my business, our families -- all the activity that happens sometimes can -- " Her voice trails off. She tries again: "Sometimes, I guess I get overwhelmed by it all." She and Ernest talk about their parenting, Sheila says. But she tends to see more causes for concern than he does, and neither has many fresh ideas to try. That's part of why she sought out a family coach in the first place. "I really try to tune in to the three kids, their different personalities, to make sure they're being nurtured as wholly as they can be."

As Sheila slowly empties her coffee mug, Darron comes in and climbs on her lap. He holds her cheeks between his chubby hands and kisses her. Then he smiles, tiny white Chicklet teeth in a broad grin.

All is forgiven for his restless night, which meant Sheila had to comfort him back to sleep. He holds onto his mother's hands and swings himself backward so that he is hanging upside down from her lap. Sheila smiles at her son, who is suddenly quiet -- awed by his new perspective -- and she frowns, returning to the effort to articulate why she has sought professional help for her family and home life. "I want to make sure I have balance," she says, but she's not sure exactly what that would look like. "I always feel like I have to be productive, or it is wasting time . . . I've been on the move the past 10 years, being home with them, so when I actually sit down, I have to say to myself, 'It is okay to sit down.' "

"I upside down!" Darron says.

"Yes, you're upside down," Sheila affirms, then she frees one of her hands. "And I'm going to tickle you!" As Darron squeals and wiggles, his "Thomas the Tank Engine" pajama shirt comes untucked, and his mother kisses his bare round belly. He escapes her grasp and runs into the other room, and Sheila begins to worry out loud. While Ernest prepares to open the pharmacy in the next month, Sheila frets that the burden of parenting will fall completely on her. "And I can't be full steam everywhere," she says.

Sheila knows the family will see far less of Ernest. And he'll no longer be able to pinch-hit so that she can grow her business. On the days when he is home in the afternoons, he takes Dorion to soccer practice so Sheila can answer some e-mail; he is happy to snuggle up with Darron for a nap so Sheila can return some phone calls. Still, as the one with the hard-and-fast work schedule, Ernest's work takes precedence, and Sheila seems to make the compromises here. "Basically, he is the breadwinner, so his goals come first," she says. (And, indeed, later this very afternoon Damon will twist his ankle playing football at school, and it will be Sheila who gets the call from the school to come get him -- scuttling plans for the client meeting she had scheduled.)

Her company, founded in 2003 to help female entrepreneurs network, is not yet generating income. Members pay annual dues of \$100 to \$200, which entitle them to participate in events and other services, but so far Sheila has put that money back into the company, Women Building and Investing in Success. Someday, she dreams of "going global," but for the moment, WBIS has only 50 members and is limited to two Virginia chapters, for which Sheila orchestrates monthly luncheons with speakers to discuss such topics as marketing or improving communication with employees. Her "office" is steps from the kitchen, and when she can steal three or four hours on the three days a week that Darron is in day care and the other boys are at school, she spends the time on the phone or e-mailing members with solutions to challenges that small entrepreneurs face. To drum up new members, she offers free advice via the Internet through her "15 Minute Business Mentoring Moment." The business helps her keep her skills honed and résumé growing in case she wants a fulltime marketing job some day. "I need to keep going with my business," she says. "This is who I am. This is what's important." She knows Ernest's new pharmacy will take up most of his time. "Are there some things we can put in place now for our family, some systems or structures, so that when that change occurs, we're okay? Is there something Lisa can do to help us so it is okay when that happens?"

In the adjacent family room Jimmy Neutron is back to beating himself up for a solution: "Think. Think. Think."

\*\*\*

One month into the coaching sessions, Lisa sits in the Dixons' sunroom chatting with Sheila and the boys, wondering how things are going as Sheila begins to shift some responsibility to the children.

Dorion fidgets on the edge of the couch by his mom, impatient to be outside on this beautiful summer day. Damon sits erect and tells Lisa that he made dinner all by himself the other night: stuffed peppers. And he wiped the supper table and helped unload the dishwasher.

"That's huge!" Lisa says. "I bet your mom appreciated that." She turns to Sheila, urging her to agree.

