

Key One

Set an Intention

I believe that the choice to be excellent begins with aligning your thoughts and words with the intention to require more from yourself.

Oprah Winfrey

We live in a culture of trophy worship. Success—and beyond that, winning—are the ultimate prizes, which prompt us to focus on the destination rather than the journey and subscribe to the false notion that the ends justify the means.

Of course, it's commendable to set a plan and to have standards and expectations as long as we don't allow them to lead to despair and feelings of failure when the "prize" is not won. This key unlocks your ability to set an intention and follow through with it no matter what is going on in the classroom.

An intention is not a goal; it is an aim that guides the action. Setting a goal, such as we'll get through three multiplication tables today, locks you in and makes you rigid; setting an intention, such as I want the kids to enjoy learning math, allows you to let go and be guided by what happens *in the classroom, with each child, in the moment.*

You can see that *intentions* and *goals* are quite different. *Webster's* defines *intention* as "a determination to act in a certain way." *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines *goal* as follows:

“point marking end of a race; objective of effort or ambition; destination.”

Goals are a necessary feature of life in our schools, especially when it comes to work in special education, as anyone who has attended an IEP meeting knows. The IEP team sets specific and measurable goals for the student with special needs. These goals will be worked on throughout the school year. The goals help guide the academic and the social-emotional program for the child. They are quantifiable milestones along the long and winding road of learning and personal development.

Goals certainly have their place. We set them in the hope that our children will rise to them and perform to the best of their ability. The problem is that goals can also be counterproductive if they do not fit the profile of a child. They can place pressure on a child that ultimately inhibits his ability to learn. Or they can be set so low that a child’s abilities are not fully actualized. Because we are ever evolving, so should any goals that are set, and so we should realize that they are malleable guides rather than tangible fixtures.

Consequently, how is setting a goal different from setting an intention? Setting a goal establishes a specific outcome that must be achieved for success to be declared. This goal may lock you into a rigid paradigm of success or failure, which can lead to disappointment. A goal is about *doing*; an intention is about *being*.

In the universe, there is an immeasurable indescribable force which shamans call intent, and absolutely everything that exists in the entire cosmos is attached to intent by a connecting link.

Carlos Castaneda

Elaine recalls a heartbreaking story about William, a nonverbal autistic teen whose featured goal in his IEP since he was six years old was to “tie his shoes.” For the next seven years, occupational

therapists, behaviorists, and volunteers worked endlessly to help him achieve this coveted goal. They believed that they needed to triumph over the fact that William had severe motor-planning and sequencing challenges that made reaching this goal extremely difficult. William resisted this painful process, but despite his rant behaviors and tantrums, he was repeatedly coerced into attempting this task, rewarded with M&Ms, hugs, and smiles each step of the way. Finally, shortly after his thirteenth birthday, he finally wrapped one lace around the other and shaped it into two sweet lovely bows, causing his parents to shout with joy. Mission accomplished!

It would be two years before William learned to type and could articulate what he felt when he finally tied his shoes. As his parents, therapists, and teachers jumped for joy, William described it as the worst day of his life.

He wrote about how being coerced into shoe tying had been a daily source of humiliation. He asked his parents why they just didn't go out and get him shoes that fastened with Velcro! He wondered why it was so much more important to them that he do this menial task than to truly acknowledge his interests and notice what was important to him. Their drive to this goal somehow made William feel invalidated. His success with laces was not of value to him and reminded him daily that they were not listening to him.

William continued to express that he would have much rather had his team spend those hours reading books to him, discussing the current events, and learning age-appropriate materials. But you see, he did not have the words at the time. He was communicating as best he could with his behaviors. Clearly, William had completely different goals than his parents.

We might always ask the question of a goal, "How important is it?" In William's case, a quick run to the sporting goods store and a pair of Velcro sneakers would have saved years of endless upheaval.

We are human beings, not human doings.

As you know, there are many variables and unpredictable occurrences in your classroom, especially when working with children with autism. This means that it is essential that you remain the reliable constant for the child. Although there are a number of things you can physically control in the classroom environment, such as lighting, spatial design, and sound, to minimize misdirected sensory stimulation, you cannot control the behaviors, actions, and reactions of the individuals in your class.

