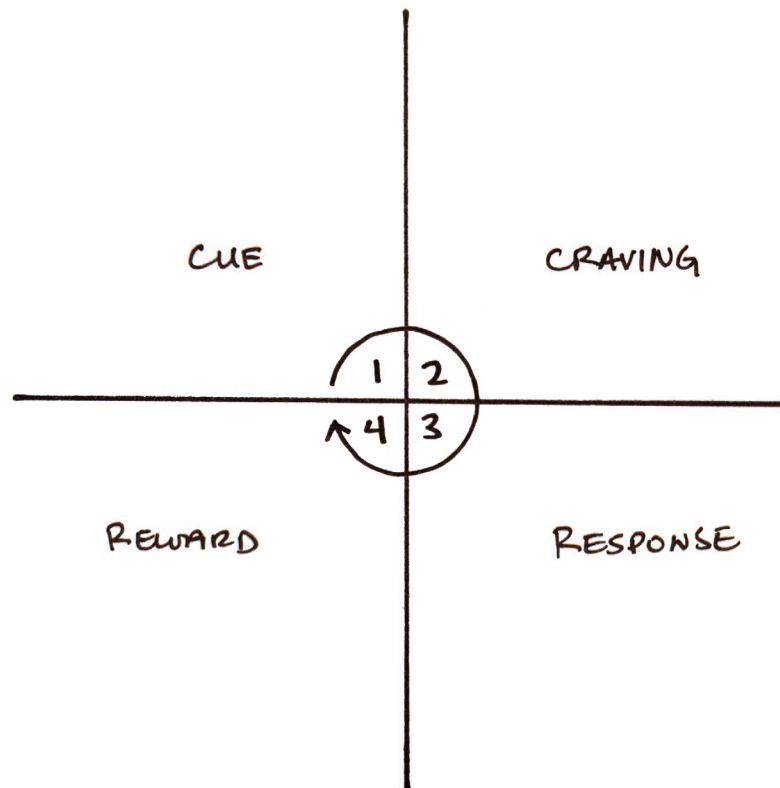


# How to Apply These Ideas to Parenting

In *Atomic Habits*, I explain a four-step loop that underlies all of human behavior: cue, craving, response, and reward. When repeated, this neurological feedback loop leads to the formation of new habits.

Here's what the Habit Loop looks like:



With these four steps in mind, I have created the Four Laws of Behavior Change:

1. Cue: Make it obvious.
2. Craving: Make it attractive.
3. Response: Make it easy.
4. Reward: Make it satisfying.

These four laws can be applied to make any behavior easier (and the inversion of each law can be applied to make any behavior harder). When applied to parenting, these same principles can be used to help children and families establish more effective habits.

Before we get into the details, it is worth noting that the concepts covered in *Atomic Habits* should work just fine with children and parents alike. However, there is one key difference: Most people read *Atomic Habits* with the intention of working on their own habits. But when you're considering how to apply the ideas to your children, you're now shaping someone else's habits. This difference presents additional challenges, and this section will provide specific examples of how to apply the ideas to parenting.

I offer these ideas only as a starting point. Every family is different, and you need to be willing to experiment with the Four Laws to figure out how they map onto your life and circumstances. If you continue to return to the ideas I lay out in *Atomic Habits*, I think you'll find that the applications are nearly endless.

## THE 1ST LAW

The 1st Law of Behavior Change is to *make it obvious*. This law is connected to the cue, which is the first step of the habit loop. A cue is anything that gets your attention (or your child's attention) and signifies what to do next. As you might expect, cues that are more obvious will be more likely to get a person's attention and, as a result, are more likely to be acted upon.

One way to apply the First Law to parenting is to employ what author Julie Morgenstern calls "The Kindergarten Model of Organization."

Kindergarten classrooms are designed to make it very obvious where things go and what to do with them. According to Morgenstern, there are five primary features:

1. Room is divided into activity zones.
2. It's easy to focus on one activity at a time.

3. Items are stored at their point of use.
4. It's fun to put things away—everything has a home.
5. Visual menu of everything that's important.

For example, if a child is assigned to the Blue Reading Group, then their books go in the blue bin, they sit at the blue table, and so on. In other words, this method makes it very obvious what to do and where to do it.

You can employ similar methods in your own home with color-coded labels or different Post-It Notes or other obvious markers. Consider the habit of toothbrushing. “Olivia gets the green toothbrush. Michael gets the red one.”

