

# **Parenting by Instinct**

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# Parenting by Instinct

*by Kathy Kolbe and Edward Hoffman, Ph.D.*

Parenting is among life's greatest satisfactions as well as its most intense challenges. In today's high-tech world, children are exposed to a variety of influences that would have seemed unimaginable only a few generations ago. Peer groups, popular entertainment, and increasingly, video games and the Internet, all entice youngsters relentlessly—and compete with parental efforts.

In certain ways, children are growing up “faster” and more sophisticated at ever-earlier ages; but paradoxically, their judgment often appears worse than in the past. Despite America's contemporary affluence, healthy development is hardly an easy process. Indeed, childhood and teenage depression are probably more widespread in our society than ever before.

Amidst a sea of countless—often contradictory—magazines, books, manuals, and electronic materials, where can parents find true guidance? Is there actually a way to foster children's mental, physical, and social growth most beneficially? What's likely to create successful results, instead of frustration for parents and children alike? When it comes to parenting, what works, what doesn't, and why? In particular, has a new vision emerged out of objective, scientific research—rather than from preconceived wishes or fantasies about what youngsters *ought* to be like?

Fortunately, the answer is a resounding *yes*. Known as the *Kolbe System™*, it's been proven from our combined professional experience to be a fresh, practical, and empirically potent tool. In this article, we'd like to highlight the Kolbe System's perspective and offer examples for applying its wide-ranging insights to such areas as children's learning, social interaction, adjustment to time and space at home, character-building, play and recreation, health and safety, and discipline. In this way, we can most effectively meet the exciting challenge of parenting today.

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### **I. The Kolbe System**

The Kolbe System is the brainchild of this article's senior author, Kathy Kolbe, daughter of E.F. Wonderlic, who pioneered the field of personnel testing in the 1930s-1940s. My academic background lies in journalism and education for gifted students. During my early career, I began studying individual differences among children, and as recounted in my first book on this subject, *The Conative Connection*, I discovered that "Being intellectually gifted didn't determine what a person would *do*. Some smart kids wouldn't read directions, while others wouldn't do anything until they read them completely...*What* people do often has quite little to do with what they have the *ability* to do or with their *perceived* desires."

I further noted that humanity's great thinkers had long postulated three basic features of the human mind: knowledge or intelligence; motivation or emotions; and volition. I decided that volition—or what I've termed *conation*—had been given inadequate attention as a vital aspect of human growth. The *Kolbe System*, as it's therefore been developed, focuses not on cognitive or personality aspects that underlie children's day-to-day behaviors, but instead, on their inborn inclination towards methods of action, achievement, and problem-solving.

Based on more than a decade of research involving thousands of men and women, the Kolbe System offers a 36-item psychological test designed to assess our particular conative approach to problem-solving, based on a conceptual grid of twelve distinct categories. Initially known as the *Kolbe Conative Index (KCI)*, it has developed into several different assessment instruments; among these are the Kolbe A index for adults and the Kolbe Y index, designed for youths from ages 10-15. Because research shows that people typically *misidentify* their own conative style unless they actually take the Kolbe index, it's crucial for both parents and youngsters to complete these respective tests.

Philosophically, the Kolbe System is allied with the viewpoint of humanistic psychology—especially its leading figure Abraham Maslow—that from birth onward, we each possess a "core-self" of instinctual talents, abilities, and predilections that form the basis for creativity, accomplishment, and happiness in life. For as Maslow implicitly recognized (as evidenced by his unpublished writings in *Future Visions*, edited by co-author Edward Hoffman of this article) this innate "core" importantly includes our conative self.

Our key point, therefore, for parents is this: *When we fail to acknowledge and respect the legitimacy of a child's conative approach—or worse, if we*

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*try forcing that approach to mirror our own, then stresses and strains inevitably result.* The key problem with other parenting approaches, thus, is their failure to take conation into account. Inevitably, then, such well-meaning advice as, “All children crave routines” is mistaken and even destructive. As parents, we ought never compromise our child’s sense of self. Rather, healthy parent-child relations involve nurturing to be who we are—and this process always involves “honoring” one’s conative self.

Before examining specific parenting issues, it’s first necessary to become acquainted with this system’s basics.

