

Dreamers, Discoverers & Dynamamos

How to Help the Child Who Is Bright, Bored, and Having Problems in School

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Table of Contents

Part I: Your Child's Inventive Mind

1. Does Your Child Have the Edison Trait?
2. Children Who Are Divergent-Thinking Dominant
3. The Nature of Attention

Part II: Eight Steps to Help Your Edison-Trait Child

4. Step One: Believe in Your Child
5. Step Two: Watch What You Say
6. Step Three: Build a Parent-and-Child Team
7. Step Four: Encourage Your Child's Interests
8. Step Five: Teach Your Child Self-Control
9. Step Six: Coach Your Child to Learn How to Achieve
10. Step Seven: Take Care of Yourself
11. Step Eight: Take Care of Your Family

Part III: A Parent's Guide to Resources

12. Your Edison-Trait Child at School

- 13. What Is ADD?
- 14. Professional Diagnosis, Testing, and Counseling
- 15. Medication for ADD: A Personal Decision
- 16. Controversial Theories and Methods

Part IV: Your Child's Future

- 17. Edisonian Leaders of the Information Age

Chapter 1

Does Your Child Have the Edison Trait?

If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.

- Henry David Thoreau

AN INVENTIVE MIND

He was a boy who learned only by doing. At age six, he had to see how fire worked and accidentally burned his father's barn to the ground. The next fall he began school, where he alternated between letting his mind travel to distant places and keeping his body in perpetual motion in his seat. Because he was distractible and restless, he did not last long in a formal classroom. His teacher called him "addled." Eventually, his mother had to home-school him. As an adult he would recall: "My father thought I was stupid and I almost decided I must be a dunce."

The core of his learning was his passion for experiments. As his new teacher, his mother gave his talent free rein. At the same time she infused him with the disciplines of study. With time and determination, he mastered his runaway mind. He grew up to become a prolific inventor, bringing the magic of electricity and sound recording into the world. He either invented or improved hundreds of practical conveniences. It is said that Thomas Alva Edison succeeded where others failed or never tried, because it was his nature to dare.

Today, a growing number of children have that nature to dare. Like young Edison, they are easily distracted and disorganized, but also wildly imaginative and inventive.

They have minds that are at home with meanderings and leaps of vast proportions. They make unexpected, sometimes startling, connections.

QUALITIES OF A CREATIVE MIND

There was once a man who drove a truck on a road through a town and got stuck under a bridge that had a low clearance. The men of the town gathered around the wedged truck to think of ways to dismantle the truck or the bridge. Finally, a young boy came up and asked, "Why don't you let some air out of the tires?" That is what they did, and the truck went on its way.

This was a child who had the Edison trait. He saw an element of the scene that no one else saw, because they were busily and systematically focused on what to them was relevant to the solution. An Edison-trait child:

Expects the Unexpected

A child with the Edison trait makes sudden, astonishing connections. Because his inner critic disallows neither the ridiculous nor the sublime, he can be innovative, ingenious, and fascinating. He can see ordinary things in extraordinary ways, which is the very essence of creativity.

His sense of humor is disarming. It stems from keen perception and the ability to see things from a different perspective. Sometimes he exhibits the kind of straight-from-the-subconscious humor that makes successful stand-up comics so funny. He blurts out ideas that are just under the surface, things that most others would have automatically censored.

Thinks Autonomously

This is a child who stands up for his own ideas, especially when they are uncommon or nonconformist. He is an independent thinker and does not rely on the opinions of others to form his own judgments. In a matter of personal interest to him, he stands firm with conviction, even in the face of strong opposition.

Hyperfocuses and Persists

When the Edison-trait child is intrinsically motivated, he has formidable mental power. If he is working on a project that is his own brainstorm, he is determined, tenacious, and persevering. As if by magic, he can work for hours involved in what he is doing. He finds ways to overcome barriers; his passion sees him through. In matters of his own choosing, he has inner direction and resolve.

Is Diverse and Intense

Edison-trait children are pluralistic, nonconforming, and multifarious. Once they begin to speak on a topic of their choosing, clear your calendar ... you'll be here for a while.

Flights of fancy are common. One thing leads to another, though sometimes the connections are not apparent to the rest of us.

Has a Mind That Is Holistic

The Edison-trait child notices and reacts to things from any and all directions, so he is likely to have a global sense of places he has been. Take this child to the shopping mall and he'll probably be able to lead you back to your parked car.