Sheila nods. "I really did."

"What challenges do you want to work on this week?" she asks Sheila.

Sheila, who has had a few weekly phone coaching sessions with Lisa to get the hang of the parent-as-coach philosophy, says she is ready to tackle the Battle of the Bedroom.

Here the battle lines have been clearly drawn -- right down the center of the room and straight across the middle of the dresser, where two identical toy robots stand back to back, dutiful border guards. "I like it when I can find things," Damon says. Dorion couldn't care less how tidy his half is -- and is largely oblivious to how his laissez-faire attitude annoys his older brother. Damon gets mad. The boys fight.

It drives Sheila crazy. How hard can it be to keep a room clean? That's the way her mother brought her up. It is tough to let go of that.

But when Sheila attempts to hold up her mother's standards to the boys, Dorion resists. She begins with the time-honored I-had-to-walk-10-miles-to-school-in-the-snow argument. "You've got it easy," she says of her own mother's higher expectations.

"Grandma's house is so clean," Damon confides to Lisa, that she has a whole room -- the living room -- that no one is even allowed to enter. "I bet no one has sat on that couch for 30 years!"

"Maybe when you're older --" Sheila says.

"What? When I'm 21?" Damon scoffs.

Lisa laughs and asks Damon whether he keeps his own side of the room clean. "I do, but Dorion leaves it dirty for 10 days or a week! He leaves his pants on the bed after his shower. And towels

on the floor."

"No, not me!" Dorion insists.

"Then who?" Sheila asks.

"It's Darron," he says, blaming it on the absent youngest.

"And under his bed it's full of dirty socks and stuff," Damon says.

"No! I take that stuff out," Dorion says.

"What? Every 10 months?" Damon demands.

"Can I go outside and play now?" Dorion says.

"Me, too?" Damon adds. He will later confide that he suspects "Coach Lisa" is undercover [FBI](#) because of all the questions she asks.

Sheila waves them away, and as soon as the door bangs shut behind them, Lisa is all business. During their coaching sessions this first month, Lisa and Sheila have been talking about a parent's evolving roles. (After the first session, Ernest mostly leaves the family coach meetings up to Sheila.) Lisa has explained that for children from age 0 to 6, the parent is a "teacher"; from 7 to 12, the parent functions as an "administrator" helping the kids remember what they need to do; by age 13, it is time for parents to start serving as "coach" to their teens. She told Sheila that her oldest boys are transitioning now and that she needs to be shifting her role from an administrator who is on them all the time with reminders, to a coach who cedes them more responsibility.

This process begins with "requests and agreements." If it drives them crazy that Dorion can never find his shinguards when it's time to rush out the door for soccer practice, get him to sign an agreement saying that he will have them lying by the door an hour before practice -- or he won't go to practice.

They craft a plan to buy Damon some new socks with a different colored stripe or design, so he can tell his and Dorion's apart. "Also, I think Damon is really ready to start doing some of his own laundry," Lisa says.

Sheila hasn't thought of that, she says, pleased at the prospect.

Finally, Lisa suggests that Sheila request an agreement from Dorion that he will have his room clean by 11 a.m. every day or he can't go outside to play. The catch is, Sheila has to step back and let the agreement take effect -- no reminders, no rescuing, no last-minute reprieves.

This will be hard.

But, on Lisa's advice, Sheila corners Dorion later that week to explain "requests and agreements." When she is sure he understands the concept, she tells him that she would like his room clean every day and asks if he can think of a consequence, should it not happen.

There's a little bit of Brer Rabbit in him when he suggests his punishment: He should not be allowed to play video games on weekdays.

Video games are always off-limits on weekdays, Sheila points out.

"What if I'm not allowed to skateboard in the basement, only outside?" he asks.

Hmmm. "How about, if it's not clean by 9 a.m., you can't play outside that day?"

"What if it's not clean by 1?" Dorion counters.

"How about 11 a.m.?"

Deal, the two agree.

Dorion, who has taken to calling Lisa "the etiquette coach" because he once saw a "Simpsons" episode where Bart was thus consigned, thinks the whole thing is a bit weird. Still, he agrees to give it a shot.

