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## Handling defiant kids made easy

By ANNE-MARIE TOBIN, CP

TORONTO -- Parents grappling with how to change the behaviour of a defiant tantrum-prone child often turn in frustration to books for help, with mixed results.

But a new entry to the genre comes with impressive credentials: Alan Kazdin is director of Yale Parenting Center and Child Conduct Clinic, and president of the American Psychological Association.

Kazdin has been working in the field for decades and wasn't impressed with the advice offered in the range of parenting books he investigated before embarking on this project, which resulted in *The Kazdin Method for Parenting the Defiant Child*.

"What makes this book different? This is based on research. This is real stuff," Kazdin said from New Haven, Conn., where he's a professor of psychology at Yale. "Does research have all the answers? Of course not, but boy, for what we're talking about, it's got a lot of helpful tools."

The book explicitly instructs parents on the correct way to praise a child to reinforce good behaviour and says punishment should be used sparingly, if at all. The program also involves rewards earned on a points chart.

Kazdin said these strategies are based on years of study.

"I can defend them, I can give you the research, I can refer to them. They're not even my findings, all of them. And so that's what this is really about."

In his book, Kazdin urges parents to think in terms of the "positive opposite."

Instead of taking the approach that "It drives me crazy when she doesn't listen," take the tack "I want her to listen to me the first time I say something," he writes.

It's a myth that lots of praise just spoils your child, he added. But praise has to be used correctly to achieve results and parents need to practise the right way to do it. In fact, a DVD that accompanies the book illustrates how to do it properly.

"Parental praise is usually 'great', 'good' -- and they shoot it once in a while. And the research shows it has to be done in a very particular way and, once it's done that way, the effects are kind of really amazing," Kazdin said.

"For praise to be really effective, you give it enthusiastically: 'GREAT,' " he said, raising his voice emphatically as an example. You say specifically what was being praised: 'I like the way you picked up your toys.' And you go over and touch, so you have a non-verbal component. And then you don't add anything on the end: 'Why can't you do that every day?' 'Why can't you do it like your sister?' "

That last bit, he describes in the book as "caboozing" -- a zinger of sorts that can undo some of the benefits of the praise just given. Don't fall into the trap of saying "you're such a good boy" or "bad boy" or remarking on the character of the child, he advised.

Besides practice and praise, another p-word is addressed, namely punishment, and mostly it's in the context of a warning against its use.

"It doesn't get rid of behaviour, and so you could slap a child, scream at a child, reprimand a child, it stops the behaviour instantaneously and that locks it into the parents' repertoire through something called negative reinforcement," Kazdin said.

"But the overall rate, how many times that behaviour occurs in a week, over the next few days, in a month, hasn't changed at all. And if you up it, up the ante, harder hits, longer shouts, more privileges taken away, the research is very clear. It doesn't make it effective. It doesn't do it at all."

If positive behaviours are being reinforced and the parent has been praising the child frequently, but the child still isn't doing what's expected, then a one-minute time-out, for instance, could be implemented, Kazdin said.

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