Another option is to help your child create their own habit stacks (a concept discussed in Chapter 5 of *Atomic Habits*). If your child is struggling with study or homework habits, then you can use habit stacking to initiate a better study routine.

*Remember, the formula for a habit stack is:  
After [CURRENT HABIT], I will [NEW HABIT].*

- After I walk in the door from school, I will take my homework out of my backpack and place it on the table.
- After I get out of the car from practice, I will take off my dirty cleats and put them in the garage.
- After I finish dinner, I will rinse off my plate and place it in the dishwasher.

Remember, these habits should be small and easy to do. Even if your real goal is to actually get your child to spend an hour working on their homework, start by creating habits stacks that prime the environment to make doing homework easier.

Additionally, you can use habit stacks as a way to incentivize the desired behavior. For example: *After I practice piano for 10 minutes, I will play video games.*

Habit stacks are simple and effective ways to make it clear and obvious when a new habit should occur.

## THE 2ND LAW

The 2nd Law of Behavior Change is to *make it attractive*. This law is connected to the craving, which is the second step of the habit loop.

As you can imagine, if a behavior is not attractive to your child (that is, if they are not motivated to do it), then you'll be hard pressed to get them to act.

Interestingly, one of the best ways to motivate your children to act a certain way is to act that way yourself. Humans are master imitators. As I cover in Chapter 10 of *Atomic Habits*, we imitate three groups: (1) the close, (2) the many, and (3) the powerful. In children's eyes, parents are both close and powerful (authority figures), so they often mimic the habits and routines of their parents. This is especially true for young children, who look to their parents for insights on how to engage with the world and solve problems.

As a result, your habits often become your children's habits. Hold yourself to a higher standard, and they will often follow suit.

Of course, as children age, they start to pick up habits not only from their parents, but also from others in their life. And the parents of any teenager can tell you that it often feels like they are avoiding imitation: Do one thing, and your child does the exact opposite. As children grow up, the social influence of their parents tends to decrease, and the social influence of their peers tends to increase. This is a phenomenon described in great detail in *The Nurture Assumption* by Judith Rich Harris.

One of the key takeaways of Harris' book is that parents can still exert a strong influence on what their children do and how they act, but they do so through a backdoor. Two of the biggest influences parents have on their children over time are (1) the genes they pass along to their kids and (2) the social environments they select for their kids. In other words, your children's habits are heavily influenced by their peers, but you can influence the peers they hang around. You can choose which neighborhood you live in, which school you send them to, which extracurricular activities you expose them to, and more... and these environments are where they meet their peers.

To put it in a simple sentence: If you want your kids to find certain habits attractive, put them in environments and groups where their peers will also be doing those habits. Or, as I put it in *Atomic Habits*: Join a group where the desired behavior is the normal behavior.

When a child sees their friends performing a habit, it becomes a very attractive thing to do.

Another inherently attractive thing is freedom and autonomy. Especially with younger children, habits can become more attractive when they are given power over them.

Here's an example from Janet Lansbury, the author of *No Bad Kids*:

*So, when he says, "No, I don't want to put my PJ's on," stay calm.*

*"Oh, I hear you. You don't want to put on your PJ's. What would you like to wear to bed?" Or maybe, "Which of these (2) PJ's will you wear?" Or "I hear you don't want to put on your PJ's. Perfectly understandable. But we won't have time for a book if you can't get them on in the next five minutes." Or "Would you like to put these on now, or in five minutes?" The key is to continue to encourage his autonomy and give him options so that he doesn't feel bossed around. Be effortlessly in charge. Totally unthreatened. Worst case scenario: he sleeps with his regular clothes on. <sup>1</sup>*

It's similar to being told to read a book for English class versus choosing to read the book yourself. The same habit can go from unattractive to attractive depending on who is in control.

## THE 3RD LAW

The 3rd Law of Behavior Change is to *make it easy*. This law is associated with the response, which is the actual behavior or habit that you perform. Behaviors are more likely to be performed when they are easy—that is, when they can be accomplished with ease.

Before I share the details of this step, I want to remind you of an important point I wrote in *Atomic Habits* concerning the 3rd Law: "The idea behind *make it easy* is not to only do easy things. The idea is to make it as easy as possible in the moment to do things that payoff in the long run."

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<sup>1</sup> Lansbury, Janet. *No Bad Kids: Toddler Discipline Without Shame* (p. 58). JLML Press. Kindle Edition.

