

Discipline for Softies

By Nancy Rones

Forget everything you've ever heard about how to deal with kids' bad behavior. According to this leading child psychologist, you don't have to get tough to discipline your kid properly.

The Truth About Tough Love

We've all been told that 21-century parents tend to overpraise their children and we've heard experts say that setting firm limits creates cooperative kids. But Alan E. Kazdin, PhD, president of the American Psychological Association, thinks that the tough-love approach that's so popular today is all wrong. He may sound like a renegade, but according to this well-respected researcher, if you really want your child to be better-behaved, you actually need to praise him even more enthusiastically -- and you can't rely on punishment to fix a discipline problem. Dr. Kazdin, director of the Yale Parenting Center and Child Conduct Clinic, says he knows what works: helping your child practice doing the right thing and then showering him with compliments every time he does it. "We have used this technique to help thousands of parents improve their kids' behavior, which ranges from normal challenges such as tantrums to extreme aggression," says Dr. Kazdin. Here, we talked to him about his warmer, fuzzier approach, which he details in his book, *The Kazdin Method for Parenting the Defiant Child*. It might just be the key to a calmer home and a closer-knit family.

Q. Why is it more effective to focus on a child's good behavior than to respond to bad behavior?

A. Studies have shown that recognizing good behavior is the only way to teach a child what you want her to do -- and to lock that behavior in. For example, if you want your child to share and play nicely, and you keep praising her when she lets a friend have a turn with a toy ("Wow! You did such a nice job of sharing your doll with Emma!"), then eventually sharing will become a habit. If you instead punish her for bad behavior -- yelling or sending her to her room when she hogs a toy -- she might temporarily change her ways. But before you know it, she'll refuse to share again.

Q. Do you think time-outs don't work?

A. There are some benefits to time-outs. When you give them calmly and keep them brief, they won't exacerbate a problem the way harsher punishment might. For example, yelling at your child can make him even more defiant. Time-outs are also a way to stop bad behavior while it's happening. But research shows that punishment -- including time-outs -- doesn't have much impact on future behavior. After a time-out, it's a good idea to explain why it isn't nice to grab or to say potty words, but even when kids understand why something is wrong, they still aren't more likely to do what's right the next time. It's what you do during "time-in" that's crucial -- creating opportunities to practice good behavior and following up with praise.

Q. How about logical consequences -- if a child scribbles on the wall, she has to clean it up?

A. Making these connections for kids seems to make sense, but it's still a punishment that won't change behavior. The time to teach good behavior isn't when you're mad about the scribbling on the wall. That's like teaching someone who's drowning how to swim. Instead, give her a time-out to stop the behavior from continuing at that instance and explain why she was out of line ("You're going into a time-out because writing on the wall isn't a nice way to treat your home and your family"). Later on, or in the days that follow, you can practice drawing pictures on paper with your child and compliment her ("You used your markers like a big girl and made such a beautiful picture on this piece of paper. Think you can make another for your sister?").

Q. How long will it usually take for a child to change his behavior?

A. There's no exact time frame, but I tell parents to work on one behavior faithfully for a few days to master the method. Once you get the behavior to happen five times and you enthusiastically praise it five times, you'll probably begin to notice some progress. It'll keep improving after that. And while you're focusing on that one issue, handle other misbehavior the same way you normally would. After the first problem is gone and you're comfortable with the program, you should be able to work on two or three different behaviors at a time.

Q. You say that how we ask a child to do something has a major impact on whether he cooperates. What's the best strategy?

A. Your child will be more likely to do what you want when you use a calm voice and the word please. Also, make a clear request ("Please brush your teeth"), instead of asking your child a question ("Can you brush your teeth?"). Otherwise, he may think that the job is optional.

Q. Any specific tips for praising a child?

A. Parents may think it sounds silly, but your tone of voice should express over-the-top enthusiasm. Instead of "great," go for "GREAT!!!" Also, explain specifically what you're praising. Rather than saying, "Good boy!" say, "The way you put your toys away was so good!" It's also important to touch your child in some way -- give him a hug or a high five. For the first couple of weeks, you can also use a points chart where stickers or checks add up to rewards, such as a trip to the park or renting a movie. But the chart isn't necessary to change your child's behavior, and it serves more to help you remember to praise.

Q. But how can you praise your child when he keeps having tantrums?

A. Help him "practice" the behavior you want to encourage by making it sort of a game. You can start out by saying, "Okay, we're going to play a new game today. It's all pretend, but if you listen and do what I say, then you'll get a check on this chart today. Okay, ready, Matt? Remember, we're just playing a game. Matt, please put your shoes on." If he cooperates, praise him the same as you would if you weren't pretending: "Wow, I can't believe you put your shoes on when I asked you to! Are you sure you haven't played this game before? Let me give you a hug!" Because it's a game, your child will get excited about following your directions, and after some more practice sessions, he'll be much more likely to cooperate when it's not pretend. Research shows that this type of praise works for kids at any age. Parents often start off being very skeptical, insisting their child would never fall for a game like this. I just tell them to try it for a week. After a few days, I usually get a phone call telling me how amazed they are.

Q. What do you do if your child follows your request only halfway?

A. Believe it or not, if your child only does a so-so job, you should give her just as much praise as you would if she completed the whole job. You can say, "Terrific! You've picked up three of the toys! Hmmm...I wonder if next time you'll be able to pick up all five toys?" This isn't hollow praise, because changing behavior is a gradual process. Every time you reinforce a halfhearted effort, you're moving one step closer to your ultimate goal. Think of it in terms of a toddler learning to walk. When she wobbles to you in a way that only slightly resembles walking, you immediately encourage the behavior by saying, "Wow! Look at you walking! Let me move back a little. Can you try again?" You wouldn't use hurtful words like, "No way, that's not walking."

Q. How do you know when to ease up on the over-the-top praise?

A. When the right behavior starts happening on a more regular basis, you'll automatically start praising less because the bad behavior just won't be on your mind as much.

Q. When should I use this method?

Dr. Kazdin says that his method works for these issues and more:

- Talking back
- Fighting about getting into a car seat
- Refusing to try new foods
- Not coming to meals when asked
- Being disrespectful to adults
- Breaking things
- Not sharing
- Tantrums
- Arguing with siblings
- Stealing

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