### The Striving Instincts

By analyzing the massive body of cross-disciplinary research on human development, it’s possible to identify four fundamental drives for action, which we term our *Striving Instincts*. Apparent to observant parents as early as their infant’s first days of life, these can be understood as inner fountains of energy and strength; but equally crucial, they must find outlets in the outer world. In a nutshell, these drives enable babies, toddlers, preschoolers, latency-age children, preadolescents, teens, and adults—that is, *all* humans—to be productive, to do things. Already apparent during infancy, our individual *conative approach* stays remarkably consistent throughout our lives.

When we function according to these drives, we fulfill our destinies and make our best decisions. But when we act contrary to them, their power works against us. Furthermore, we self-actualize—become “all that we’re capable of becoming” during the course of life only through these specific striving instincts. They are:

- 1) The *probing instinct*—which involves our need to investigate in depth. It’s known too as the *Fact Finder* tendency.
- 2) The *patterning instinct*—which pertains to our need to create a sense of order. It’s also identified as the *Follow Thru* tendency.
- 3) The *innovating instinct*—which relates to our need to experiment, to create new things. It’s also identified as the *Quick Start* tendency.
- 4) The *demonstrating instinct*—which relates to our need to convert ideas into tangible, “hands-on” form. It’s known too as the *Implementor* tendency.

Here are some additional descriptions of our *Striving Instincts*:

- 1) the *Fact Finder* drive is most oriented to activities that

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- encompass defining, calculating, formalizing, and researching;
- 2) the *Follow Thru* drive is most oriented to such acts as arranging, coordinating, integrating, and planning;
  - 3) the *Quick Start* drive is most oriented to activities that involve brainstorming, intuiting, inventing, and risk-taking;
  - 4) the *Implementor* drive is most oriented to such acts as building, crafting, forming, and repairing.

### The Operating Zones

It's vital to understand that we each possess these four *Striving Instincts*, but to varying extents. To offer a simple example: all children experience at least a bit of satisfaction from craftwork—such as working with clay, paper-mache, or easel-and-paint. But some youngsters eagerly seek out such activity, while others just as vigorously avoid it. For this reason, each of the four *Striving Instincts* is organized in a three-zone format. These *Operating Zones* are labeled as:

- 1) *Initiate* (insist)—the extent to which a child actively insists upon, relies upon, or utilizes a striving instinct;
- 2) *Respond* (accommodate)—the extent to which a child more passively accommodates, accepts, or cooperates with a striving instinct;
- 3) *Prevent* (resist)—the extent to which a child resists or rejects a striving instinct;

Diagram 1 provides a clear model for seeing this twelve-section grid. The important point is that everyone possesses all four *Striving Instincts*, and each is placed within a particular *Operating Zone*. The overall combination of these four drives comprises our unique style—what we term our *modus operandi* or *MO*. Let's take a few examples to master this grid, and then see how the Kolbe System can significantly help in parenting's major domains. Keep in mind: For purposes of readability in this introductory piece, we're highlighting children's *MOs* by emphasizing only one particular *Striving Instinct*. But in real life, we all possess the four *Striving Instincts* in a specific combination.

#### Example 1—The Melting Ice Cube:

Surprising as it may sound, before children even acquire the capacity to speak, they already reveal their *conative self* when an appropriate stimulus is provided, such as a melting ice cube placed on a metal tray. That is, faced with this new situation, babies react quite variably. The *initiating*

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*Fact Finder* will carefully poke, probe, and investigate the material; whereas the *insistent Follow Thru* will be more concerned with maintaining order and tidiness, and reacting to the growing, watery mess. In contrast, the *initiating Quick Start* is likely to grab the ice cube impulsively and “mouth” it, then spontaneously pop it out and rapidly lose interest. Evidencing a very different *Striving Instinct*, the *insistent Implementor* is fascinated by the object’s colors, shape, weight, and other sensory components—and will pound, bang, and throw it.

From such examples, parents agree that even babies have differing *conative approaches*—and that they’ll thrive best when nurtured daily to give full rein to them. Likewise, if babies are chronically prevented from utilizing their particular approach, they’re likely to suffer, exhibiting frustration and irritability. Indeed, such behavior is undoubtedly a primary cause of the famous “terrible-tuos” of toddlerhood. For no matter what our chronological age, we do things best when following our unique *conative approach*. Conversely, we’re most inefficient when we act against that inner grain.