Lives on His Own Schedule

Time passes slowly for this child when he is not engaged in an activity of interest. Otherwise, watch out! When an Edison-trait child works on a project of his choosing, he is dedicated and determined.

Loves to Come Up with Ideas

Some do this slowly and dreamily. Others are like kernels of popcorn popping. Many do both. They have qualities of being both a whimsical Dreamer and a high-charged Discoverer or turbulent Dynamo.

DOES YOUR CHILD HAVE THE EDISON TRAIT?

All children are imaginative and enjoy make-believe, but children who have the Edison trait live even closer to their imaginations. It is their lifeblood.

Children manifest the Edison trait in various ways. Some are quiet and reserved and live in their own worlds. Others are loud, interruptive, and bold.

Your child may be a Dreamer, a Discoverer, or a Dynamo. Or he may combine features of any or all of these patterns.

- **Dreamers** drift from place to place, on a schedule of eternal time.
- **Discoverers** have to find things out for themselves and do things their own way.
- **Dynamos** are always in motion, with a flair for surprises, power, and speed.

If your child has the Edison trait, you'll find that some passages in this book will sound as though I wrote them with him in mind. Others won't fit at all. To see how closely your child's patterns match the profile of children with this trait, take a moment and think about him since his earliest days. Then ask yourself these questions:

If your child is a Dreamer

1. Does he get absorbed or intensely involved in his own ideas much of the time?
2. Is he prone to saying things out of the blue?
3. Does he procrastinate to an extreme?
4. Are his interests and activities eclectic?
5. Does he start at least three projects for every one he finishes?

If your child is a Discoverer

1. Is he easily attracted to sights and sounds around him?
2. Is it vital for him to express his opinion?
3. Does he crave novelty, power, and excitement?
4. Is he always ready to speak, especially if you're talking?
5. When he wants his own way – which is almost always – is he relentless?

Or, if your child is a Dynamo

1. Does he get aggressive or intensely emotional about his own ideas much of the time?
2. Is some part of his body always in motion?
3. Are chances to run and climb as vital as the air he breathes?
4. Does he have boundless energy, enough for about three children his age?
5. Do you find yourself wondering if he lacks common sense?

The more "yes" answers you gave to these questions, the more reason there is for you to read on.

DREAMERS

Noelle's teacher calls her "a fairy-tale princess." Noelle lives in her own delicate world, which makes her vulnerable to the stress of classroom demands and playground roughhousing. "She has the soul of an artist," her mother observes.

Noelle is a bright child, but gets teary-eyed and withdraws whenever there is a math test or classwork that must be finished by the end of the work period.

Noelle loves music. She tried to take piano lessons, but this did not work out. Noelle told me, "I couldn't get the notes in a row, the way the teacher did, and I knew that's what she wanted." Noelle dances with extraordinary grace. Also, she likes to draw. At times, when engaged in these activities, she becomes totally absorbed, intensely focused.

I was not surprised when I learned that Noelle likes to paint in watercolors. In getting to know her, I'd come to realize that she thinks in watercolors, too.

Dreamers are mind wanderers. These Edison-trait youngsters seem to be lost in timeless space. From time to time, they have blank expressions on their faces or may look a little dazed. Actually, they are floating through one or several ideas in another realm, a world of their own.

*I dwell in Possibility
A fairer house than Prose,
More numerous of windows,
Superior of doors.*

Like Emily Dickinson, the author of these words, Edison-trait Dreamers are self-styled visionaries and poets. They have an ephemeral quality, a digressive style of thinking, and an inclination to see things from an unusual, even quixotic angle. In the classroom, after a lesson

is taught, the Dreamer may not give the expected response, so others presume he just didn't "get it." But ask him and you'll find out that if he was tuned in, he probably "got it" all right - in an entirely unintended or uncommon way. He produces the kind of answer that makes you think twice.

Dreamers like sensory experience. They are drawn to color, sound, texture, taste, and fragrance. Often, Edison-trait Dreamers remember odd and seemingly unrelated facts and details, knowledge of an idiosyncratic nature. Seldom can they say exactly why they are drawn to these particular thoughts or recollections, but their fascination can become intense. What appears as spaciness to us is felt as absorption by them.

ANNE MORROW LINDBERGH

Portrait of a Dreamer

Poet, pilot, and dreamer, Anne Morrow Lindbergh was ahead of her time. Her books are still read and beloved today. Airlines still fly international routes that she and her famous husband scouted and mapped together.

