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Parenting by the book

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What parent hasn't had to deal with an unruly child? Throwing a tantrum in the supermarket. Refusing to go to bed on time. Arguing about putting their toys away. Some of the conventional approaches — punishment, rewards, explaining why the behavior is wrong — may temporarily solve the problem, but these methods don't stop the behavior, according to Alan E. Kazdin, Ph.D., director of the Yale Parenting Center and Child Conduct Clinic. Kazdin is the author of several books, his latest being, "The Kazdin Method for Parenting the Defiant Child with No Pills, No Therapy, No Contest of Wills" (Houghton Mifflin, \$26).

"The explosive and the reasonable parent are both ineffective," said Kazdin during an interview at the New Haven clinic. "Explaining [why] to children just won't do it; it's not a strong way to alter human behavior."

In his book, Kazdin, who's been a therapist for 30 years and the director of the Yale Parenting Center for 18, lays out the step-by-step parenting method he's developed that he said is firmly based on research behavioral scientists have been doing for many years. He and his staff of five therapists use the method at the clinic with clients and are now teaching it to other therapists from across the country.

Defying a parent is normal behavior for children, said Kazdin, and usually starts at the age of 3, not the "terrible 2s," when no may be their favorite word. This normal behavior becomes problematic when parents don't know how to

handle it correctly. "How a parent talks to the child can make it a little worse," Kazdin said. "The way you present instructions influences greatly [the behavior] you get."

PRAISE, PRACTICE, POINTS

Learning the proper tone of voice, participating in role playing, practicing with your child the kind of behavior you expect, giving children praise and attaching a reward system are all part of his parenting method.

When parents come to the center for help, the first session begins with role playing, said his staff during a recent tour of the center. (A DVD that comes with the book shows how this works.) In the role playing, the therapist may take the role of the parent and the parent the role of the child or visa versa. Most of the parents, about 99 percent, come for help with minding behaviors, they said.

"The parent learns to praise, how to praise and how to prompt [the child] for good behavior," said therapist Molly McDonald, who has been with the center for nine years.

As seen in the DVD, the praise is very effusive and seems exaggerated, but praise when properly used, says scientific research, is very effective in changing a child's behavior, said Kazdin in his book.

"At first the parents may be uncomfortable [with role playing], but it's the best way to learn and the best way to remember," said therapist Erin Carrubba.

After participating in role playing, the parents use what they've learned at home by setting up practice sessions with the child. To explain how this works, in the book Kazdin uses the example of a child who resists going to bed. The parents tell the child they're pretending its bedtime and see how the child reacts. If the child minds the parents, he is given points and praise. Accumulating points leads to a reward, something the child would want, like a special toy or an extra story at bedtime. While parents often tell the therapists, they've used charts and stickers before without success, how and why points are given make the difference in Kazdin's method. It's imperative that parents consistently practice with the child and reinforce positive behavior. By working the program, parents should see results in a few weeks, he said.

Most parenting books, said Kazdin, are not based on science and there are many myths floating around that he hopes this book will dispel.

"For too many parents, trying to change behavior mostly means noticing what they don't want and punishing it," he said. "Even if they don't want to punish their child they think it's their duty to do so, but research tells us that it's not very effective."

"Punishment teaches a child what not to do, but doesn't teach what to do," said Kazdin. "You have to have a program developing the opposite behavior."

If you do punish, it should be "mild, brief and sparingly used," he said. A time-out, for example, shouldn't be longer than two to five minutes. Or take away the child's bike for a day, not a week.

As the 2008 president of the 150,000-member American Psychological Association, Kazdin will be dividing his time between New Haven and Washington, D.C. There are several critical issues he'd like to focus on, he said, including the post-traumatic stress disorder, interpersonal violence, health care and the effect of day care on children. "We're seeing younger and younger children" with behavioral problems, said the father of two grown children. The youngest client he's seen was a child a year-and-a-half old, he said, who had been kicked out of three day-care centers.

The best parenting advice may be the simplest.

"Always talk to your child, hug your child," he said.

The Yale Parenting Center and Child Conduct Clinic is located at 314 Prospect St. in New Haven. For more information, call 432-9993.

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