In short, to expect *all* infants to care about the melting ice’s messiness, or to enjoy the cube-and-tray’s shadings of color and light, is a prescription for parenting disappointment—and eventually even disaster.

### Example 2—Circle Time at Nursery School:

One of the most basic activities in early childhood education is “circle time,” in which a group of three-to-five-year-olds sits loosely around their teacher holding a colorful story-book. In ragged unison, they sing a favorite nursery song like “Pop Goes the Weasel” or the “Eensy, Weensy Spider.” At such a typical gathering, no observant adult can fail to notice how individual children exhibit very differing reactions. In our view, these flow neither from their intellect nor basic mood, but from their varying *conative approaches*.

For example, *insistent Quick Starts* crave a lot of excitement; they make funny facial expressions, invent rhyming words, spontaneously move their chairs, and generally, react in new ways to familiar tunes and tales. However, *insistent Follow Thus* seek routine above all; such children are likely to assist—even guide—their teacher in maintaining group decorum and in ensuring that the classic tune is sung “as it should be.” In contrast, *insistent Fact Finders* react best to a “research” game during such sing-along activity: for example, “Who can count the number of sheep in this picture for the ‘Bah, Bah, Black Sheep’ song?” Finally, *insistent*

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*Implementors*, with their strong sensory attraction, will most enjoy the experience of imitating different animal sounds, such as grunts, barks, whinnies, and snorts.

Again, it's vital that parents know and respect their child's *conative self*, for even seemingly commonplace activities like "circle-time" elicit significant individual differences. Some children will demand absolute faithfulness to the words and melody, while others will be equally adamant about creating a new version. Some will show concern for organizing in unison the group's effort, or uncovering patterns in the song—and still others will be most attracted to the physicality of sheer sound. Whatever the child's *conative approach*, he or she will reap the greatest personal reward from relying upon it.

### Example 3—Bedtime in Middle Childhood:

It's a reality almost all mothers and fathers eventually face: children typically dislike going to sleep. But bedtime needn't be a horrific, tension-generating occasion if you know your child's *conative approach*—and can meet it sensibly. Remember, you can't change it, but you can adapt to this approach, and that's definitely a good thing. Otherwise, we as adults would be little more than clones of our own parents, and wouldn't that make life boring!

So here's the familiar scenario. It's late in the evening at the Jensen household, and time for reluctant, seven-year-old Alex to go to sleep for school tomorrow. Is there one correct way to manage this situation? Absolutely not, for it's crucial to know Alex's particular *conative approach*. If an *initiating Follow Thru*, then he best functions by adherence to a routine: a sequence of evening rituals like a snack, followed by bathing, toothbrushing, and finally a familiar story before the lights go off. If an *insistent Quick Start*, however, Alex needs at least mild activity outside his darkened bedroom in order to fall asleep. It's not unusual for such children to call out, "Mommy, turn on the hall light!" or even "Do some work in the kitchen. It's so quiet!" Too *little* sensory stimulation makes these children feel anxious, not soothed.

However, if Alex is an *initiating Implementor*, then encouraging him briefly to do something physical, such as arranging his bedsheets and blankets by texture, or disassembling his new game, is likely to produce a calming disposition for sleep. Finally, if Alex is an *insistent Fact Finder*, then he's likely to be persuaded by appeals to fairness, that "Everyone, including mommy and daddy, has their bedtimes, and yours is right now."

### II. Application in Parenting

Over the course of our respective careers in child psychology and education/training, we've found seven key domains of parenting, and the Kolbe System offers a valuable perspective on them all. Due to space limitations in this article, we'll highlight each of these with one specific example.

#### 1. Learning

It seems that parents are always advised to “Make sure your child spends enough time on homework every day.” It's almost a truism in the field. And yet, as the Kolbe System clearly indicates, youngsters learn differently based on their *conative approach*. Whether through formalized schoolwork or informal learning (which can occur anywhere and at any time) problems will emerge if your child's conative self is ignored.