\*\*\*

"So, how did it go?" Lisa e-mails Sheila a few days later, wondering if the room got cleaned.

"Dorion agreed to have his side of the room picked up by 11 a.m. It's 9:13 a.m., and I'll ask the question and remind him of the time," Sheila e-mails back.

She is not optimistic. "On the same note, he has been responsible for his swim pass," she writes, explaining that she is using Lisa's suggested natural consequences: If he can't keep track of it, he can't go to the pool. "He could not find it yesterday and wanted to use the guest pass or his friend's guest pass or go with the neighbor who knows the lifeguard." Sheila told him, no -- and reminded Ernest to back her up on this. "Ernest did, without comment," she tells Lisa.

The next morning, Dorion tells his dad that his room is clean -- and his dad says he can go outside. But later, when Sheila checks Dorion's room, well, their definition of "clean" differs. She scolds Dorion -- and she and Ernest decide a visual inspection needs to be part of the deal.

"This is going to be a process of working on respect and boundaries for a while," Lisa encourages Sheila in an e-mail the following day. "And this is entirely normal. He is in the testing process, and right now that is his job. As a person, he needs to understand limits, and it is much better to learn those from someone he loves and loves him than a stranger. This doesn't make it any less of a challenge -- but remember it is a normal process of growing up." She offers a tip: "Ask him what he thinks respect is about. Once you have a mutual understanding of that, then make sure that you take the opportunity to let him know things that he does [and] how he acts that you respect." Don't be discouraged, Lisa says, reminding Sheila that there has been progress on the room-cleaning. "Just hang in there."

Several days later, an ecstatic Sheila e-mails Lisa. Dorion had his bed made and his room clean by 10:30 a.m. -- half an hour ahead of schedule. "I yelled down to Ernest to say what Dorion did. Ernest said, 'What made him do it?' My response, 'We'll have to ask him.' About four minutes later, Dorion went to the office and said, 'Dad, I made an agreement with mom that I would clean my room by 11 or I can't go outside for the day.' It was *amazing*," Sheila crowed.

\*\*\*

As she sits on a picnic bench one late August afternoon and watches Damon, Dorion and a friend swooping up and down the half pipes at a local skate park, Sheila has time to reflect on where she is with her parenting efforts. The summer is drawing to a close, and so are Lisa's coaching sessions.

"I just want to make sure that the boys are well-rounded and able to make good decisions without having to work too hard at it," she says. "I want them to be mature and be leaders, but I also want them to be boys and have fun . . . So, how do you do that? Through working with Lisa, I'm trying to balance that." She says she doesn't want them to be impulsive because that means they may one day jump from job to job without feeling accountable. But then she wonders whether that isn't the wave of the future, anyway. "When I went to school, the expectation was that you'd be in your job for seven to eight years. That's what you did because you needed to get your 401(k). My parents' generation stayed in their job for 30 years. Now, you can skip jobs every two to three years." She mulls over this. "What's the trend of the future, and how do I make sure my kids are working toward that trend? What do I need to do to make sure they're okay?"

Sheila says her challenge is to let go of her worries a bit and be confident that it is okay to let her sons be who they are and to trust that they will be okay.

"Mom, can we go?" Damon interrupts over and over. Finally, Sheila relents and packs the boys into the van for a trip to the mall to buy grip tape for their scooters and skateboards and pizza for lunch.

The boys have been doing so well lately, and Sheila's been feeling so good about her parenting, that she decides to up the ante a bit after lunch with a culminating test that moves her firmly away from "parent-administrator" toward the new title of "parent-coach." She takes the boys to Target for school supplies and preps them in the car: They are in charge today, and it is their job to find everything on their supply list and put it in the cart -- by themselves.

Inside Target, she takes them to the school supply section and simply steps back, waiting with the cart at the end of the aisles to see if they can handle the exhaustive lists on their own. It is a challenge for the boys. And for Sheila.

When Damon keeps getting confused between two separate notebook items -- one two-inch, three-ring vinyl binder and two 1.5-inch, three-ring vinyl binders -- she has to intervene.