Throughout her school years, Anne's imagination was both her friend and her foe. She saw images and stories everywhere and wrote fairy-tale plays for others to act in. But rote learning was her nemesis, particularly multiplication tables, and as an adult she acknowledged, "I never passed an arithmetic examination in my life."

As a freshman at Smith College she failed Greek and mathematics. In a letter to her mother she wrote: "I do wish I had some alibi for such inefficiency ... but I haven't any excuse.... I look at a birch tree through a mist of gym shoes, course cards, alarm clocks, papers due, writtens, laundry boxes, choir practices, bills, long themes, and exams.... it makes me discouraged and when I'm discouraged I can't do anything. [April]

Later that year, Anne discovered her passion. In response to the dean's suggestion that she change her schedule to take Home Gardening, a rebellious and self-determined Anne decided instead to enroll in literature courses that appealed to her imagination. The tone of her letters home improved dramatically: "I can't begin to describe the classes...so rich and so stimulating. It is the most glorious world – I feel like a Magellan!...Some powers have no hold on me as they seemed to have before – I feel like saying, 'Let them not have dominion over me!' [October]

*Anne graduated from Smith, began an illustrious career as a writer, and achieved fame as Charles Lindbergh's copilot, navigator, and radio operator. Motivated by a sense of adventure and purpose, the Dreamer who never passed an arithmetic test in a classroom successfully performed complex mathematical calculations in the cockpit of a plane, often under high-risk conditions. She and her husband broke the transcontinental speed record, and they were the first to fly many uncharted routes, like the Great Circle route from New York to China. Their work made it possible for commercial airlines to establish passenger service. Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote five books of diaries and letters, and eight books of prose and poetry. Her perennial best-seller, *Gift From the Sea*, is still widely read and appreciated. The most recurring symbol in this eloquent Dreamer's literary works is the unicorn -- a one-of-a-kind imaginary steed of natural beauty, strength, and wonder.*

DISCOVERERS

From the moment he was born, Gregory was an explorer. "He'd climb out of his crib, go into closets, empty the cabinets, get past any lock. When he was three, he walked out the front door and down the block. Then he was mad at us when we stopped him!" Gregory's dad spoke with a curious mix of exasperation and pride.

Gregory's mom's voice sounded worried. "Once when I was driving, he leaned over and took the wheel right out of my hands. Suppose he had done that on the freeway?"

At school Gregory is known as a child who tests limits. His teacher says is smart, but does not want to do his work. She says, "He's always looking for some excuse, for some way to get out of doing it. And he's constantly on the lookout for excitement. If there's a ruckus anywhere, that's where you'll find him."

Gregory likes to trade things and find ways to make money. Baseball cards are his passion and he has made some profitable deals. At school he sold candy and gum, until the principal ordered him to stop. In sixth grade, when yearbooks came out, he thought up clever inscriptions, then sold them to his classmates to use.

Discoverers are Edison-trait adventurers who must blaze their own trail. They are high-spirited and have to see "what would happen if . . ." They are spontaneous and they must do things their own way.

Discoverers are multisensorial, usually with a strong preference for visual input. This is a child who craves, and often creates, the stimulation of power, surprise, or diversity. He wants to explore his own ideas and express his own opinions. He wants life to keep him interested. If he does not find people stimulating, he will stimulate them, usually by provoking laughter or anger.

Discoverers like to live in the moment, without giving too much mind to what will happen in the future. Typically, they are not planners. Discoverers live with the attitude that they'll discover what's going to happen when it happens. That's what makes life interesting.

When a Discoverer is on the trail of an idea or project of his own, he feels a sense of urgency or impatience. During these times the Discoverer may "hyperfocus." He pays attention to what he is doing with an unusual degree of intensity and to the exclusion of all else. Discoverers also "multitask." Multitasking means doing more than one thing at a time. Dreamers and Dynamos hyperfocus and multitask, too. But Discoverers do it more.

HENRY FORD

Tales of a Discoverer

The man who made the automobile an affordable reality saw into the future with the open eyes and mind of a discoverer. As an adult, Ford stated his personal philosophy: ". . . all life begins here and now. Other men will tell me things which they claim to be facts, but I must not believe them. I will not accept things as true unless I, myself, prove they are true."