Suppose, for example, you're an *initiating Fact Finder* and you've taken your two daughters, Jennifer and Lynn, to the aquarium for a stimulating Saturday trip. You've planned the whole day effectively, and even estimated the amount of time your family will spend at each new exhibit.

Now although our conative approach is certainly biologically-based, it doesn't seem to be hereditary; for this reason, neither child shares yours. Your action drive, of course, is to identify and categorize all the fascinating, differing forms of sea-life at the aquarium. You'll naturally look for subtle commonalities among species characteristics. But if you try forcing your daughters to experience the aquarium this way, you're asking for trouble.

For as an *insistent Quick Start*, Jennifer needs to see everything, dashing happily from room to room—and has little interest in detailed classification. Her sister Lynn, as an *initiating Implementor*, immediately gravitates to the “Hands-on Learning Center” where children are encouraged to gently handle starfish, turtles, crabs, and other touchable creatures dwelling in small tanks. It's likely that Lynn will be perfectly content to spend the entire afternoon in such activity; she has little need to classify the animals and even less to see everything the aquarium has to offer. Rather, through her own *conative approach*, Lynn is gaining real knowledge about such aspects as animal structure, form, color, and protective features.

As the parent, you'll need to create a way for all three of you to benefit from your aquarium trip. The key issue is that each mode of conation is legitimate and must be respected—and indeed, *creates its own needs that require fulfillment*.

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### 2. Adapting to Time and Space at Home

“Home is a holy thing—nothing of doubt or distrust can enter its blessed portals,” declared Emily Dickinson, one of America’s greatest nineteenth-century poets. Spending virtually her entire life in the same New England house, Dickinson was probably an *insistent Follow Thru*—who experiences home as a “nest,” a place in which tidiness and order are almost sacredly paramount.

But not everyone shares this *conative approach*. For the *insistent Implementor* child, home needs to be a place for building and constructing things, and for actively using materials and tools; such youngsters are likely to turn their rooms into miniature workshops. For the *initiating Quick Starts*, home is typically neither a “nest” nor a “construction site,” but a “launching pad”: a base from which to seek constant adventures in the outside world. And nowadays for the *insistent Fact Finder* child, home may be prized for its Internet access; a gateway to seemingly endless research about animal life, bicycle design, or Latin American history.

Precisely the same kinds of distinctions apply to children’s varying usage of time at home, depending on their conative approach. As a *resistant Follow Thru*, six-year-old Stevie absolutely avoids dealing with routines. For such matters as dinners and homework, he’ll simply ignore your carefully-constructed schedules, or worse, react with tantrums or false cooperation. You’ll have to adapt to Stevie’s spontaneity, such as by keeping a cooked meal ready in the refrigerator for when he’s hungry.

As an *initiating Implementor*, Jason in contrast gravitates to manipulating sensory objects. If you can arouse his interest in routine activities by emphasizing their sensory appeal, then success lies at hand.

### 3. Social Relations

“To have a friend, be a friend” is a well-known adage. But we make friends, and respond to others more broadly, in ways that always reflect our particular *conative approach*. To enhance children’s social skills involving peer and family relations, it’s thus important for parents to take conation into account.

One useful guideline is that youngsters usually seek out playmates with the same conative orientation: if your nine-year-old daughter Marta is a *resistant Follow Thru*, she’ll resist arranging dolls by hair color and clothing with neighboring Nicole, who’s an *initiator* when it comes to that *Striving Instinct*. However, children will sometimes recruit a peer to fulfill a specific need. For example, inseparable Bill, Aaron, and Ryan are all twelve-year-old *accommodating Implementors*; to fix their ailing bikes effectively,

they've asked Sean, an *insistent Implementor* to join them for their Saturday outing.

Another key principle is that conation affects how children express affection to friends and family members. In gift-giving, *initiating Fact Finders* generate letters and receive many in return, whereas *insistent Quick Starts* might choose a day at the amusement park. Such conative differences also affect how children *interpret* affection, though of course often non-verbally. As an *initiating Implementor*, eleven-year-old Juan is excited by the new, wall-to-wall shelving that grandpa has personally built for the playroom. Together they happily discuss the woodwork, brackets, various tools, and special lacquer that grandpa (also an *initiating Implementor*) has used for this project.