The only thing you can fully control in your classroom is your own attitude and your own state of being. This starts with your conviction *to behave and react* in a certain way, no matter what is going on around you. If you set your intention to be unruffled and relaxed no matter what happens, you'll be able to deal with a child who is having a particularly rough day.

You know this dance very well: child has a meltdown; teacher tries to force child to sit and calm down; teacher gets upset; child gets worse. Well, what if you tried something different? Child has a meltdown; teacher calmly breathes and encourages child to breathe; student calms down.

What if you decided to leave home your serious side for the day and set your intention to be playful? Your teaching will have a levity to it, and you can cultivate your students' participation in playful learning. Maybe you push the desks aside and build a pretend campfire in the middle of the room and teach in a circle with camp activities between subjects. Maybe you create a tribe and have students role-play the chief, warriors, buffalo hunters, gatherers, and so on.

If there is stress and behavioral upheaval, if you approach it through playfulness, the energy of the class will follow your lead and often a greater problem will be averted. Other intentions may be to be patient, empathetic, and compassionate. Imagine

yourself practicing these intentions. Students with autism respond particularly well when the teacher's intention is to be calm.

Paradoxically, once you let go of the goal and let your intention guide you, you will be more likely to achieve more goals in the long run. For example at The Miracle Project, the goal is to create a musical for the kids to write and star in. The intention is for the children to feel comfortable. If Elaine comes in on the first day attempting to read lines, block scenes, and rehearse a play, nothing will happen and there will never be a show. If she comes with the intention to let them feel comfortable, she creates a warm and cozy environment for the children to feel safe to be themselves. She encourages them to hop and skip across the floor; to be in their own space until they are ready to be part of a group; and she takes time to discover what interests them. All the activities are directed to creating a comfort zone for the new kids. Eventually, over the course of the next twenty-plus weeks, a musical production will come out of it that will far exceed the goal she set initially. It may not appear that a full-on musical can come to fruition from the early sessions, but opening night eventually comes and surpasses everyone's expectations of what is possible for a child with autism to do.

It is essential that you remain the
reliable constant for the child.

Key One begins with addressing the way you, as a teacher, caregiver, parent, friend, or neighbor, prepare yourself before you even meet up with a child with autism. Remember that this has nothing to do with fixing or controlling the child or manipulating the environment. It is all about you being the steady and persistent compass for navigating the changing waters of a dynamic classroom.

Even if a child is overwhelmed or having a tantrum, if you can be the consistent "calm within the storm," you will see how quickly

a difficult situation can deescalate. Children with autism are highly sensitive human beings. If you are anxious or uncertain on the inside, no matter how you smile on the outside, they will feel your anxiety. They can be barometers for your inner life and cannot be fooled! Commit wholeheartedly to your positive intention and positive outcomes will follow. Our thinking, whether positive or negative or all that lies between, can lead to a chain reaction for us and our students like a pinball bouncing its way down through the bumpers.

The Lock: Domino Morning

First, we will present a scenario in which we are locked in our usual way of behaving. We will return to that same scenario but only after going through an exercise to unlock and modify our perception and approach from within.

The following story illustrates the kinds of obstacles that can prevent us from being in the moment with our students and staying true to our intention. Does this sound familiar? You blink to the blurred neon red of your alarm clock. 7:47 AM. The alarm didn't go off and now you are going to be super rushed . . . again.

You spring out of bed and into the shower. No time for conditioner. On the way to work, performance driving like that kid from *Transformers*, you decide to give your usual morning latte a miss. Not a good start. Because you are behind schedule, you lose out on a prime spot in the main lot. As the attendant humorlessly motions you toward the side streets, you think to yourself, give a guy an orange vest and a traffic wand and suddenly he thinks he's king of the world. There are no spaces for what seems like blocks. Of course, this is the day on which your bag is filled with a stack of corrected papers and heavy books rivaling the weight of a full set of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Hoisting it like a Nepalese sherpa over your shoulder, the bag handle rips. You scramble, chasing after a blizzard of paper, dozens of essays, and handouts wafting out into

the middle of the street. A mother you half-recognize pulls up in her SUV, bumper inches from your head, as you crouch down, frantically collecting papers. Also late for work, the mother honks at you to get out of the way. You stand up, a chaos of papers pressed to your chest, mouth agape.