As a child, Henry was high-spirited and strong-willed, and he spent many hours on the "bad boys' bench" at school. Once, he directed his classmates to dam a drainage ditch so he could build a water wheel, which he then attached to a coffee mill to see how many things

he could grind; pebbles were fun because they gave off sparks. Unfortunately, it rained while the ditch was still dammed, and this flooded and ruined a farmer's crop. Another time, Henry concocted a steam turbine, using the school fence as a support. After getting about 3,000 rpm from the engine, it blew up, injuring several children and setting fire to the school fence.

In the classroom, Henry was a doer, not a listener. His mother had to teach him how to read at home. He liked to figure things out, but he was poor in spelling and penmanship. He had a gift for invention and an aversion for convention.

An enterprising young Ford refused to accept the status quo that cars were only for the rich. He was determined to make and sell family cars. First he built a practical gas-powered engine. Then he set his entrepreneurial drive in motion. He attracted financial backers by challenging the world's racetrack champions - and winning. Twice he began companies and twice his companies failed. The turning point came when Ford realized that he needed a business structure that would free him to work on his own. He needed to be able to construct his own timetable and to account only to himself. He recalled this historic moment in his own words: "In March, 1902, I resigned, determined never again to put myself under orders." Ford then built the "999," a remarkable race car. He and several loyal workers toiled in an unheated warehouse, designing and testing parts. They donned boxing gloves for antic midnight matches to restore the circulation in their hands. When they were done, they had built a car that had four upright seven-inch cylinders and, according to The Detroit Journal, made "more noise than a freight train."

As a result, twelve investors came together to back the Ford Motor Company. With the innovative style of a Discoverer, Ford developed the assembly line to mass-produce automobiles. He made himself and his investors into millionaires. And he gave America the keys to the car.

DYNAMOS

"I call him 'my child who flew.' It was the very first day he got his bicycle. He came tearing down the hill, and, with the bike at full speed, he stood up on the seat! What was he thinking of? He wore a cast for months, but did he learn? No. He'd do it again in a minute. He does not have a strong relationship with gravity."

Ty's mom, a best-selling novelist, has a knack for describing Ty's life in the danger zone. Referring to the popular comic strip character, she says, "My son is Calvin."

Dynamos are fuel-injected speedsters. They have erratic spurts of energy. They overexcite easily, and when this happens, trouble is on the way.

In some ways, a Dynamo is also a Discoverer. He is impulsive. He acts first and thinks later. Like the Discoverer, the Dynamo loves power and speed. And like the Discoverer, the Dynamo is strong willed and immovable in his position.

The distinguishing feature of the Dynamo is his boundless physical energy. Dynamos keep their bodies in motion, one way or another, almost all the time. They walk, run, skip, kick, climb, jump, bounce, leap, bound, pounce, bolt, dash, race, sprint, dive, swim, splash, and fly.

Dynamos act with gusto and zest. They are risk takers and daredevils. And they are

constantly entertaining. Life in their company is never dull.

JESSE OWENS

Triumph of a Dynamo

At the 1936 summer Olympics in Berlin, the dynamic Jesse Owens won four gold medals and set one world and two Olympic track records. He did this against a backdrop of Nazi hatred, threats, and racism. With the determination of a champion, he insisted on his own history-making version of reality - and he prevailed.

As a child, James Owens was accident-prone and impulsive. Once he stepped into a steel hunting trap his father had just set. Another time he got too close, and was run over by a cotton drag. He often got into scrapes and brawls. There is not much to say about him at school, because there was not much schooling for blacks in the 1920s in Alabama. James liked to "spin yarns," a source of conflict with his dad, who feared that his son's ideas and ambitions were too unrealistic.

In junior high school, Owens found what every Edison-trait child needs: an adult who understood and believed in him. That adult was his running coach, Charles Riley. Coach Riley painted mental pictures for Owens. When he wanted Owens to run lightly, he told the athlete to move "like the ground was a burning fire." Riley helped Owens improve his attitude. He taught him how to step back, take a look, and act, not react. James became known as Jesse during this period, a new name for a new life.

When Owens arrived in Berlin in 1936, the Olympics were marred by world tensions. The Third Reich now occupied the previously demilitarized Rhineland, sending shivers of fear throughout Europe. At the stadium, Adolf Hitler's daily presence cast a perceptible chill. Throughout Germany the tenet of Aryan superiority reigned. Blacks were considered a "subspecies." Nazis denounced their "use" in the games and lodged a formal complaint to prevent "nonhumans" like Owens from competing

Owens not only overcame this pressure, he turned it around to make sports history. His Dynamo ability to make things go his way gave him the winning edge. In the long jump, for example, Owens had become rattled when officials called two immediate, controversial fouls on him. One foul away from elimination in his best event, Owens created a new scenario for himself on the field. He stopped and spoke with his rival, Lutz Long, a tall, blue-eyed, blond German, prototypical Aryan male.