But Juan's thirteen-year-old brother, Miguel, a *resistant Implementor*, reacts minimally to grandpa's same labor of love. He has no interest at all in the specific tools and materials used to create it. Rather, as an *initiating Fact Finder*, Juan's already thinking about his long-awaited encyclopedia that can at last be purchased and placed in this bookcase.

#### 4. Play and Recreation

As it's undoubtedly becoming clear in this article, children's conative style affects their selection of toys, games, and leisure activities in general. As early as infancy and toddlerhood, parents can observe such tendencies in action and choose appropriate recreational forms for their child. *Insistent Quick Starts* will most gravitate towards toys with bright colors and sounds, and to games that challenge new ways of thinking. *Initiating Follow Thrus* will be drawn to activities that involve ordering and categorizing—such as matching pictures by color and shape, or grouping cards by category of animal species. Later, reading and writing projects would arouse their interest.

*Insistent Implementors*, of course, respond best to toys and games involving building, constructing, and manipulating objects. They're likely to move from blocks to Legos at an early age, and then on to mechanical assembly-kits involving electronic or computer paraphernalia. *Initiating Fact Finder* children, with their attraction to detail, historical preferences, and practicality, are drawn to puzzles and information-laden games like Scrabble®.

Unfortunately, family vacations are often a source of tension and conflict. Why? Because parents fail to take conation seriously. On a long car trip, for instance, you can keep *insistent Fact Finders* happily busy

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with immersing themselves in travel brochures, guidebooks, and maps. *Initiating Follow Thrus* will benefit from a schedule clearly specifying times for new activities, meals, and rest-periods, and taking along familiar and comfortable toys and games. As for *insistent Implementor* children, it's important for them to be physically absorbed, such as with coloring books and a sizable array of pencils, pens, and markers. *Initiating Quick Starts* will give you the hardest time, because they get bored so easily. Spontaneous events like a family sing-a-long or an unscheduled stop to look at a view—rather than a carefully-honed schedule, will be most successful with them, as will the challenge of competitive games and contests.

By the way, what if your *conative approach* really differs from your child's involving the recreational domain? Then it's imperative to find an appropriate role-model or mentor; you shouldn't be expected to enjoy assembling electronic circuitry with your daughter Annie if you're a *resistant Implementor*, but you need to provide a responsible adult—whether family member or friend, who can foster Annie's talent for electronics.

### 5. Building Character: Commitment Values

As parents, we all want to see our children develop into responsible adults, persons who can be counted on to act ethically, honorably, and reliably in a changing world. Today, this is a realm regaining much importance for families and educators, and in this context, we like to use the terms “gumption” and “commitment values.” The question isn't simply how to make our youngsters academically successful or knowledgeable, but how to cultivate their inborn capacities for honesty and self-confidence (“gumption”) and faithfulness and integrity (“commitment values”). Ultimately, this domain encompasses what inspiring thinkers from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Abraham Maslow have viewed as self-actualization.

Here, too, conation is a vital aspect of effective parenting. By way of example, let's take the practical issue of guiding children to handle money responsibly. We want them to respect its value, to appreciate that it “doesn't grow on trees,” to avoid becoming spendthrifts or compulsive shoppers as adults. How can we do this most reliably?

Strong on verbal proficiency, *insistent Quick Starts* learn best by negotiating. Wide-ranging dialogue and discussion—such as through hypothetical example and scenario—is most meaningful to them. However, *initiating Follow Thrus* learn better through the process of actual record-keeping and budgeting. Verbiage soon becomes irrelevant to them, as it

does to *insistent Implementor* children, who learn to value money more through “in-kind” barter or exchanges of concrete materials like cardboard, wood, rocks and minerals, cloth and yarn, and tools.

As for *initiating Fact Finders*, money acquires significance to them through their research, investigation, and incorporating measures of “fairness”: that is, what differing experiences—such as entertainment and travel—and possessions—such as toys, games, sporting or electronic equipment—cost in relative terms.

