

CHAPTER 1

When something's not quite right with your child . . .

Or, when to worry

A majority of the children who receive the benefits of therapy are beautiful, smart, rapidly growing, school-age kids—more than a little reminiscent of Alex—about whom something seems *not quite right*, but it's hard to put a finger on what that “something” is. It is common for parents to have only just become aware of their child's challenges when teachers inform them of an academic weakness or behavior that deserves attention.

Because parents live in such close proximity to their children and observe their development in small, daily increments—and because one of a parent's most important jobs is simply to love her children *as they are*—it is often extremely difficult to see (and subsequently acknowledge) when a child might be having a problem beyond his control, one that can be corrected when identified early enough. That's something I have personally experienced both as a therapist *and* a parent.

If an eighteen month old still isn't crawling or stiffens and resists when he is cuddled, those are early signs that might raise concerns to some. But, for a first-time parent trying to do the best for his child, how can he tell, at three, how clumsy is too clumsy? When is being a picky eater a problem? At six, how messy does handwriting have to be before

it's considered a red flag? Is a child simply shy or is she encountering problems in interacting with others? Is she a "bundle of energy" or is she hyper-active? And how many of our kids are "just like us," a "chip off the old block," or simply "unique"?

Answers to these questions are always child specific—every one of us develops in our own unique pattern and at our own pace. Yet there are a number of classical signals that parents, teachers, and medical professionals can—and should—be aware of. As a rule of thumb, one or two red flags may not be cause for major concern, but several in combination may well be a sign that something is not quite right and early intervention could help.

As a child enters preschool or kindergarten, for example, he may have difficulty following instructions, or he may over-focus on one activity while being reluctant to shift to a new one. Or maybe he's always pushing into his friend's space, over-touching, or playing roughly with materials and other kids. Perhaps she's a young girl who breaks her pencils frequently because she writes with such heavy pressure, or a boy who just *can't* sit still, even for a moment.

In general, if a teacher suggests to parents that their child may have a problem, that suggestion deserves attention. Teachers have the advantage of observing a wide range of children in their classes. Even if they can't identify what the exact problem is, they often know when a child is having more trouble than her peers. "Normal," "typical," and "average" all encompass a wide spectrum of development. A smart child who does not appear to be living up to his potential can signal trouble that can often be helped by therapy. From my own experience, I knew very well that five-year-old Alex could be a challenge and that he didn't like to color, but it wasn't until his teachers brought their concerns about how he was struggling with writing and wasn't following directions to my attention that, in concert, these behaviors began to point to his need for therapy.

It is important for you to know what the red flags are, not so that you frighten yourself about what your child's potential weaknesses might be, but so that you will have help in identifying the very things that truly *can* be helped by therapy when identified early. Even if your child demonstrates half a dozen of these issues, that does *not* mean she won't grow up to be an absolutely normal, capable, and wonderful adult. Even when the mountain of challenges seems to be insurmountable, the right interventions at the right times can make all the difference in a happy, successful outcome. Even children with big hills to climb have the potential to make incredible successes and are far ahead of where they would have been without help.