Meraki

Exercise Freedom

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Before You Agree

Re-scripting the stories we're handed: a calm way to think when school, social media and the people around us all have an opinion.

A MERAKI PARENT SERIES GUIDE

Who this is for

This little book is for parents of school-age children, especially parents who are doing a lot of this on their own.

Maybe you're young, or busy, or both. Maybe you didn't spend years studying psychology or law, and you don't have a professional to call when something at school feels wrong. When you need advice, you probably turn to the people you trust: friends, your own parents, grandparents, a group online. That's normal, and those people often love you and your child very much. But they're working from their own experiences and their own stories, just as you are.

Our lives are shaped by the stories we tell about ourselves, and by the stories others tell about us and our children. This guide is about noticing those stories before we accept them.

This book won't tell you what to think about any school, person or issue. It offers three simple ideas, and a few small habits, that can help you think more clearly when emotions are high and everyone around you already seems sure.

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This is educational material. It is not counseling, therapy, legal or medical advice, and reading it does not create a counseling relationship.

CHAPTER 1

Look before you agree

Here's a question worth asking yourself sometimes: *How many of my strong opinions did I form from things I actually read or saw myself?*

For most of us, the honest answer is "fewer than I'd like." A lot of what we believe arrives already explained. Someone tells us what happened, others repeat it, and by the time it reaches us, it feels like a fact.

The words come first

Look at these two sentences. Either one could describe the very same afternoon:

ONE WAY

A parent asked the school several questions about a decision.

ANOTHER WAY

A difficult parent kept going after school staff, even after being told to stop.

Neither sentence has a date, a document or a quote in it. But each one has already decided who to believe, before you've seen anything.

That's how a **characterization** works. It doesn't argue with you. It frames things for you. And once you hear the same frame from people you trust, it starts to feel like there's nothing left to check.

Why we go along

In the 1950s, a researcher named Solomon Asch showed that people will sometimes say something they can see is wrong, just because everyone else in the room said it first.[1] Most of us have felt that pull: in a group chat, at a meeting, at a family table.

But Asch found something hopeful too. When even **one other person** in the room gave the honest answer, people were much more likely to trust their own eyes. One ally made a big difference.

> **TRY THIS**
>
> The next time someone tells you a story about a teacher, a school, or another parent, ask quietly: *"Have I seen anything myself, or am I only hearing how someone else described it?"* You don't have to say it out loud. Just notice the answer.

"I don't know enough to agree with that yet."

That sentence isn't rude, and it isn't a refusal to decide. It's a promise to look first. You're allowed to say it to friends, to family, even to yourself.

CHAPTER 2

Notice the role you're handed

Many stories come with the cast already chosen. Someone has been wronged. Someone is to blame. And there's usually a part waiting for you: the one who rushes in to fix it.

In 1968, a psychiatrist named Stephen Karpman gave those parts names. He called it the **drama triangle**.[2]

ROLE	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE
Victim	"This is happening to me, and there's nothing I can do."
Persecutor	"It's all their fault."
Rescuer	"Let me fix this for you." (In Karpman's sense, help that keeps someone stuck, not every kind of help.)

Karpman noticed that people **switch roles**. The rescuer who isn't thanked starts to feel like a victim. The victim, pushed far enough, starts blaming. Round and round it goes, and the real problem often doesn't get solved.

Six seconds

Imagine a short video: a parent at a school meeting raises their voice, and someone at the front table says, "We're moving on." Captioned one way, it's a parent being silenced. Captioned another way, it's a school finally dealing with a disruption. The video is the same. Only the roles change. And you're invited to be the rescuer: share it, get angry, pick a side.

A way out of the triangle

An author named David Emerald suggested a different set of roles, which he called the Empowerment Dynamic.[3]

INSTEAD OF	TRY BEING
Victim	**Creator.** "What do I want to happen, and what's one step I can take?"
Persecutor	**Challenger.** Name the problem clearly, without attacking the person.
Rescuer	**Coach.** Help someone see their own choices instead of taking over.

> **TRY THIS**
>
> When a story or video makes your heart pound, pause and ask: *"What role am I being handed right now, and do I want it?"* You can still act. Just act as a creator, a challenger or a coach.

CHAPTER 3

Remember that people are more than one moment

Think of someone you know well. Picture them at work, at a family dinner, at a ballgame, at a tense school meeting. They probably don't look like quite the same person in all four places. Which one is real? All of them.

Psychologist Walter Mischel spent years showing that people are less consistent across situations than we assume, but consistent in patterns: *if* I'm in this kind of place, *then* I tend to act this way.[4] Later researchers described a "trait" as something closer to an average of many moments than a fixed setting.[5]

A moment versus a person

"She was angry at that meeting" describes a **moment**. "She's an angry person" claims something about who she **is**. A lot of stories quietly swap one for the other. One afternoon, one email, one video becomes the whole person.

When we feel threatened

When we sense danger, our bodies react fast: fight, flight, freeze, or what some counselors call "fawn," giving in to make the danger stop.[6] Psychiatrist Daniel Siegel talks about a "window of tolerance," the zone where we can still think clearly.[7] Outside it, our fastest reactions take over. That's true for us, for our children, and for the teachers and staff on the other side of the table.

YOUR TURN

Which places bring out the calmest version of you? Which ones narrow your window? You don't have to fix anything yet. Just noticing is a start, and it's something a counselor can help you explore.

TRY THIS

Before you judge someone by one moment, ask: *"Is this describing a moment, or claiming a character? How many moments would I need to see before I'd know?"* Then give yourself the same allowance.

CHAPTER 4

Putting it to work with your child's school

These ideas become most useful when something at school is actually going wrong. Here are a few habits that follow from them:

Write it down, calmly

A short email after a phone call ("To make sure I understood our conversation today...") turns a memory into a record. Write what was said, with the date. Leave out guesses about why.

Quote, don't describe

"The principal said, 'We'll revisit it in the spring'" is stronger than "the principal brushed me off." It's also kinder, and harder to argue with.

Ask one clear question at a time

Numbered questions get numbered answers. Add the date you'd like a reply by. (That's your request, not a legal deadline.)

Choose your role on purpose

Be the creator who asks and records, the challenger who names a problem without attacking a person, and the coach who helps other parents find their own way.

> **WHERE TO GET REAL HELP**
>
> If stress around school is affecting you or your child, a licensed counselor can help. For school and disability questions, every state has a **Parent Training and Information Center** that helps families with school and disability questions for free. Your state's **protection and advocacy organization** can also help. If you need legal advice, talk to an attorney.

Look before you agree. Notice your role. Remember the whole person.

Notes and where to read more

1. Solomon E. Asch, "Studies of Independence and Conformity: I. A Minority of One Against a Unanimous Majority," *Psychological Monographs* 70, no. 9 (1956).
2. Stephen B. Karpman, "Fairy Tales and Script Drama Analysis," *Transactional Analysis Bulletin* 7, no. 26 (1968): 39–43.
3. David Emerald, *The Power of TED* (*The Empowerment Dynamic)* (Polaris Publishing, 2009).
4. Walter Mischel, *Personality and Assessment* (Wiley, 1968); Walter Mischel and Yuichi Shoda, "A Cognitive-Affective System Theory of Personality," *Psychological Review* 102, no. 2 (1995).
5. William Fleeson, "Traits as Density Distributions of States," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 80, no. 6 (2001).
6. Walter B. Cannon, *Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear and Rage* (1915); Pete Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving* (2013).
7. Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind* (Guilford Press, 1999).

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