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When she turned two, Kate Ross made it perfectly clear that she thought her mother was a domestic dictator. Kate's mother, Beverley Cathcart-Ross, had just left a fast-paced marketing job on Bay Street to focus on her headstrong daughter. Kate fought every order her mother handed out, no matter how gently phrased. She told her mother what to wear, what to cook, when to speak. At bedtime, she insisted her mother sit on the bed in a certain way before reading a story. Any deviation from the routine required Cathcart-Ross to start reading the book again, from the beginning. Then it got worse. When her brother Andrew was born, Kate issued the ultimatum: take him back. By the time Cathcart-Ross made her way to the pediatrician for his first checkup, the former marketing pro, who had considered herself to be responsible, strong and independent, had been defeated by a toddler. She was exhausted. After checking the newborn, the doctor took one look at Kate and wrote his diagnosis on a piece of paper: prima donna.

That was in the mid-1980s, when parent education usually consisted of consulting a well-thumbed copy of Dr. Spock. Cathcart-Ross, daughter of a successful architect/contractor and a homemaker, had grown up in a household where father knew best, where the smart way to avoid the strap was to do what you're told. "What that girl needs is a good swift kick," her father suggested. But she didn't agree, so she tracked down a parenting class, one of the only available in Toronto. Signing up was, for her, an admission of failure, as embarrassing as getting nabbed for drunk driving.

Two decades later, she has become Toronto's top professional parent. She's taught thousands of others how to win cooperation at home, without issuing orders. Mention her name at any North Toronto party and someone will have taken one of her

courses—upwardly mobile parents, it seems, are eager to be just as professional in their home life. She offers an eight-week basic parenting course, an advanced parenting course, plus a family forum in which parents and kids hash out problems with a therapist in front of other families. She gives private lessons to Bay Street accountants and lawyers at their offices and at off-site conferences. (Her methodical, systematic approach—eerily similar to the advice leadership gurus are doling out to CEOs these days—appeals to them.) She counsels parents over the phone in conference call classes, or in private telephone coaching sessions. She sells her CDs (Parenting Styles and Encouragement Skills) on her web site; two more CDs (Power Struggles and Undue Attention Seeking) are coming out this spring. A book is in the works. And now Cathcart-Ross is expanding her scope, teaching courses in London, Ontario, with plans to expand to other cities.

Oddly for a professional marketer, Cathcart-Ross doesn't promote her name or her persona. She almost squirms with discomfort at a comparison to Dr. Phil. She never preaches, or criticizes, even when parents are fumbling—Cathcart-Ross is the ultimate, self-controlled professional parent. She's clearly not in it for the fame, or the money. (She won't disclose her income but admits her take still hasn't hit the six figures.) Instead, she's propelled by a deep conviction that the high drama of domestic power struggles between parent and child can be tamed by the rational style of parenting that she developed while trying to raise her daughter Kate.

My childhood in the early 1960s was ruled by an English nanny; a stern teacher with a visible moustache, she was ruthless when it came to imposing the rules. We had to eat the dinner she cooked—often lukewarm cod and stewed tomatoes—or we'd get it for

breakfast. That disciplinary approach, which tolerated no dissent, was seen as perfectly normal—at the time my three brothers were routinely caned at their private boys’ school. But some children I knew had permissive parents, who let them do whatever they wanted. Both strategies had their academic backers. The century-long debate over effective parenting techniques swirled around a fundamental question—whether children’s innate nature resisted any parental influence, or whether they could be molded into the citizens of their parents’ design. As Ann Hulbert describes it in her book, *Raising America*, the story of parent education in the last century displays an “unexpected continuity in child-rearing confusions.”

Cathcart-Ross’s initiation into the world of parent education came from the Adlerian Association, named after the psychologist Alfred Adler. The Adlerians introduced her to a 1964 book, *Children: The Challenge*, by Rudolf Dreikurs. It became her bible. Dreikurs, an Adlerian child psychiatrist, argued that children have a right to be respected, to have a say and a choice in the family business. So parents can’t boss children around, or punish them when they rebel. Instead, parents have to win their children’s cooperation, by giving them a say, by encouraging them to make choices, and allowing them to learn from the consequences, even if they’re awkward and uncomfortable. It’s a new family order in which the parent is a team member, empathetic coach, leader—but not the boss.

The lessons and research helped her to see what was happening. “I was in a play with Kate every day, and she wrote the script,” she says. “So I stopped controlling her, and I took back control of me. I disengaged.” If Kate refused to leave the park when it was time to go, she just said, “I’ll stand over there. When you’re ready, let me know.” If

it took too long, the next day she'd tell her, "It didn't work out last time, so we won't go to the park today. I'm not willing to go back to the park until you're ready to go on time." When Kate threw a tantrum on the supermarket floor, her mother would sit patiently on the windowsill and say, "I love you, Kate. I can't force you to stop. I'll be waiting here." By Grade 1, Kate was a different child, still headstrong, but no longer fighting her mother. "That's when I called her my gift," she says. "She forced me to change."

