

On Parenting

Article Index  
Subscribe



Home > Health > On Parenting > Praise a Child Right, and You'll Get Results

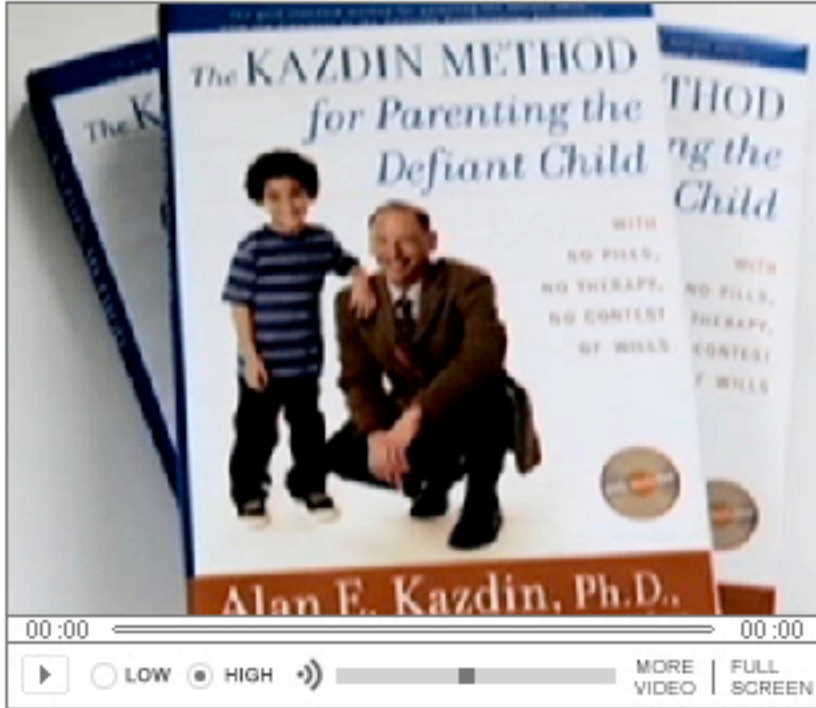
« Don't Trust Childproof Packages



**Praise a Child Right, and You'll Get Results**

February 04, 2008 04:05 PM ET | Nancy Shute | [Permanent Link](#)

Alan Kazdin knows where I've gone wrong. He knows that I nag, and threaten, and then try to reason with my child, explaining why what she's doing is a bad idea. And he knows that none of those time-honored parenting techniques work worth a darn. "It's almost as if when you leave the maternity ward, they told you five or six things that you shouldn't do with your child, but we do them anyway," says Kazdin.



Fortunately, Kazdin also knows what parenting skills work, and as director of the Yale Parenting Center and Child Conduct Clinic, he's got the scientific cred to back it up. His fascinating new book, *The Kazdin Method for Parenting the Defiant Child*, explains how parents can use the techniques honed in the center's clinic to put an end to whining, tantrums, defiance, and whatever other incredibly annoying behavior is tying your family in knots.

Much of what Kazdin recommends sounds superfamiliar—praising the child, and using a rewards chart or sticker chart to encourage good behavior. The surprise comes in the execution. For instance, Kazdin says parents err in doling out generic praise like "good job!" rather than praising the precise behavior they're trying to encourage. "I can guarantee you're not doing it," Kazdin says. To be effective, he says, praise should be:

1. Superenthusiastic (think head cheerleader)
2. Specific to the desired behavior
3. Reinforced with a smile or a touch
4. Frequent
5. And immediately following the desired behavior

This may sound like a huge list, but in practice the concept's pretty simple. A DVD accompanying the book demonstrates how the process works. (This is the first parenting advice book I've seen bundled with a how-to DVD, and it's such a terrific idea that I hope the practice will catch on.)

"Some of this is counterintuitive," Kazdin says. "You take that counterintuitive stuff, and you practice it. Once you practice it, it's in your repertoire. And gosh, it makes a huge difference. It really does."

I was skeptical; this sounded too easy. So I conducted a miniexperiment. There I was in full nag mode one evening last week, saying, "Get out of that bathtub now!" for the umpteenth time. Zero response from the kid. Suddenly I saw a chance to, as Kazdin says, "catch my child being good." When my daughter happened to plop a bath toy in the toy basket, I said, in the most enthusiastic voice I could muster: "Wow! You're picking up your bath toys all by yourself, without my asking! That is awesome!" Then I touched her lightly on the shoulder. My 4-year-old paused for a second and shot me a puzzled look. Then she proceeded to pick up all the toys, empty the tub, get out, dry herself off, and trot off to put on her PJs. Hallelujah! Since then, I've continued the tightly focused praise. My child's now added cleaning the bathtub to her evening routine.

The secrets behind Kazdin's success are two basic principles in human psychology, and in animal behavior, too—positive reinforcement and extinction. Study after study over the decades has shown that the best way to encourage a behavior is to offer praise or a reward when it happens, and the best way to make a behavior go away is to ignore it ("extinguish" it). Not only do parents usually muffle the praise part, they also attend to bad behavior through yelling and punishment. "The amount of berating that goes on of children is just amazing," Kazdin says.

It's hard to admit that nagging and punishment ultimately don't work. Kazdin, the father of two grown children, is sympathetic, noting that the human brain is hard-wired to notice negative things in the environment. Parents inevitably want to stop children's bad behavior. He tells the tale of one client who beat his child every day. "He hits him like a boxer. He says, 'I'm going to beat him until he learns.' What do you want him to learn? 'Not to fight.'"

One of Kazdin's more charming concepts is that parent and child can practice good behavior by playing "pretend." The child can rack up points for pretending not to throw a fit when Mom says "no candy." Practice once or twice a week, says Kazdin, and "Billy's real tantrums will change." Who doesn't like to play pretend? Who doesn't like rewards?

And who among us, big or small, doesn't feel a warm glow inside when someone catches us being good?

ABOUT ON PARENTING

Parenting may be an art, but there's a lot of science behind raising healthy, thriving children. Senior Writer **Nancy Shute** explores the latest discoveries and developments affecting children's health and parenting. Send her your comments and questions at [onparenting@usnews.com](mailto:onparenting@usnews.com).

advertisement

**OUR LITTLE GPS IS SUCH A KNOW-IT-ALL**

Add Garmin GPS Navigation to any Avis rental.

**AVIS** We try harder.

CLICK NOW

OTHER ARTICLES FROM THE ON PARENTING BLOG

Archives

Recent Posts

- February 2008 (1)
- January 2008 (2)

NEWSLETTER

Enter E-mail address

Sign Up Now!

Sign up today for the latest headlines from U.S. News & World Report delivered to you free.

[\\*Learn More](#)

RSS FEEDS

Personalize your U.S. News with our feeds of blogs and breaking news headlines.

[\\*Subscribe](#)

U.S. NEWS MOBILE

U.S. News daily briefings are also available on your mobile device.

[\\*Subscribe](#)

FAVORITES

- The American Academy of Pediatrics
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- National Institute on Child Health & Human Development

advertisement

**New exclusive rankings of America's Best Black Colleges**

U.S. News

VIDEO: DISEASES & CONDITIONS



**Autism: What Every Parent Should Know**

One in 166 children is affected by this mysterious disorder.



**Family Health**

Travel safe with your newborn baby with a backward-facing car seat.



**Is Your Child Overweight?**

Nearly 1 in 5 American children is overweight, which causes serious and lifelong health risks.