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## Taming your toddler

**For those times when your kid goes from zero to possessed in 60 seconds—and you feel like you're yelling at 160 decibels—a top psychologist offers some soothing (and surprising) advice.**

By Anna Nordberg



When your child is scaling new heights of naughtiness, you'll turn to any source—the blogosphere, that book your cubicle friend recommended, even your judgy in-laws—for help. The problem is, a lot of the conventional wisdom about disciplining kids is spotty or just plain wrong, says Alan Kazdin, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and child psychiatry at Yale and director of the Yale Parenting Center and Child Conduct Clinic. In his new book, [The Kazdin Method for Parenting the Defiant Child](#) (Houghton Mifflin), he shares strategies gleaned from his work with thousands of patients. "Much of the advice in parenting books—like 'Ask your child why she's angry' or 'Use a monster time-out if a shorter one isn't working'—is analogous to giving parents a fishing rod with no hook," says Kazdin, who is also the 2008 president of the American Psychological Association. "It may make them feel better, but it won't work." Here, he tells us precisely what will.

***Q: What's the most important lesson parents can take from your book?***

A: It's a change in mind-set. As parents, we tend to be experts in what we want kids not to do, but I try to get parents to shift their attention to what they do want their kids to do, and to reinforce that behavior. In the book, I refer to it as "catching children being good." For example, say, "You went to bed right away when I asked, and that's wonderful," or even, "Look how that child helped that person pick up his napkin. Isn't that nice?" It's more effective to practice and praise positive behavior than to try to wipe out negative behavior.

***Q: How should you praise good behavior?***

A: Be enthusiastic, label exactly what the behavior was, and do something nonverbal, like touching your child on the shoulder. Say, "Look at how nicely you and your sister are playing, with soft voices. That's really great." Don't add, "Why can't you do this all the time?" Tacking on a negative criticism at the end—I call it "caboosing"—cancels the reinforcement of the good behavior.

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***Q: What is the Kazdin method?***

A: If you want to get rid of your child's horrible tantrums, practice less explosive tantrums at calm times. Say to your child, "We're going to play a little game. I say, 'No, you can't go out.' You can stand there and make a face and say, 'Oh, no!' But you're not going to hit Mommy. You're not going to say bad words to Daddy." Tell her you're going to practice this once a day for five days. If you do, the real tantrums will improve.

***Q: What age range does it work for?***

A: We use it with children from about 1 1/2 to 15 or 16 years old. But if you feel like your 2-year-old won't understand the concept of playing a game, try this: When he has a tantrum that isn't so bad, go to his eye level and hug him, and say exactly why you're doing it: "You got angry, but you didn't kick or throw anything. You acted like a big boy—very good." Be specific.

***Q: In your book, you write that tantrums are not "teachable moments." How so?***

A: When a person's drowning, it's not the time to teach him to swim. During a tantrum, parents are too reactive and negative, and the child is too upset—it's the worst time to try to teach him something. Just try to defuse the situation as best you can. Sometimes walking out of the room for a moment, if it's possible, will help you calm down and get the situation back under control.

***Q: What are other common traps parents fall into when disciplining their kids?***

A: Escalating punishment. Many parents think, *If it's not working, I need to go all the way, with a four-hour time-out.* While punishment immediately suppresses the bad behavior, it often returns as soon as the punishment is over, and sometimes it's worse. Punishment rarely works unless you're also reinforcing good behavior. And long time-outs keep a child out of social

situations—interacting with siblings or peers—in which she is more likely to learn good behavior.

Another trap parents fall into is thinking of their child, *If you knew better, you'd act differently*. So they say, "Let me explain why you shouldn't break your sister's dollhouse. What if she came over and broke your toys?" Verbal interventions like this won't do anything to change behavior if good behavior isn't being rewarded as well. Think about adults—we've been told trans fats are bad for us, but that doesn't stop us from reaching for the potato chips.

**Next Page: [Giving Time-Outs](#)**

***Q: What's the best way to give a time-out?***

A: One minute is usually all you need, and you shouldn't go over 10 minutes. The point is to give the child time away from reinforcers of bad behavior, such as attention or the activities of other kids. This is not the moment for a child to "think about what she's done." But if a child calms down or doesn't put up a fight, praise and reinforce that. You can say, "You went into time-out without fighting and stayed in your chair. Good job. Now let's go back out."

***Q: What's the most effective way for a parent to get a kid to do something?***

A: The word please changes the tone of a parent's request—we call that a "setting event"—and implies a choice to the child. Many parents think, *I don't need to say "please" to my child*, but saying, "Can you get ready for bed, please?" is a much better way to get the behavior you want than saying, "Get into bed!" This doesn't just apply to children—it's true of people in general. Humans have a strong preference for choice; the illusion of control is critical. If you give your child a small choice—"Do you want to wear the blue jacket or the green one?"—he's more likely to get out the door quickly.

***Q: What happens if he starts to regress?***

A: Parents should understand that regression in children's behavior, whether in potty training or playing the piano, is totally normal. In people, behavior swings back and forth until it's learned, and then the variations occur less and less. The key is repeated practice. When a child is learning something new, he can do it perfectly one day and then can't do it the next. This is frustrating for parents—they feel they're being manipulated by the child. But they should remember that it's normal.

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