

Tips on Dr. Thomas W. Phelan's 1-2-3 Magic Effective Discipline for Children 2-12

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The Toddler's Creed

If I want it, it's mine!
If I give it to you and change my mind later, it's mine!
If I can take it away from you, it's mine!
If I had it a little while ago, it's mine!
If we are building something together, all the pieces are mine!
If it looks just like mine, it is mine!
If it's mine, it will never belong to anybody else, no matter what!

Parenting is both challenging and rewarding. Providing children with discipline is extremely important. Effective discipline helps children to develop self-control and assists children in becoming socially and emotionally mature adults.

When parenting your child remember that:

- You know your child best. If you are concerned about your child's development talk to your child's pediatrician and communicate your concerns. Tell the pediatrician when and why you became concerned.
- Every child and every adult has a unique temperament. (disposition – i.e. easygoing, strong willed). Temperaments have an impact on parent child relationships. (i.e. A strong willed parent will find it easier to parent an easygoing child as opposed to a strong willed child.)
- Children generally develop skills in an orderly and predictable manner. There is a **range** of what is considered normal for the

achievement of developmental milestones.

- All children are different and there is variation in the rate at which children acquire skills.

Children with special needs

Factors, which can have an impact on the developmental stages of children with special needs, include:

- hospitalizations / therapies
- feeding / sleeping difficulties
- auditory / visual issues
- communication / language issues (receptive or expressive)
- mobility issues can impact one's ability to explore the environment
- attachment issues can result from fear of separation or care from multiple caregivers
- independence issues can result from prolonged dependence on others
- limited access to peers can affect the development of friendships and social skills

If you have a child with special needs, understand your child's diagnosis

Ask doctors and specialists about the impact of your child's condition on:

- physical development
- gross motor and fine motor skills
- cognitive skills
- language skills (receptive and expressive)
- social skills, friendships
- sensory processing
- emotional regulation
- attention span, concentration
- changes in routines or environments
- independence with activities of daily living

For example, a child with autism will have difficulty with language and social skills. A child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) will have difficulty with attention span and concentration.

You need to understand your child's diagnosis so that you can appreciate:

- the developmental milestones your child is capable of meeting
- your child's limitations

Understanding your child's diagnosis is important with regard to behavior and discipline because it is essential to assess:

- what is and is not under your child's control (i.e. hitting may be something your child has control over, but bedwetting may not be)
- what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior for your child (i.e. a child that has cerebral palsy may tire easily, a child that has difficulty processing sensory information may not be able to manage well in a very stimulating environment.)
Every child, whether the child has special needs or not, has issues to

deal with which will influence where you, the parent, draw the line when it comes to making decisions about what you consider to be acceptable and not acceptable behavior.

One of the most important things in parenting is consistency

- Consistency is the foundation of effective child management.
- Consistency increases the chances that effective parenting strategies will work.
- Inconsistency confuses children and increases the tendency for children to ignore parental requests and engage in manipulative behavior.

What is discipline?

- To discipline is to impart knowledge and skills. When you are disciplining, you are teaching.
- The most important and difficult role a parent has is that of disciplining a child.
- There are no short cuts. Teaching limits and acceptable behavior takes an incredible amount of time and energy.

Discipline equals love

- Dr. James Dobson in *Dare to Discipline* and Dr. Charlotte E. Thompson in *Raising a Handicapped Child* equate discipline with love. They claim that you show love for your child by disciplining your child.

The goals of effective discipline are to:

- protect a child from danger
- help a child to learn self control and self discipline
- help a child to develop a sense of responsibility
- instill values
- help a child mature

- help a child to be well adjusted

What is effective discipline?

Effective discipline is made up of three components:

1. a positive, supportive, loving relationship
2. the use of positive reinforcement strategies
3. a strategy to decrease or eliminate undesired behaviors

How can parents promote positive, supportive relationships with their children?