Owens went on to qualify for the event, and his first jump in the finals set an Olympic record. An inspired Long then jumped farther than he ever had in his life. But Owens kept his lead. In the fifth and sixth rounds, Long matched Owens' jumps exactly. Each time, Owens responded by leaping even farther, breaking the Olympic record he had set the round before.

In the end, Jesse Owens won the gold and set an impressive Olympic record. The first person to congratulate him, in full view of Adolf Hitler, was the picture-perfect Aryan, Lutz Long.

THE EDISON TRAIT IS LIFELONG

The Edison trait is a personality characteristic. It endures. As Edison himself did, people with the trait have to make good matches between their aptitudes and their life work.

Mr. Richards is a forty-three-year-old investment broker. When he learned about the Edison trait, he related to it immediately. He says that looking back over the course of his life, he can see a parade of events leading him to understand and accept his nature.

For years Richards went from job to job until he built a successful business of his own. His first marriage failed, due largely, he says, to his ignorance of how he was given to impulsivity. Today, he is happily married.

Mr. Richards enjoys considerable personal and financial success, which he attributes to the kind of risk that he, unlike many others, is willing and inclined to take. Mr. Richards says the Edison trait has caused him "a heap of trouble" but "it's what gives my life creativity and energy."

TURNING THE LIGHTS ON

As the parent of an Edison-trait child, you have probably asked yourself some variation of the following question: "If my child can recall the entire roster of the 1955 Brooklyn Dodgers, why can't he remember that eight times seven is fifty-six?"

To better understand your youngster, picture him wandering through an empty house alone. Most of the rooms are dark. One or two are well lit. When your child enters a bright room, he is filled with enthusiasm to explore. He remembers those bright rooms and develops a strong preference for them. Of course, the way you see it, he should be able to turn the lights on in any room, if only he would use the light switch. When you ask him to and he doesn't, a strain of tension develops between you.

From his point of view—and this is his house—his lights are wired differently. In the past, your Edison-trait child has tried to use the same kind of switch he sees others use, but to no avail. He senses that he doesn't operate the same way. He has a different configuration. Problems start getting solved when you work from his blueprints, not yours. You empower him to figure out his own circuitry, and the rules and methods to turn his lights on.

CONVERGENT, NO - DIVERGENT, YES

Having the Edison trait makes some things easier for your child and some things harder. The things that come easy are

- Thinking up wild or unusual ideas
- Standing up for, feeling strongly about, and getting involved in those ideas
- Making things up, and imagining the future
- Trying things out
- Starting new projects

The things that come hard are

- Focusing on someone else's ideas

- Letting go of his own ideas
- Remembering things he's been asked to do
- Practicing skills repeatedly
- Finishing things

The things that come easy are divergent thinking skills. In divergent thinking, one thought stimulates many others; thinking branches out. The things that come hard require convergent thinking. In convergent thinking, many thoughts reduce to a single one; thinking funnels in.

Read the lists again. It is no surprise that Edison-trait children will not shine in a typical classroom, or on the playground, or in most forms of organized sports. In settings like these, their chemistry sets them apart. They are the exceptions to our implicit rules of how children should think and perform, rules that say they should behave like uniform convergent thinkers.

CONVERGENT THINKING AS THE NORM

It is a natural human tendency to assume that all minds work the same way. We tacitly agree that all minds should naturally be able to follow through on one idea at a time, from beginning to end, with attention to detail. We call convergent thinking the norm and we presume it's what comes naturally if a brain is "normal." Divergent thinkers are viewed as having "attentional problems."

We label convergent thinking as right and divergent thinking as wrong. We base the methods we use to train our children on this premise. We expect children to focus in a linear fashion for as long as we say they should. This is true at home and at school. And at school, as class sizes get larger and children get more diverse, a teacher's tolerance for a student's divergent thinking necessarily diminishes. The same curriculum gets taught to all students in the same way and at the same pace.