A third child was born, and Cathcart-Ross plunged into the latest thinking on parenting in North America. By then, she had an insatiable thirst for knowledge about raising kids, and she soon exhausted the parenting courses available in Canada, so she flew to the U.S. for sessions with top parenting educators. Her mentors encouraged her to teach other parents, so she earned parent-educator certificates from a Toronto Alderian Society and from California guru Jane Nelson. When Kate was six and Cathcart-Ross was pregnant with her fourth child, she tentatively offered her first class to neighbours. They immediately signed up; they were amazed to see the change in Kate. In her first class, given at a local school in the Beach in 1989, Cathcart-Ross was so nervous that she read word for word from the script she had written for the occasion. But parents lapped it up. At the time, she had the field to herself. Word-of-mouth spread, and she slowly built her parent-education network to become the top in the city.

It's a Thursday night, Toronto's night out, but 17 of us, mostly white urban professional types in our 30s and 40s, have come to the Fairlawn Neighbourhood Centre for an eight-week crash course in raising a family. We're sitting in a semi-circle on hard plastic

chairs, and all of us have white nametags hanging from strings around our necks, printed with the names of our children, and their ages, mostly under five. For many, this isn't remedial training; it's the natural extension of prenatal class, and they've come here to learn how to be parents, before the trouble begins. Cathcart-Ross, dressed in a turquoise sweater set that highlights her thick dark hair and deep-set eyes, is sitting quietly in her chair. Crisp and professional, she sits up straight, long and lean like a dancer, warmly welcoming people to the room. She stands up with quiet authority, felt pen in hand, and starts writing out the fundamentals of the new family order on the board: love, the unconditional kind, to be showered on the child at least three times a day; respect, for "the child's right to make decisions for himself;" and faith, "that you (and your child) will be able to handle the outcome. You will survive."

Hers is a logical approach to parenting, one that asks the parent to step back from a highly charged moment, analyze their child's motive, and react in a controlled, purposeful way. Yelling is not recommended; nor is micro-managing, which in Cathcart-Ross's view robs the child of the chance to develop independence and responsibility. Yet democratic parenting, as she sees it, is not laissez-faire. In fact her approach requires detailed advance planning, so that the child can come up with a game plan that she will follow, and live with the consequences. As long as the child is not putting herself in physical or moral danger, you're supposed to let her experience the results of her decision, even if it makes her extremely unhappy.

Say your child routinely dawdles while you're trying to rush out the door to school and work. Some of us are nodding our heads; this is an all too familiar scenario. Now, asks Cathcart-Ross, why would a child do that? Her voice is reassuringly warm and

professional, honed by years of experience with her own four children. She answers her own question: it's about control. The dawdler is trying to say, "You're not the boss of me. I'm going to make the decisions." Cathcart-Ross then pauses her lecture to illustrate why ordering around a child will eventually backfire. We're asked to play the rebellious child, while she takes the role of the irritated parent. It feels a little awkward playing a four-year-old in front of perfect strangers, but you get the point, especially when the lines from the frustrated parent sound so embarrassingly familiar.

She actually has a one-page chart that demystifies bad behavior. As she hands it out, she explains that every repeated behavior has a purpose, so the best way to figure out the child's motive is to examine the impact—on you, the parent. If, for instance, you feel angry, and react by fighting, you can be pretty sure that this is a power struggle. If you feel hurt, your child is probably bent on revenge. If you merely feel annoyed and find yourself issuing constant reminders, your child is probably seeking undue attention.

Over the next few weeks, parents start to open up, confessing how their children taunt them, fight each other, even stage mutinies. After each tale of discord and woe, Cathcart-Ross calmly returns to the chart, asking the parents how they felt in order to figure out the child's goal, which in turn would suggest a course of action. This chart neatly encapsulates Cathcart-Ross's popularity. For one thing, it offers the hope that by following the steps, parents can avoid the annoyed-angry-hurt-hopeless feelings listed on the left-hand column. It makes sense of a confusing family world. It sounds almost businesslike: Strategic Parenting 101. It's only when you get home and try it out on the kids do you realize how hard it is to put into practice. Analyzing a child's motives isn't

easy. And just when you think you've licked one problem, your child cooks up another power play.

At one class, for instance, a former labour negotiator, who had finessed countless rifts between unions and management, tells of how she can't get her kids to eat lunch and back to school on time. She had even mapped out a plan and secured the kids' agreement. They screamed in protest and refused to eat. Fuming, she retreated to her room, wondering why she had quit her job to take over from a Mary Poppinsesque nanny. Cathcart-Ross listened sympathetically and offered a few reassuring words that she might say to the kids in such a situation ("It looks like you don't like what we decided. What do you think we should do about this?") This was a clear case of a power struggle that escalated to outright rebellion, she says. "They're resisting change." If the parent has asked the kids to help devise the plan, and she sticks with it, they'll eat their lunch on time by Day Three. "You have to see it as an investment."