- **provide positive attention**
Look for opportunities to show praise and approval. Give your children comfort and affection and show interest in their school, friends, and day-to-day activities.
- **spend time alone with each child**
Spend time reading, playing together, talking, going outside. If you have a child with special needs spend time with your child in activities, which are unrelated to caregiving.
- **provide consistency**
Have a consistent response for the same behavior. What is inappropriate today should be inappropriate tomorrow. Children, especially little children, get really confused if one day they can jump on the couch and the next day they can't.
- **listen carefully**
Allow children to express themselves and voice their concerns. Parents can be tempted to problem solve issues quickly and prematurely terminate meaningful and rich exchanges with their children.
- **help children use words to express feelings**

Children are little, and they're learning. Sometimes they are frustrated, hungry or tired and they may not know how to verbalize these things.

- **respect feelings**
Be polite. Avoid name-calling and avoid making belittling comments.
- **keep promises**
If you promise a child that you're going to do something, or that you're going to consequence the child for a behavior, which you consider to be inappropriate, keep your promise. It's important that both you and the child develop trust in your relationship. If you follow through on the consequences you set, your child will begin to realize that you do what you say.
- **provide opportunities for choices**
Let children have choices when appropriate (i.e. do you want to wear the green sweater or the red sweater?)
- **ignore trivial misdeeds**
Depending on the kinds of issues which your child is dealing with there are certain behaviors which you may choose to ignore. For example, if your child has Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), he/she may be dealing with social and academic issues. If this child is also not keeping his/her room clean, you need to decide how important this is to you. Choose your battles.
- **model predictable behavior**
Engage in respectful communication and collaborative conflict resolution. If you yell, scream and call your child nasty names then don't be surprised when your child calls you these names back. If you walk away from disagreements, chances are

your child will learn to deal with conflict in the same way.

- **be flexible**
Negotiate. Listen to your children and spend time finding out what's important to them. Try to be flexible, so that they feel that they are being heard and understand that you are trying to keep them safe. This is especially important for teenagers.
- **have fun and laugh together**

1 2 3 Magic

1 2 3 Magic is an approach to managing the behavior of children from the ages of approximately 2 to 12 years old. The approach includes **strategies to decrease undesired behaviors (“stop behaviors”)** and **strategies to increase desired behaviors (“start behaviors”)**. Dr. Phelan is the author of 1 2 3 Magic. His book 1 2 3 Magic is available at most bookstores. I strongly recommend that you read Dr. Phelan’s book if you plan to use 1 2 3 Magic.

Dr. Phelan’s ideas about children

- **Children are not little adults**
The little adult assumption is the idea that children are just littler than us. That they are born with hearts of gold and that they are basically reasonable and unselfish. If you believe in the little adult assumption, then you will think that you can use words and reasons to discipline your children.

Let’s say you have a ten-year-old boy and he is hitting his younger sister. According to the little adult assumption, all you need to do in order to discipline him is to say, “Mark, I don’t want you to hit your sister anymore. Can’t you see that it hurts her? Can’t you see that it

makes me mad? How would you like it if somebody treated you that way?” Your ten-year-old should then say, “You’re right, Mom, I have never thought about it that way. Thanks for sharing that with me. I am never going to hit my sister again.”

The idea that you should be able to use words and reasons to discipline children sounds wonderful, but the foundation upon which that idea is based is false. Children are not little adults. When they are misbehaving they are not able to have rational conversations. This does not mean that they can not have rational conversations at other times. They can, but not, for example, in the midst of a temper tantrum.

- Not only do words and reasons not work very well, but they can also take you through the **talk, persuade, argue, yell, hit/give up/give in syndrome.**
- **Instead of thinking of your child as a little adult, think of yourself as a wild animal trainer.**
This is not to infer that your child is a wild animal, it is just that this is an effective model to use. A wild animal trainer chooses a method and then repeats it over and over again until the trainee does what the trainer wants. 1 2 3 Magic is a method you can use repeatedly to change your child’s behavior.
- **When a child is misbehaving, too much talking and too much emotion are the two biggest mistakes that parents make.**

We have already discussed how, when a child is misbehaving, too much talking is not effective and how too much talking can take you through the talk, persuade, argue, yell, hit/give up/ give in syndrome. Too much emotion is also a problem. Dr. Phelan says that when children are little they feel inferior. He explains that they feel inferior because they are inferior, they are smaller, less privileged, less intelligent, less skillful, less responsible, etc. than their parents and older children. Dr. Phelan notes that children don't like this feeling.