As you arrive at your desk, the bell rings and children start trickling into class. You have had no prep time; your instant coffee has spilled on your white blouse. Two kids are struggling over another kid's backpack as two others race in amid some game of tag being played at earsplitting decibels. The distractions mount as the classroom escalates into a random cacophony. A small voice inside is pleading with you to regroup and take a "chill pill" before reacting. But that voice isn't loud enough, and before you know it, you are reacting to the energy of the students. The environment of nurturing becomes one of survival, and all the students fall in line to play their starring roles as instigators. The special circumstances of the classroom disappear from your mind-set like a mirage in the desert. Your chest tightens. Your voice rises above the fray. You are yelling now. One child crawls under a table in the far corner where a classroom poster cheerily reads, "One-of-a-Kind Gifts." Your heart sinks. You feel like the most terrible, worst teacher ever. Maybe your mother was right: you should have chosen a more predictable profession—like accounting.

Key One Exercise: Set an Intention

For many teachers, this scenario is not uncommon. Here is an exercise to practice setting an intention that allows you to establish an inner compass that can keep you centered through your day. It is ideal to create a daily ritual at home before coming to the school campus. The first time you do this exercise, it will take about fifteen minutes. Believe me, it's worth it, and once you've done it, you'll find that this process of centering yourself will take only a few minutes. Here goes . . . Find a quiet place where, for a

few minutes, you can regroup without distractions. Sit comfortably with your back supported in a chair or on the floor. Get a sense of your body. Plant your sit bones like roots to the chair or floor.

Take a deep breath in and a deep breath out. Close your eyes and get a sense of your body, of the way you are sitting. Feel the way your sit bones are touching the ground or chair. While you are breathing, sense your feet. Move from your feet, up to your calves, then to your thighs. Fill up your chest with air and sense the way your breath moves in and out.

Keep breathing deeply. Get a sense of your shoulders, your back, your arms, your elbows, your wrists, your hands, your fingers. Keep breathing as you get a sense of your neck, the back of your head, your throat, your face, the top of your head. Allow yourself to be fully present in these moments.

Now visualize a golden yellow light that originates from high up in the clouds and that goes down your spine, grounding you to the earth. Let your body be filled with the golden light and breathe in this light. Let it energize your entire body, your muscles, your lungs. Feel your stillness. Now, from this calm place, set your intention for the day. This intention will serve as your reliable compass.

Again, an intention is about your state of being. For example, my intention may be to simply be open. Your intention might be to be playful. So when you find yourself getting a little too serious, you go right back to that intention and see your situation with a sense of playfulness. This may sound difficult but in fact it's a discipline that can be practiced and mastered. You may set an intention to be calm, so when you feel upset, make an effort to return to that feeling of calm.

Breathe into this thought. Give it energy. Visualize yourself placing your intention in your heart. Or, if you're a more practical sort, write it on an index card and carry it with you the entire day. Place the card on your desk or close by. This way, when the day starts unwinding and you need to restore your intention, you'll

know where to find it. Never worry if you veer off course. It's not reasonable to expect yourself to always *hold on to* the intention. Just be aware when you're slipping away from it and *return* to the intention as swiftly as you can.

Did you know that when we take a trip in an airplane, our flight is off course more than 90 percent of the time? The guidance system reports to the autopilot that the plane is off course and the autopilot makes the necessary adjustments. This happens thousands of times throughout any given flight. Just as the autopilot adjusts a course, we can make adjustments to get our intention back on course. For on course or off, we need to remember that whatever mood we display—whether positive or negative—the child we are seeking to help will be sure to pick up on it.

The Unlock: It's Never Too Late to Start the Day Over

Now, let's revisit the morning scenario once more, but this time, we'll employ the work we discovered in the exercise of Key One. You still blink to the blurred neon of your alarm clock. Again, you fly out of bed but this time, before you step into the shower, you take a moment. You close your eyes and inhale, directing your breath all the way down toward the base of your spine. You see it there—a glowing ball of peaceful yellow light. Return to the place you discovered in the exercise, that inner place of calm. It may feel counterintuitive to stop and take a long slow breath when you are late and rushed, but it is the most effective way to break the chain of frantic energy. Taking that moment to yourself will make all the difference in how your lateness dictates the ensuing events. "I have all the time in the world . . . to play," you remind yourself. You open your eyes. You set an intention for the day—to be playful. Back in reality, you jump into the shower, shampoo. Speed-racer

hair conditioning is followed by the stunt driving and that sorely missed latte, but this time you recall your intention: you have all the time in the world for play.

