

How to Handle Behavior Challenges

Even after the “terrible two’s”, some children challenge their parents. These types of children are usually difficult to control when their anger or screaming gets out of hand, and they challenge their parents’ rules and words. This does not mean that your child is bound for a life of disobedience. Although many children are compliant and seem to want to please their parents, if you are continuing to read this, you probably have a child that needs more information. He or she challenges you and talks back because they want you to give them more data. They need you to prove to them that you mean what you say. They learn by gathering information. Sometimes the information that you are giving them may not be in the form that they can grasp, or understand.

There are a few simple steps, or recommendations, that you can take to help mold your child’s behavior into a more calm and acceptable form. Discussed below are some tips that can help at all the different stages of a child acting out.

CATCHING IT BEFORE IT ESCALATES:

- Give them a “heads up”. Some children do better when they feel like they have control over what is going to happen next. When you tuck him in the night before, let him know what the day is going to be like tomorrow, outlining what comes next.
- Remind him of those events the next morning when he wakes up. Use times, or the first number of the time these things will happen. Use a digital clock. Or instead use a reference point or other event so that he can organize this in his brain.
- Pick your battles. You know you are right, and he is resisting you. For example, you know he’ll get hot in those clothes later in the day. To keep things rolling. Let it be. Instead, pack a change of clothes so when he starts to get irritable later on, you can prevent an outburst.
- If he is starting to be clearly defiant but you see that it could escalate into a full-fledge temper tantrum, use a means of distraction or count 1-2-3. For example, if you know he loves cars or birds, and he is focused on one thing, switch the topic to his favorite topic and watch him forget about what was bothering him. I often leave the house with 3 “catch” phrases in my head, just in case we get into trouble.
- Many parents have read the book 1-2-3 Magic, but you don’t have to read the book to know that children respond to consistent warning. If he is doing something he is not supposed to do OR not doing what you asked him to do. Start counting. When you get to 3, if he has not responded to your request, then he gets “time out”. Be consistent. Don’t count to 3 a total of 5 times before you act on it. He only gets one chance. The goal is to have him starting to move toward what you want him to do by the count of “2”.

- Another counting method involves counting DOWN. This means counting down privileges. For example, if your child will not come upstairs for bath time, you could start with 10 books to be read for story time and the number you are left with when he gets upstairs is the number of books he can have read to him before bed.
- Remember that the consequences of taking things away or adding things (like minutes to a time-out timer) should be IMMEDIATE CONSEQUENCES. This should be something that happens within the next hour that your child can or cannot have because of his persistent behavior. For example, you cannot say, "That's it! You will not be allowed to sleep over Johnny's house tomorrow!" This result does not occur close enough in the future for it to matter to your child.

WHEN THE DAMAGE IS DONE:

- When your child has not obeyed, then he should receive a "timed" cool-down. This means that he did not obey your rules and requests, and he has a set time to sit and think about what was done. No talking during this time. If he tries to get up, put him back with no words and very little eye contact. Set the timer. Each time he gets up, the timer gets re-set.

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS:

- It is too late, or it happened so fast. Your child is in full melt-down mode. Remember, he has an audience. This is in part why he continues to scream, yell and thrash about. If you add your words to the mix, the intensity gets even greater. This is cool-down chair material too. The difference this time is that the cool-down, or "time-out" period is not timed. I tell parents that we are not punishing your child for screaming and being upset. We are just letting him know that we understand that he is upset, but there is an appropriate place to let out steam, and the current location is not it. Send him to his cool down area and let him know that he can come out when he is calm. If he tries to leave that area, place him back, and gently explain that he needs to be calm to receive anyone's attention or participate with the rest of the family. If you must, close the door and continue to place him back in that area with as minimal conversation as possible. Remember....no audience.
- If you are in a public place, change scenery. Go outside or in the hallway or lobby. Set him down in a safe place and turn your back to him. Tell him that you will not go back inside until he has calmed down.