Have you ever noticed how children love to throw stones into water if they are near a lake or pond? Why do children do this? They do it, because they like to see the big splash! So, you are probably wondering what the big splash has to do with the real world of parenting. When it comes to parenting, the big splash is your emotion. If a little child can get you so upset that you have a parental temper tantrum in response to the child's misbehavior the child feels a sense of power and is temporarily gratified by this.

You are going to complicate the job of disciplining your children tremendously if you get into too much talking and too much emotion. You are also going to complicate the job of disciplining your children if you think that your children are supposed to like the discipline. Most children, and even most adults, do not like to be disciplined.

CAUTION: If you have a child who experiences excessive separation anxiety, or engages in self-punitive behavior or is physically violent, please do not use 1 2 3 Magic. Given any of these situations, it is important

that you seek psychological evaluation and counseling before attempting to use this approach.

1 2 3 Magic and “stop behaviors”.

Dr. Phelan calls “stop behaviors” undesired behaviors because these are behaviors which you want your children to stop doing such as: arguing, whining, yelling, screaming, sibling rivalry, temper tantrums, etc.

How does 1-2-3 Magic work for stop behaviors?

- **Give your child two chances**

Let's say your four-year-old is sitting in the living room and the television's on, but the child isn't watching it, so you turn it off. The child proceeds to have the biggest outburst which you've ever seen.

You turn to the child, hold up a finger and say, “That's one.”

Big deal. The child doesn't care, the temper tantrum continues. Five seconds later, you look at the child, hold up a two fingers and say, “That's two.”

The child still doesn't care. You wait another five seconds, you look at the child, hold up three fingers and say, “That's three. Time out”.

You have given the child two chances to improve his/her behavior, and the child has failed to do so. The child should then be in a time out situation.

- **How long should the time out be?**

The time out should be equivalent in minutes to the child's age. A six-year-old should get a six-minute time

out, a three-year-old, a three-minute time out.

- **What happens when the time out is over?**

When the time out is over, it's very important that there be no talking, no negotiation, no emotion, no apologies, no lectures, nothing. All you need to do is say, "Your time out is over." Sometimes a child will challenge you and tell you that the time out is not over. That's okay, just calmly let the child know that as far as you are concerned the time out is over.

- **What happens if the child repeats the behavior which resulted in the initial time out?**

Count the child again and if the child gets to three give the child another time out.

- **What if the child does something very inappropriate, too inappropriate, to give the child a chance to repeat the behavior?**

For example, what if your child has learned some nasty language at school, and when you turn off the television he/she swears at you? You decide that you are not going to give your child another chance to repeat this behavior. Give your child a time out, and in this instance, sit the child down and explain what the language means and why you would prefer he/she not use this kind of language when he/she is talking to you.

Questions asked by participants

- **Some people say they've used time outs and they don't work**

Think back to whether or not you

used too much talking and too much emotion. If you use a time out in conjunction with either too much talking or too much emotion, it will not be effective. Too much talking and too much emotion are not a part of 1 2 3 Magic. Dr. Phelan is clear about this.

- **Isn't it manipulative when a child misbehaves until you count to two?**

No, it's wonderful. If you only have to talk to a child twice about his/her behavior, you'll have so much more energy for other things. It's manipulative when a child continues to misbehave after you have talked to the child twenty or thirty times.

- **Is the goal of Dr. Phelan's method to give children time outs?**

No. The goal is not to give time outs; the goal is to have children who listen to you when you say "That's one," or "That's two."

- **How quickly will my child's behavior improve?**

If a group of parents implemented this system at one time, a third of them would have children whose behavior improved immediately.

Another third would have children whose behavior got worse before it got better. The idea is to stick with the system. These children tend to be more strong willed. They don't like what you're doing, so they test you. They want you to give up. In about seven to ten days their behavior should improve.