Losing out on the good parking in the main lot, you succumb to the dictatorial guy in the orange vest and end up a half-mile away from school, nudged between a motorcycle and a fire hydrant. The spring blooms are ablaze and beautiful. It is still the day on which you hoist your overstuffed bag over your shoulder. The handle rips sending dozens of papers flying into the street. As you crouch down, collecting the white carpet of scribbles, you are a near miss for the mother in the SUV. You stand up clutching all your papers, but this time you laugh and she blushes, embarrassed that she almost mowed down a teacher.

You arrive right with the bell and children flooding into class. The two kids are still struggling over another's backpack as another twosome charges in amid the game of tag. The distractions mount to a deafening roar. Again, that tiny voice pleads with you. This time, you realize, it's not too late to start this day over. You step to the middle of the classroom and clear your throat to get everyone's attention. In a Vegas-style boxing match voice, you call out the entangled students names as if prizefighters and do a blow-by-blow radio call of their backpack struggle. The class relaxes and falls into their proper seats to get ready for first period.

As the last stragglers shuffle past you to their seats, you notice that the coffee stain on your blouse is perfectly hidden by the sweater you've thrown over your shoulders. As you head to the front of the class, you remind yourself of your intention. You take your sweater off and ask the students to do something called a Rorschach test, interpreting the "ink" coffee spot. The kids amaze you with their creativity and the level of playfulness rises.

Whether you think you can, or you think you can't—
you're right.

Henry Ford

Meet Special Educator Lisa Johnson

The most effective teachers are the ones who engage with intentions rather than with particular goals. An excellent example is Lisa Johnson. Throughout this book, she will be bringing you insights and stories of her process and successes from the playing field as a teacher.

Elaine met Lisa through a parent who described how Lisa had transformed a special education classroom—one that consisted of fifteen students of all abilities, a very small room, and no resources—into a haven of enthusiastic learners—all surpassing their IEP goals. Lisa developed her skills over time; at the start of her career she was at a loss, perhaps like some of you.

Early in her career, teacher Lisa Johnson, armed with a master's degree in special education, enthusiastically arrived at her first job: to teach children with autism. She had her education, her credentials, ample theoretical training, an arsenal of textbook guidelines, and goals to inspire an imaginary class she had been teaching in her head for years. "Remember to speak slowly. Repeat what you are teaching often. Seat the special education students close to the front of the classroom. Break tasks down into single steps. Simplify the curriculum." She was ready to take on the challenge with these recommendations.

However, she found over time that *some* of these recommendations worked *some* of the time with *some* students, a *few* of them worked *most* of the time with a *few* students, and *none* worked *most* of the time for far too *many*. She felt she was missing the target. No matter how animated she made a lesson, she couldn't hold Sam's attention. Jane wouldn't respond to her questions. Bart seemed lost in his own world and wouldn't even look her in the eye. She had no idea how much of the lesson each was able to absorb, and homework and tests were not reliable indicators given the fine motor challenges and challenged communication skills of her students.

One girl hid under her desk from the overhead lights. Another ran in circles when the chatter around her got too loud. All the tools Lisa implemented had little to no effect. The class was simply not going according to her goals! Some seasoned educators told her, “Don’t worry so much; there’s only so much a teacher can do. Some kids just can’t be taught.”

But deep inside, she had a burning belief that there was a better way to support students with severe learning challenges and differences. Although her concrete and quantifiable goal was to get through the textbook material with a B-C grade bell curve, her overarching ambition was to create a room of independent thinkers and self-motivated learners.

Toward this end, she began examining different learning styles. She read educational manuals, met with school psychologists, and tirelessly interviewed every teacher to learn from their experiences. She studied all the certified teaching methodologies and became a conference junkie, picking up different strategies every weekend at airport hotels and taking continuing education credits over the summer. Some things she learned worked for a bit, others flat out failed. Some elevated one student but alienated two others in the process. Determined to a fault, she was not going to stop until she achieved every goal with each student. It took a long time for her to realize that the goal she had set was unattainable. She was on a one-way freeway to frustration and disappointment, and so were her students.