### 6. Discipline

Discipline is an inescapable facet of parenting. It’s certainly not why we become mothers and fathers, but nevertheless, it comes with the territory. While punishment for its own sake is never a desirable way to modify a child’s behavior, all youngsters must learn that their actions have consequences. During this slow, steady process, conative approaches play an important role, especially in the realm of parent-child communication.

Suppose, for example, that you’ve just had your living room attractively painted. Your three-year-old, Joy, has been absolutely fascinated and—despite your repeated warnings earlier today—she’s proudly just scribbled her name all over one of the freshly-painted walls. To prevent a repetition of Joy’s well-meaning but clearly unacceptable behavior, what’s the best way of handling this situation?

If Joy’s an *insistent Fact Finder*, then an appeal to fairness or appropriateness would be most effective: “Mommy and Daddy don’t write on the walls, do they? No, you’ve never seen that. So as a member of our family, you mustn’t do that either. That’s fair. Everybody writes on paper, that’s where they’re supposed to do their writing and drawing.” However, if an *initiating Follow Thru*, Joy would respond better to an explanation of how creating a mess then creates a need to clean it up so that everything is put back into its original condition. Conversely, *insistent Implementors* would react better to a hands-on lesson on the difficulty of removing crayon marks from wall-paint; such children should be handed a washcloth and encouraged to see for themselves.

However, influenced by their drive for novelty, *initiating Quick Starts* would respond best to an admonition like: “Okay, Joy, now you know what a crayon mark looks like on our just-painted walls. So, of course, you don’t need to experiment anymore, do you? How about seeing what crayon marks look like on paper bags? I’ll bet you’ve never tried that before!”

In short, as parents we must always seek to discipline in ways relevant

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to—and consistent with—our child’s conative self. Otherwise, no matter how often or loudly we repeat our message, it’ll fall on proverbial deaf ears.

### **7. Health and Safety**

Finally, nearly all parents these days are concerned about their child’s physical well-being, and once again, the Kolbe System provides valuable guidance. As with the six other domains we’ve identified, the varying styles of conation require different types of parental response. Whether children or teens are canoeing, fishing, learning to bike-ride, ice-skate, roller-blade, or even acquiring cooking proficiency, their conative approach always impacts upon safety concerns.

For example, both *initiating Fact Finders* and *initiating Follow Thrus* are less likely to endanger themselves due to their respective action-tendencies for researching, investigating, and planning. They avoid surprises in personal activity, and this gives them a safety edge. In contrast, both *insistent Quick Starts* and *resistant Implementors* tend to be most accident-prone as a result of their impulsivity and risk-taking, as well as mechanical aversiveness.

Likewise, when it comes to following basic hygiene and grooming in daily self-care, *resistant Follow Thrus* typically require special supervision due to their avoidance of routines. In contrast, *initiating Implementors* thrive on the sheer physicality of feeding, washing, toothbrushing, shampooing, and related activities. Play up texture, scent, and other sensory qualities, and they’ll positively love mealtime or bathtime.

### **Conclusions**

In summary, parents today needn’t feel overwhelmed by the mass of voluminous—and often confusing—sources of professional advice. Though many parenting magazines, books, manuals, and electronic materials are indeed misleading, or derived from outdated scientific theory, there’s a fresh, practical, and incisive approach now available. As we’ve sketched here, the Kolbe System focuses not on children’s cognition or mood—but vitally on their *conative self*. For this reason, the Kolbe System avoids the mistaken and inadvertently destructive forms of parenting advice, such as “All children crave routines,” typical in other approaches. Comprising the four *Striving Instincts* and three *Operating Zones*, conation vitally affects all aspects of learning, growth, and social development. By relying upon this innovative method, we can nurture our children most successfully.

**Diagram 1**

	Fact Finder	Follow Thru	Quick Start	Implementor
Prevent (Resist)		<b>Won't Do</b>		
Respond (Accommodate)		<b>Willing to Do</b>		
Initiate (Insist)		<b>Will Do</b>		

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### **About the Authors**

Kathy Kolbe, the originator of the Kolbe Pure Instinct System, is the author of 32 books for children, parents, and educators. Founder of Resources for the Gifted, Inc., and Kolbe Corp., she has received numerous awards for her pioneering work in identifying and teaching methods of creative problem solving.

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