Then there's another group of children whose behavior is a little more confusing. Their behavior gets better immediately and then gets worse.

Initially, they don't realize what's really happening, but with time they understand. That's why their behavior gets better and then it gets worse. Just stick with it. No emotion, no talking, use your time outs, do your counting, stick with the system, and things will improve.

- **If a child is having a temper tantrum and the tantrum continues well past his/her time out, what do you do?**

The time out doesn't start until the tantrum is over.

- **Where should the time out take place? If you use a child's bedroom, won't the child associate it with being punished?**

The time out place can be anywhere, but it has to be safe. Dr. Phelan recommends that you use the child's room. There is no research or evidence that I know of which proves that a child will have difficulty sleeping at night if his/her room is used for time out.

- **How do you get a child to the time out place?**

If your children are little, transport them. With older children, give them a choice, say you can either go to your room for a time out, or there will be another consequence. i.e. no game boy, no hockey game, etc. Know your older children's' favorite activities and then use this knowledge when you need to set a consequence for inappropriate behavior. You can always have your older children choose between a time out or a consequence involving the loss of a privilege relating to favorite activities. In my opinion, if the older

child chooses a time out I think that the child has made a good choice. Remember, however, to leave it up to the child. If the child does not choose a time out then you need to follow through with the consequence that you set.

- If you can't get your children to a safe time out space, leave them where they are, and remove your attention from them. You say, "That's one, that's two, that's three – time out. I am not going to pay any attention to you until you are calm and quiet." If children scream, eventually they will stop. Please remember to always make sure that your children are safe. Do not leave them unattended in a room in which they are not safe.

- **What about disciplining a child with special needs who is non-verbal?**

It is perfectly fine to use this approach with a child that is nonverbal. As a parent you will need to assess what is manipulative behavior and you will need to assess whether your child understands that a time out is a consequence for inappropriate behavior.

- **How young of a child can you use this method with?**

Don't bother if your child's under two. At this age use redirection or distraction. Ask yourself if your child is hungry, tired or frustrated? Has your child had too much sugar or too much caffeine? For children of all ages be aware of situations and substances that may trigger behavioral outbursts and try to plan ahead to avoid these outbursts. This

does not mean giving in to children when they are in the midst of tantrums.

Remember if you're using this method, your child needs to be able to understand cause and effect. When you say, "That's one" or "that's two," your child needs to know you mean, I want you to stop what you are doing. On three your child needs to know that a time out is a consequence for continuing to misbehave despite the fact that you have provided two chances for him/her to improve his/her behavior. Your child needs to understand this

- **What if your child misbehaves when you are not at home?**

Use the system as you would if you were at home. Talk to your child the same way that you would if you were at home. You can time a child out anywhere, on a bench, in a corner, or you can just stand there, hold the child's hand and not interact verbally with the child. When you are out in public your biggest challenge is not where to time out your child but rather how to deal with the threat of public embarrassment. So, ignore the stares and discipline your child appropriately.

If you have other children over to your house and a situation arises that requires counting, go ahead and count. If your child then says, "you're embarrassing me," say "if you do what I say, and stop whatever behavior it is that I am asking you to stop, you won't need to be embarrassed."

- **How do you deal with grandparents?**

Grandparents come in three different varieties 1) the supportive kind, 2) the passive kind, and 3) the kind that undermines you. The grandparents who undermine you are the real problem. Talk to them nicely, and explain that if it's difficult for them to be with you when you need to discipline your child then at these times you would appreciate it if they left you and the child concerned alone. It's difficult to do, but sometimes it may be necessary.

- **What about dealing with an ex-husband who has a different parenting style?**

Don't worry about what happens in his house, worry about what happens in your house.

- **I feel that by giving time outs I may be changing my child's behavior, but I'm not teaching him/her anything.**

What you are teaching the child is that you will not give in to testing and manipulation. If you set a consequence for inappropriate behavior and follow through with it, you are teaching your child that you can be trusted to do what you say you will do. Your child has the choice to stop the behavior that you consider to be inappropriate when you count to 1 or 2. If your child continues on then your child is choosing a time out.

