



## Q&A: Alan Kazdin

**Child behavior specialist Alan Kazdin answers our staffers toughest kid problems.**

By Anna Nordberg



Alan Kazdin, Ph.D., is the 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 outlines strategies gleaned from his work with thousands of patients—and offers hope to beleaguered parents everywhere. Here, he helps *Cookie* staffers with their own disciplining dilemmas. Find out more specific information on the [Kazdin Method](#).

***Q: We're trying to move our two boys, 2 ½ and 6 months, into the same room. But the baby goes to bed 90 minutes before the toddler, and when the toddler goes in (after reading stories outside of the bedroom) he can't resist waking up the baby by talking very loudly or even shaking the crib. Any advice on making this transition, taking into account their different sleeping schedules?***  
—*Mother of two*

***Kazdin:*** This will be difficult but not impossible to control. The resting baby is likely to cause this behavior in your toddler because engaging the baby is very rewarding and normal for an older sibling. You could develop proper behavior in the presence of the baby—whispering only, not touching the crib, and other quiet things—by practicing and praising the behavior at times when the baby is not in the room.

I recommend playing a game in which your toddler can earn points (the points are not really very important; what's important is the practice and special praise). Practice the behaviors you want

five or six times per week. Pretend the baby is in the room, prompt your toddler what to do, and praise effusively when he does it. When he goes in the room with the baby, whisper the behaviors you want (and that he practices) and give quiet praise (so as not to wake up the baby) and points.

***Q: My 3-year-old daughter constantly talks about "pooopies." Nonstop. We thought if we ignored it she would stop. Nope. Then we thought we would explain that it isn't nice to talk about it all the time. She doesn't care. Then I thought, If I can't beat her, I'll join her. She thought that was funny. She really likes to talk about it when we're in restaurants or on the subway. When we try being firm with her she just laughs and does it more. Since she does it in public, it's hard to be firm without looking like a crazy parent.***

***—Father of one***

***Kazdin:*** Ignoring your child when she does this will not be very effective by itself. I recommend that you select periods of time (maybe five minutes) in which she can earn points if she can go the whole period without saying the few critical words (in this case, "pooopies"). If she can go an hour or two hours, start with that, but it is important not to set the standard too high.

You could do one period in the morning and one in the afternoon or just one per day. Say, "It's okay for you to say (mention the words), but if you do *not* say the words for the next however-many minutes, you can earn two points on the chart." Once or twice during the period say, "You are doing great; you did not say those words." If she says the words, calmly say, "You did not get the points this time, but maybe next time you can," and then leave the room (or simply do not lecture her). As she masters the time period, extend it a little. In this way, you will be able to have long periods without the behavior. Your praise has to be very special and specific for all of this.

I recommend not saying the words you are trying to eliminate, not trying to get her to understand, and not being firm or reasoning—these are all called normal parenting. Lord knows I have done them all—but research suggests they will not work.

***Q: When my daughter (4 ½) is really frustrated, she lashes out by hitting—her sister, her mom, and her dad. She has never done this in school (or, I assume, I would have heard about it), but I don't know how to handle it. We give her a time out in her room, then she wanders back totally ashamed and bursts into tears, and I comfort her. Happens all the time, yet she never learns her lesson. I guess I should be firmer.***

***—Mother of two***

***Kazdin:*** Firmer will not do the trick here and could actually make it a little worse (more hitting). Have her practice getting mad, make a game out of it. The key is getting her to do the correct behaviors—hands to herself, not getting physical—when she is not frustrated or mad and when everyone is calm. There are many simulations of this outlined in The Kazdin Method. We have done this many times; the way to get the appropriate behavior is to practice it and then engage in the very special praise to lock it in.

***Q: I gave my son a very tiny time-out over the weekend, and he cried so hard, and held his breath until he turned a little blue and fainted for a split second. I was terrified. I have looked***

*on all kinds of mom blogs, apparently it happens, albeit rarely. This has made me very gunshy with regard to using time-outs as disciplining strategy. Help!*  
—Mother of two

**Kazdin:** It would be fine to shift the punishment to loss of a privilege for one day or one hour—nothing more. Thus, you can stop using time-out. Also, if you are giving points for positive behavior, it's fine to take one away instead of using a time-out. Keep the punishment small and brief. What is most critical here is not which small punishment you use but what you do to develop the behavior you want.

**Q:** *When my daughter, 4 ½, is being bad (not sharing, not listening to me, not putting on her shoes, protesting getting in the car or accompanying us to the bus stop with her sister, whining that she needs something to eat now!) we often resort to threats like "If you don't stop this behavior now, that means no dessert/pool/sprinkler/playdate/bedtime story." Whatever it is we can lord over her that day, we do, shamelessly, even though we are always warned against it. Basically, we are negotiating with a terrorist.*  
—Mother of two

**Kazdin:** Well described. The key here, too, is selecting only one or two behaviors to practice at a time. It is just easier and better to start out with one or two. Practice the positive opposite behaviors you want (if she has trouble sharing, play a game where she practices sharing with you or her sister; if she refuses to get in the car, practice her putting on her shoes and getting into the car quietly and quickly when you ask, then praise her specifically when she does this.) Negotiating is good to teach thinking and talking, but it will not change behavior. The one-shot loss of some privilege or activity will not work. Get her to practice the behaviors that you want to replace those you do not. You will be surprised at the effects.

**Q:** *My son (16 months) likes to bite from time to time. Seems to happen more when he is getting new teeth. And it's not a when-he's-angry-or-having-a-tantrum kind of thing. It's not hard to avoid getting bitten—I just pull my finger/shoulder/etc. away. The problem is that when I tell him no, he laughs and goes in for another chomp. He thinks it's funny.*  
—Mother of one

**Kazdin:** This behavior will probably drop out soon without intervention. I recommend turning away and not attending to it; you cannot leave the room because he is so young, but don't pay attention to it, even to say, "No!" If this does not drop out in a couple of weeks, write back.

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