The brains of Edison-trait children are misunderstood, not inferior. As students they are attentionally disadvantaged because we punish, and fail to appreciate, their unique creative slant. They get blamed for not completing desk work in the allotted time. They are scolded for not staying in their seats until recess. They are forced to work at an unsuitable tempo, and then get graded down for poor handwriting, and errors in grammar, spelling, and math facts. These outcomes are inevitable artifacts of a mismatched approach.

We teach to their weaknesses, not to their strengths. We insist that they see things our way, but we won't see things theirs. These children are stunningly divergent. They are on a quest for discovery, exploration, and stimulation. Surely we can be flexible and accommodate their style. They can and will develop convergent skins, but only if their desire to learn is protected and kindled with success.

WE CAN HELP EDISON-TRAIT CHILDREN DEVELOP SKILLS

We Can Guide Them to Motivate Themselves

"I remember what it used to be like, " said Kyle, a tall, lanky seventeen-year-old who has the Edison trait. Kyle was referring to the time he was failing junior high school. "I felt like I lived in a maze with glass walls. I could see the way out, but I never could get there."

Now a college-bound high school senior, Kyle had come back for a visit. His metaphor reminded me of the words of psychologist Russell Barkley, Ph.D. He says that a struggle like Kyle's is "not a problem of knowing what to do. It is a problem of doing what you know."

Many times, after being shown what convergent thinking skills are, children who have the Edison trait do not apply these lessons. Dreamers forget what they were supposed to do. Discoverers and Dynamos know they should plan or wait, but they act too soon or stop too late.

Like Kyle at age fourteen, Edison-trait children can see the right path, but keep running into walls on the way there. Since they have to work harder at patience and self-control, these children need more impetus to try. Conceptualized this way, their problem is one of motivation. Chapters 4 through 9 describe specific ways to keep their motivation high.

These children need extra incentive and stimulating rewards. They need to experience success so that they can believe in it. They need reasons compelling enough to keep up the extra effort to get through the glass maze.

We Can Communicate – Think and Talk – in Their Language

A child with the Edison trait needs to feel he's in control. He will accept help only if it does not threaten his autonomy. He is prone to feeling crowded and seeing adults as overbearing.

The Edison-trait child is easily overwhelmed. For this reason, he needs clear direction, phrased in brief, concise messages. He needs his workload assigned in manageable portions. He needs structure, simple categories, and prominent visual cues.

For this same reason, he needs frequent breaks and relief from tension. He responds best to a calm and steady voice, devoid of emotional charge.

The Edison-trait child thinks in images and stories. He needs instruction that is attractive and captivating. He responds to metaphors and identifies with characters he likes. Creative approaches work best. Humor is a strong ally.

In Chapters 5, 6, 8, and 9, you will learn more about communicating with your child, including effective ways to correct him. You'll learn to listen more than you talk, and to think in "Edison-trait dialect," using mental pictures to connect his world and yours.

Your goal is to value your child's divergent thinking, while at the same time teaching and encouraging him to think convergently. With guidance and support, he will learn how to concentrate, shift focus, and do things in sequence. He'll make his own ways to organize his thoughts, words, papers, time, and money, to follow through, plan, schedule, and stay on track. He will come to appreciate conventional wisdom and the merit of reflective thought.

BRIDGES, NOT FENCES

Pretend for a moment that when babies are born, they already know how to talk. Right from the cradle: "Hello, Mother. Hello, Father. Please feed me. I'm hungry."

Now let's say 80 percent of the babies in the United States are born speaking English, but you're a parent of one of the 20 percent who speak a foreign language. You know you must help him to learn English somehow, so he can get along with everybody else. But it's clear your little guy likes his language better than yours.

He learns barely enough English to get by, but no more. He prefers the sound and the flow and the feel of his own tongue. He doesn't know how much of your language he can learn, even if he tries. And why should he try, when everyone acts as if he already should

speak English fluently, and people make a bigger deal over his failures than his efforts?

At first, you forbid your child to speak his language. That doesn't work.

Next, you reward him when he speaks only English. That works some, but it's a strain on everyone.

Finally, you make a commitment to learn and appreciate the language he speaks. You enter his world – through his sounds, his words, and his expressions. You don't insult his language; you find what is beautiful and useful about it.

At the same time, you acknowledge every attempt he makes to speak English - regardless of whether he succeeds or not. You let him know you recognize his efforts and his desire to communicate with you. You tell him that you see his courage and his hard work.

And then, a funny thing happens.

The more good you see in his world, the more good he sees in yours.

You build bridges, not fences.

You become enriched by your knowledge of his language. And he grows in his motivation to learn yours.