Remember, when your child is having a temper tantrum, your voice is not being heard. Constructive conversation can not take place in the middle of a temper tantrum. Your child needs to calm down.

When your child is calm and quiet you may converse and teach your child verbally about anything you wish.

- **Is it a punishment if a child is around puzzles and books when in a time out?**

No, a child does not require a sterile environment for a time out. The time out space, however, has to be safe. The child's safety is of the utmost importance. If a child uses puzzles and books, that's marvelous. The point is you've stopped the behavior that you consider to be inappropriate. To be safe, don't allow the child to watch TV, play computer or video games, talk on the phone or have friends in a time out. Today, children spend enough time engaging in these activities.

- **My child can't wait for dinner, so it's a struggle every night.** Knowing this is good, as this knowledge will allow you to use a preventative strategy. Give the child a healthy snack or something that's already prepared. If you know that your child can not wait for dinner, a healthy snack will enable the child to wait for and enjoy dinner.

**Testing and Manipulation
Dr. Phelan identifies six kinds of testing and manipulation.**

- **Badgering**
Why, why, why, please, please, please. Give me what I want and I'll stop.
- **Intimidation**
Temper tantrums, yelling, screaming, arguing. Something designed to make you feel uncomfortable.
- **Threats**
I'll never speak to you again, I'm not

going to eat dinner. Something terrible is going to happen.

- **Martyrdom**
Crying, pouting, looking teary, looking sad. Nobody around here loves me.
- **Butter-Up**
You look nice, you have beautiful eyes, my room is clean. Instead of doing something to make you feel uncomfortable, the child does something to make you feel good. The parent then waits for the inevitable request, or demand for something that the child wants.
- **Physical**
Fighting, attacking you or running away.

What is the purpose of testing and manipulation?

The first purpose of testing and manipulation is for the child to get what he/she wants. If the child does not get what he/she wants, the second purpose of testing and manipulation is to get effective revenge. Remember, if a little child can get you all upset, and get you to have a parental temper tantrum, this is the child's revenge. The child can then sit back and feel powerful.

Essentially what the child is saying is this, "if you give me what I want, then I will stop my testing and manipulation". And if you give into the child, the child will indeed stop, but then you have to question who is in charge of your household.

How does 1 2 3 Magic work for start behaviors?

Start behaviors are those things you want your children to do, get up and out in the morning, practice musical instruments, do homework, etc. Dr. Phelan identifies

certain strategies that will encourage start behaviors. These are:

- **Positive Verbal Feedback**
Positive reinforcement. Praise your child. Notice the good things that your child does and comment on the good things. It is essential to notice the good as approval and praise are the two most powerful motivators for good behavior.
- **Kitchen Timers**
You can use a kitchen timer to motivate a little child by playing a game with it. “Mommy would like you to clean up your room. I’ll set this timer for five minutes. Do you think you can beat the timer and clean up your room before the timer goes off?”

You can motivate an older child in a different way. Be clear about what your expectations are and what the consequences will be if your expectations are not met. “Mark, I’m going to set the timer for half an hour. If your room is clean then you will be able to watch the hockey game and if your room is not clean, you will not be able to watch the hockey game.” If you follow through, your child will know you mean business.

- **Docking System**
Taking things away. For example, if you give your child \$5.00 a week for allowance, Dr. Phelan suggests that you give your child \$2.50 for being your child and then allow your child can earn another \$2.50 to get to \$5.00. By giving your child \$2.50 for being your child Dr. Phelan explains that you have leverage. You can say, “I don’t like what you’re doing. You can either go to time out or you’re going to lose a portion, say \$1.00, of

your allowance.” You can use the docking system with many different things, television time, Nintendo time, anything the child likes to do. It’s important not to argue with a child when you’re using the docking system.