"Here," she tries to explain that 1.5 means one-and-a-half inches. "And you're getting the two rows mixed up."

"No, I'm not!" Damon is exasperated.

The organizer in her rears up. "You need to check off each item on the list," she says, digging in her purse for a pen for each of the boys. She hands them the pens, and starts to add, "You need to --" but stops herself. She crosses her arms, keeping her advice to herself -- she *can* do this -- and resolutely returns to the cart at the end of the aisle.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good experiment," she worries. Her own mother would have whipped down the school supply rows with her in tow and been in and out of the store in 15 minutes.

Dorion comes down the aisle with three folders the same color and drops them in the cart.

"Dorion, maybe you want to get different colors so you don't accidentally think you're bringing home your science folder homework when it's actually your math folder."

"Mom." Dorion says, in a voice that reminds her it is his choice.

Sheila closes her mouth. It is true that this will result in the natural consequences that Coach Lisa is always advocating for. She bites her tongue.

A moment later, when his mother's back is turned, Dorion grabs the folders and discreetly replaces them with different-colored ones. She pretends not to notice.

Damon finishes his list first and, as they prowl the aisles, grows bossy.

"Dorion," he chides, "you can't get this kind of Kleenex. Get the Target brand, like me. It's cheaper."

Dorion's face drops. He likes the soft kind with lotion in it.

"Sorry," Damon says, putting Dorion's Puffs back on the shelf, "but you need to get Target."

"Damon!" Sheila sees the usual dynamic unfolding, where Damon wants to run Dorion's life. "He can get whatever kind of tissue he wants."

From halfway down the aisle, a pleased Dorion retrieves his box of tissue, aims, and sends it soaring toward the shopping cart. He shoots! He scores!

\*\*\*

On a crisp day at the end of October, Sheila and Ernest stand behind the counter of the Centreville Medical Arts Pharmacy in a strip mall off of Lee Highway. The Dixons' new pharmacy has been open for nearly two months, and Ernest -- who worked the overnight shift at CVS the night before, buzzed home for a shower and came right here -- looks exhausted as he stands among the rows of medicine in his white lab coat. Even so, he is pleased. "We had 20 prescriptions yesterday," he says. This is double his projection for daily business the first two months.

(Later, The Dixons will say that they are worried about how their new business will fare in a souring economy. "Fortunately, we are in a business where people need medication," Sheila will say.)

The sessions with Lisa are over, and Sheila declares them a success. "I've gotten a lot of really good suggestions from her, because she's really looking at our family from the outside," she says. Mostly, Sheila sees this objectivity as useful -- though there were a few moments when, as the woman who knows her children best, Sheila challenged Lisa. (Lisa recommended Dorion get some time to play after school before settling down to homework, and Sheila rejected the idea, saying she'd tried it in the past and it didn't work.)

Sheila's general satisfaction aside, it's hard to know how deep the changes will run. Recently, Sheila has devoted a lot of time to the pharmacy, including making sachets for Ernest to give out to nurses so they'll remember to refer patients. With the extra load at home, Sheila still hasn't worked much on her own business -- one of her primary concerns.

But family life is still going relatively smoothly.

"Damon needed a few reminders about his laundry this week," Sheila says. But for the most part, she says, he has ably tackled his new chore. Dorion is remembering to bring his schoolbooks home after Sheila took Lisa's suggestion and made a chart to help him keep track of what he needs each day. And there's been a permanent cease-fire in the Battle of the Bedroom, with Dorion working steadily to keep it clean.

"And middle school is going good for Damon," Sheila says. "He is even class president."

Suddenly, her husband interjects from behind the pharmacy counter.

"He is?" Ernest says. "I didn't know that."

\*\*\*

[Join Lisa Carey, Sheila Dixon and Karen Houppert for a live discussion about this story Monday, Dec. 22, at 12 noon ET.](#)

*Karen Houppert is a contributing writer for the Magazine. She is the author of "Home Fires Burning: Married to the Military -- for Better or Worse." She can be reached at [me@karenhouppert.com](mailto:me@karenhouppert.com).*

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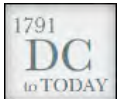
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