Many parents commit an error by making life too easy on their kids: they write papers for them, have tough conversations with coaches and teachers for them, and otherwise intervene whenever a problem or challenge arises. This might “make it easy” in the moment, but it violates the message I just shared above. Such hand-holding does not make it easy for your child to do the things that payoff in the long-run.

Rather than doing the work for your child, you can make it easy for them to do the work themselves. For example, you can set up your child’s homework environment for success. Make sure they have a quiet place with pens, pencils, and paper and a room that is relatively free from distractions. (For more environment design ideas, see chapters six and twelve of *Atomic Habits*.)

A similar strategy can be used for the social environment. For example, you can give your teenager precise language to use for handling peer pressure. This type of preparation makes it easier to take the desired action in the moment.

As with any habit, the earlier you start with these changes the better. While I was in high school, a family of four brothers was attending at the same time. I remember the day I found out they didn’t have a single television in their home. I was stunned.

When I think back on that memory today, it is very unsurprising to me that all four brothers were extremely intelligent, very well-read, and attended wonderful colleges. From a very early age, they learned to love books. While the rest of us were playing video games and watching ESPN, they were reading.

This type of environment design is too extreme for many people’s taste, but you can’t deny the central point: children (and their parents) are often a product of their environment. If you want your children to develop certain habits, then make that habit the convenient and easy option within the environment.

It’s a lot easier to build a reading habit when there are no television sets around.

## THE 4TH LAW

The 4th Law of Behavior Change is to *make it satisfying*. This is the final stage of the habit loop, and it is related to the reward. If there is a reward associated with a behavior—that is, it feels good and has a satisfying ending—then we have a reason to repeat it in the future.

In Chapter 15 of *Atomic Habits*, I say, “The first three laws of behavior change—*make it*

*obvious, make it attractive, and make it easy*—increase the odds that a behavior will be performed this time. The fourth law of behavior change—*make it satisfying*—increases the odds that a behavior will be repeated next time. It completes the habit loop.”

In order for any habit to stick, your children must find it satisfying or enjoyable in some way.

Here’s the good news for parents: praise is naturally satisfying, and parents are in a perfect position to offer it. Every child enjoys being praised by their parents for a job well done.

Of course, this is opposite of what many parents do. So often, parents criticize the very behavior they are hoping their children will exhibit.

When an introverted child joins the family for dinner, they say something like, “Well, look who decided to join us.” Such comments make it *unsatisfying* to do the very thing you were hoping they would do. Don’t criticize the behavior you want to see.

As a result, I think it is effective for many parents to keep this philosophy in mind: Praise the good, ignore the bad.

That doesn’t mean you ignore every mistake your children make and never correct them. (In all likelihood, it will be impossible for you to do so. Criticism, for whatever reason, seems to come naturally. Parents are often finding themselves saying no all day long: don’t climb on that, put that down, don’t touch that, not right now, don’t go in there, and on and on.) But it does mean that you remind yourself to focus on the good parts of their behavior and praise them for the actions you want to see.

Here’s Janet Lansbury again, this time providing a good example of what “ignoring the bad” might look like in a real-world context. She recommends giving a “ho-hum” response, which is a modest reaction:

*“Ho-hum responses are also helpful when children whine, scream, or try out the profane new word they heard at preschool. Kids are much more likely to forget that word and stop whining or screaming if we disempower the behavior by ignoring it (which doesn’t mean intentionally ignoring our child) or giving a ho-hum, nonchalant direction like “That’s a bit too loud” or “That’s an ugly word. Please don’t use it.”*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lansbury, Janet. No Bad Kids: Toddler Discipline Without Shame (p. 50). JLML Press. Kindle Edition.

Here's the basic idea: Whenever possible, you want to use positive reinforcement rather than negative reinforcement.

One creative way I heard of doing this is by creating a “token” system or an allowance system with your kids. But the key is that you only add to the allowance or tokens when your child does something good, rather than subtracting from it when your child does something bad.

The typical allowance is taken away as a punishment when a child breaks the rules. But it might be more effective to consider how you can incentivize good habits by adding to it. For example, if the child chooses to read a book for an hour instead of watch television, they get another token. Or they can earn tokens by doing chores or earning good grades or completing other valuable habits.

Ultimately, the idea is to *make it satisfying* to do the right thing.

That's it! I hope you enjoyed this appendix. For more ideas on how to apply the Four Laws of Behavior Change and build better habits (in both children and adults), please see *Atomic Habits*.