Taking a step in the right direction, she studied and became certified as a DIR graduate (Stanley Greenspan’s developmental, individual-difference, relationship-based approach), which focuses on the teacher cultivating a relationship with the student as the necessary foundation for all learning and turns the familiar teacher-as-giver–student-as-receiver paradigm on its head. She immediately had to release her expectations of the daily grind: getting through scheduled curriculum, sticking to semester time lines, and tracking progress graphs. Instead, her focus became how to best

connect with her students. Her idea of success in the classroom was no longer measured by test scores or checklists at the end of a chapter. She let go of her *goal* and set an *intention* to be present and truly understanding of her students' differences to reach them in order to teach them. She practiced that intention every day. So can you. Ready. Set. Follow your intention.

From the Trenches

Carol Ishihara, Special Educator

When there is chaos in the classroom, I detach personally from the noise and disruption, unless a student is in danger of being hurt. When I become the “calm within the storm” and stay still and quiet, I find my students reflect that calm.

Sometimes I will play classical music such as Mozart.

When Sarah has a meltdown, I quickly ask the aide to take the other students to the library. I give Sarah space to release her energy and tell her that she is safe and that I am staying over at my desk but I am with her. I focus on my breathing and stay calm even as she is raging. Noticing a cup of sharpened pencils and a landmine of backpacks on the floor, I clear away any potential hazards. I monitor her behavior while I pick up a book and read, letting her know that I am aware of her but not obsessed with stopping her. After shrieking and crying in tantrums, she eventually calms down from her emotional escalation. I remain consistent, neither worried by her tantrum nor relieved by her calm. I am

her constant through the storm. I gently touch her back, knowing she likes sensory input. Sarah is fatigued, her emotional outrage has exhausted her, and she falls asleep at her desk. The next day, to determine the trigger for the emotional collapse, I take the time to talk to her about what happened. We can find the triggers and bring awareness to them. I find that most emotional outbursts are caused by an unexpected surprise or transition. Simply by being aware of it reduces its power. My intention to remain calm and be an anchor for her allows her to feel safe with me. It validates her emotions and builds a trust between us.

Zack Wimpee, One-on-One Aide

My attitude is that I love all the kids and I try to find the individual differences in all children to give them the best therapy to help them succeed. But at the end of the day, I remember that this is my job, not my life. If you attach yourself too much, you aren't able to let go when work is over. Remaining in good mental and physical health for the kids is very important. You must be able to relax and not bring work home with you in order to recharge and be the best therapist for the next day's work.

Monica Jorgensen, Special Educator

My main strength as an educator is flexibility. It is so important to be able to make plans but more important to let them go if they are not appropriate for that moment. Plans

made at home away from the students should never be set in stone. General education teachers have a blueprint for nearly every week of the entire year. They have curriculum outlines and chapter pacing. Because I don't know what kind of progress is going to be made, I try to plan week by week instead. This can become day by day, even minute by minute. My flexibility benefits the kids because a sudden interest that they take on can become a stimulating two-week unit. I take student engagement wherever I find it and run with it.

Three Morning Intentions from Lisa Johnson, Special Educator

First, the door check. Hang up your personal issues before entering the class. Take short breaks throughout the day to clear away any thoughts that may be lingering around. Lisa likes to assure these thoughts that she'll attend to them after school on her own time. She reminds herself that time at school is 100 percent for the students.

Second, be of service. A word that works both ways because you get what you give. The concept of being of service aligns Lisa's principles to her actions. When she begins with an attitude of service, helpfulness is her constant companion. Helpfulness is also contagious to all the students and is a community builder.

Third, remember humor. Lighten up to brighten up. Obviously, there is a time for seriousness in teaching, but adding laughter to a lesson brings a positive charge to the

material. A shared laugh is a bonding agent and engages students to participate. Ultimately, we are all seeking joy, and students look forward to being in a classroom infused with the joy of learning.



Quick Keys

- Find your own place of relaxation and peace.
- Set your intention for the day—to be calm, patient, joyful, playful, and so on.
- If you sway from this intention, call on the “autopilot” and readjust.
- Remember that it is never too late to start your day over.