While raising her four children, she often had her doubts. "I cried in bed at night. But I said I will do this. I will get there, because I knew I was half of the problem." In class, she often uses her own kids as Exhibit A. "I remember one time they were having a food fight," she tells us. She figured she'd be the target for the next volley of food, so she said she'd return when things calmed down. Then she went upstairs to her bedroom, and promptly burst into tears. The kids eventually came upstairs and apologized. They all descended to assess the damage. "We've got a mess," Cathcart-Ross told the kids. Then, as she told the class, she uttered the "magic words" of cooperative parenting: "What are we going to do about it?"

She applies this democratic approach liberally. One night, a mother talked of how her three-year-old boy would jump on top of his twin sister with such force that she was afraid her daughter's neck would break. Now most parents would separate the children and punish the aggressor, but not Cathcart-Ross. She told us, she'd calmly say to the boy, in an even voice that betrayed no anger or disappointment: "You must be pretty upset to hurt your sister like that. Do you want to tell me about it?" Some of the parents looked skeptical. You're letting the aggressive child hurt the weaker one? She anticipated the question: "This is not sometimes comfortable," she said. "The child knows what's right and wrong. He knows when he's hurt somebody. The child needs to hear he's loved and accepted, but his behavior is not." It's hard advice to swallow. The idea of letting your child make decisions and live with the consequences is fine when it comes to getting ready for school, but when the stakes are higher, most parents would naturally want to step in and stop or prevent the pain.

Her philosophy raises two key questions, says psychologist Linda Perlis, a friend of hers but no admirer of Driekurs and not an adherent of Cathcart-Ross's approach. First, where do you draw the line? At what point do you decide you'd rather not expose your child to the consequences of his actions and instead impose your authority? And second, what do you do if your child cannot make a logical choice? Driekurs assumes your child is resilient, Perlis says. It presumes the abstract thinking so the child can relate the action to the consequences. It assumes a reasonable parent. It assumes the mainstream. If you or your child doesn't fit that reasonable mould, the Driekurs reliance on logical consequences won't help.

What Perlis says next is surprising: “Driekurs won’t create a high achiever. B and B+ students follow Driekurs. It takes a crazy parent to raise an A+ student. You won’t find anyone who’s a character who was parented under the Driekurs system,” she says. It doesn’t encourage kids to take risks because they get bogged down in the consequences; children are more likely to be adventuresome if they’re protected from making bad choices.

“There are many times you just say no,” Cathcart-Ross said. Anything that affects your health or safety is one obvious area where the parents rule. Beyond that, “you just have to pick your issues,” she said. For some families, it’s Hebrew class, for others, piano lessons. For Cathcart-Ross, it’s a semester in France this summer with her youngest child Maddie, 15, and her husband Rob, a developer. Maddie doesn’t want to go, but Cathcart-Ross says this one is non-negotiable: she’ll learn French and bond with the family. “It’s going to be an experience she won’t forget,” she said. Yet she gave Maddie’s older sister Kate a lot of leeway. When Kate wanted to leave Havergal College to attend a public school, her parents were disappointed but let her go. It wasn’t a happy experience. Kate returned to Havergal, then fell ill with mononucleosis, and finished high school in an alternative program. Kate took four years off, waitressing in London, England, and travelling throughout Europe. Cathcart-Ross was worried but didn’t push her daughter to go to university right away: “I respect her right to make decisions.”

Kate is a slender elfish girl with a silver stud in her left nostril. After work one night, she tells me she’s closer to her parents than most of her friends are: “They put such faith in me at a young age,” she says. “I can talk to them about anything.” One time when she was a teenager, she wanted to go to a rave. Her friends were just sneaking out,

but Kate told her parents, and they agreed to let her go as long as she called home every hour or two. “It was kind of embarrassing,” she says, but she did it. Kate is now working at a travel agency to save money so she can start full-time university this fall, at age 23, when most of her friends are graduating. She’s aiming for a career in international development and can’t wait to start studying. “This is the first time I’ve been excited about settling down.”

“It took a lot of courage for her not to follow the tried and true path,” says Cathcart-Ross. And now, to see her happy and embracing this phase with such enthusiasm is a joy for me.” She considers her goals for her children—respect, independence, self-esteem, responsibility and intimate, caring relations. She’s always kept those goals in mind while raising Kate, she says, and now her daughter is a curious and passionate young woman who values close relationships with friends and family. Cathcart-Ross is obviously pleased: “I feel my job is done.”