- **Natural Consequences**
Sometimes you can let your child do something because the consequence will teach the child. For example, a child will learn to wear a coat after going outside without a coat and feeling cold.
- **Charting**
Keeping a chart is like having a calendar. You have the days of the week at the top, then down the side you have three or four simple things for the child to do such as, clean room, feed cat and brush teeth. You work yourself off the chart. When the child accomplishes one of the tasks you can give the child a sticker. For an older child, the stickers can take on different values (i.e. a green sticker equals fifty cents, a red sticker equals a dollar). At the end of the week the child can cash in the stickers and either spend the money or save up for things he/she wants.

Final thoughts about 1-2-3 Magic

- **From dictatorship to democracy**
When you start out you may feel like your home is a dictatorship. As your children grow, you will want it to become more like a democracy. Have family meetings and take the time to ask your children what they think the consequences for certain behaviors should be.
- **Getting off track**
Some things may get you off track – the passage of time, travel, visitors, illness, new babies etc. If you get off

track, start again. Go back to the system.

- **Counseling**

Please do not use the system if you have a child who experiences excessive separation anxiety, self-punitive behavior, or is physically violent. Given any of these situations, it is important that you seek psychological evaluation and counseling before attempting to use this approach. Counseling may be helpful if you find you are having difficulty with the too much talking and too much emotion rules.

- **Why do some people have difficulty with the too much talking/emotion rules**

There are certain reasons why a parent may have difficulty with these rules:

- If a parent has a job, which he/she hates, and which consumes 8 or more hours per day of the parent's time, the parent may come home from work feeling stressed and unintentionally vent his/her frustrations on the child.
- If a parent is depressed, this can cause difficulty with the too much emotion and too much talking rules. A depressed parent may have a tendency to be inconsistent, to count all the time or not count at all.
- If a parent was raised in a family when there was a lot of screaming or yelling going on, the parent may inadvertently find himself/herself doing the same thing. Sometimes counseling can help to identify these issues and work toward solutions.
- **1 2 3 Magic fits**
Mothers sometimes accuse fathers of being too strict while fathers sometimes accuse mothers of being too wishy washy. 1 2 3 Magic is a

popular approach because it is neither too harsh nor too wishy-washy and generally mothers and fathers can agree on it.

- **If 1 2 3 Magic doesn't work**

If, after using 1 2 3 Magic, exactly as described by Dr. Phelan in his book 1 2 3 Magic, you find that it is not working for you, please to speak to your child's physician. A comprehensive assessment and/or counseling may be indicated.

- **Keep talking to your children**

The only time you should not be talking to your children is when they are misbehaving. Talk to your children.

Final thoughts about parenting

- **Parenting is a relational process and a process of constant learning**

What works when a child is three or four years old may not work when the child is ten. Make sure the consequences you use are age appropriate. Also keep in mind that each child is different. Each child has a different temperament and different parental needs.

- **Having faults does not equate you with not being a good parent**

We all have faults, to be perfect is impossible.

- **Take time for yourself**

Go for a walk or a coffee, talk to friends, seek out resource groups, etc. This is especially important for parents who have children with special needs. See what support groups are out there for you. Meeting other parents who have similar concerns may help you to feel less alone and less frustrated.

- **You need to be comfortable with your parenting approach**
If you don't like it, don't use it. There are a lot of parenting books on the market. Use strategies that you are comfortable with. Read about parenting and attend parenting programs which interest you.
- **You know your child best**
Have confidence in yourself. Discipline your children by combining your knowledge of each child with effective parenting techniques and good common sense.

Books to read

1-2-3 Magic, Effective Discipline for Children 2-12
Thomas W. Phelan, Ph. D.

Surviving your Adolescents
Thomas W. Phelan, Ph. D.

All About Attention Deficit Disorder
Thomas W. Phelan, Ph. D.

Self-Esteem Revolutions in Children
Thomas W. Phelan, Ph. D.

How to Get Your Kid to Eat...But Not Too Much
Ellyn Satter

Solving Your Child's Sleep Problems
Richard Ferber, M.D.

Raising Your Spirited Child
Mary Sheedy Kurcinka

Siblings Without Rivalry
Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish

How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk
Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish

Kids Are Worth It
Barbara Coloroso