

# 1-2-3 Magic!

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The following is a summary of the key points offered by Dr. Thomas Phelan in the above titled book. It may be helpful to read the entire book for more examples and clarification.

There are two kinds of behavior problems parents must deal with, and they require separate discipline techniques.

## **2 kinds of behavior problems:**

### **-STOP behaviors**

- Things you want your child to STOP doing
- Frequent everyday issues, minor, such as whining, throwing tantrums, or yelling
- Use 1-2-3 counting procedure

### **-START behaviors**

- Things you want your child to START doing
- Positive activities such as cleaning her room, going to bed, or doing homework
- Use praise, simple requests, natural consequences, docking system, kitchen timer, charting, or 1-2-3 counting variation

\*\*An important point to remember is that children are not little adults!! They are not rational or logical, and are naturally selfish! Think of yourself as a wild animal trainer and choose a kind and gentle method of discipline and repeat it until it works. \*\*

A key element of 1-2-3 Magic is the “*no talking, no emotion*” rule. This means that when you are using counting as discipline, you do not talk, explain, or rationalize with your child, and you do not get angry or otherwise emotional during or after. This will make your child think about her behavior and take responsibility for the choices she makes. This rule is essential to the effectiveness of 1-2-3 Magic. 90% of the time when the program does not work it is because the parent forgot this rule.

It is ok to offer one explanation if necessary, but lectures and long wordy explanations are not effective. Explanations often have no effect at all, or they may lead the parent and child through what Dr. Phelan calls the *Talk-Persuade-Argue-Yell-Hit Syndrome*: you talk, the child doesn't respond, so you try to persuade her of your view, she doesn't agree or doesn't respond so you argue, which leads to a yelling match, leaving you feeling there may be nothing else left for discipline but to hit. Also, if you get emotional about a behavior, your child knows this behavior upsets you and it is highly likely you will see it more frequently!

## **Counting STOP behaviors:**

### **How to use 1-2-3 Magic for STOP behaviors:**

1. After your child misbehaves, mouths off, or does not respond to you, calmly say “That's a 1”, then do not speak. Wait 5 seconds.
2. If behavior continues, say “That's a 2”, then do not speak. Wait 5 more seconds.
3. If behavior continues, say “That's a 3. Time out”. Do not talk, argue, or get

emotional. The consequence for getting a “3” could also be a time out alternative such as the loss of a privilege, a fine from allowance or token economy, small or large chore, earlier bed time, no desert, cannot see a friend, etc. You can choose for the child or have the child choose from a few.

### **Guidelines for counting:**

- Before using 1-2-3 Magic:** explain to your child what the counting means and what will happen when he misbehaves.
- Length of Time outs:** 1 minute for each year of your child’s age
- Time out area:** a designated area free of phone or electronic entertainment
  - Can be the child’s bedroom, free of these privileges
  - Can be a chair or step-but with some children this may lead to more struggle, as it is very tempting for some children to test parents when it is so easy to get off, or only stay on by a finger, etc
- After the time out is over:**
  - No lecture, apologies, or discussion
  - If this is the first time for the offense and the child really does not understand, if it is severe, or if you need more information about what happened such as in the case of an injury, then a brief and simple explanation may be given, but only once
- Serious offenses**-If the offense is too serious to give 3 counts
  - Say “That’s a 3. Take 10, and add 15 for your mouth”, or whatever you feel is appropriate.
  - If it a first offense, briefly explain your reasoning after the time out
- If your child will not go to the time out area:**
  - Child is smaller than you
    - Move towards him and he may go on his own
    - Carry him there
  - Child is bigger than you
    - Move towards him and he may go on his own
    - Tell him he can go to time out or take a time out alternative
      - You can choose the alternative, or let him pick for a few
      - If you need a break and the child is still in the room, walk out, or sit in silence. No discussion!!!
- If your child counts back to you:**
  - Ignore it or count the child
  - Don’t let this throw you off, you are the parent and the child has no authority.
- Hold the counts:**
  - 15-30 minutes for small children
  - Up to several hours for older children
  - Example: your 4 year old gets a 1 for mouthing off, and 15 minutes later gets a 2 for coloring on the walls, but does well until 5 hours later, you would start back at 1 again.
- Saying goodbye:** If your child has fits or tantrums when you drop her off at school or at a caregiver’s
  - Kiss her goodbye, tell her when you’ll be back, and leave
  - The longer you stay, the worse it will get
- Count different behaviors:**
  - Your child could get a 1 for not sharing, a two for not doing a chore, and a three for yelling at you
- Parents or caregivers can count together:**

- You give the child a one, your partner gives the child a two, etc
- Ignore minor behaviors if you choose:
  - Do not ignore anything for the first 7-10 days, as the child is getting used to the program and needs to know you are serious
  - Sometimes if you just watch the child do something that you would usually count, he will stop because he has internalized the rules and knows you will count him
- When you have company: follow the program as normal or your child will remember that you won't follow through in front of friends or relatives
- If your child will not leave his room after the time out: be sure he is aware his time is up, and let him stay in his room for as long as he wants to
- Misbehavior while you are on the phone:
  - They will do this because they feel like you are hostage while on the phone
  - Count them with your fingers
  - Say excuse me and count them out loud
  - Explain that you need to go for a few minutes and will call back
- Preserve your child's self-esteem: If you count using 1-2-3 magic, your child's self-esteem should not be hurt, but it may be damaged by yelling, name-calling, arguing, or hitting
- "Room-wreckers": if your child destroys his room during a time out
  - You may ignore it and allow the child to live with the natural consequences of not being able to find clothes, toys, or have a calm private place to enjoy himself
  - Then, without lectures or emotion, help the child clean up the room another day
  - If you think you have a potential "room-wrecker" make sure the area is safe before you need to use it as a time out
- Apology: You may require your child to apologize after the time out, but this would be punishment rather than a sincere and compassionate response. If you want your child to apologize, be sure you are not asking your child to lie.
- STOP behaviors in public: Count calmly as you would at home
  - There is always a room or place you can take your child for a time-out in public such as the car, the corner of a store, a restroom, etc, or you can count and then issue a time-out alternative to be served while in public (loss of a treat) or at home (loss of TV)
  - You can prepare your child before the outing for what will happen if they get a 3
  - Plan for car rides, and use time out alternatives for behaviors that occur while in the car, or pull off the road and serve the time out
- Sibling rivalry: If siblings are fighting count both children unless you know exactly what happened
- Tantrum after you give a time out:
  - Children 4+ let the timeout begin when the child stops tantrum
  - Children 3- begin the time out but do not talk to the child until he stops the tantrum
- Pouting is a passive behavior to make you feel guilty
  - Ignore it and walk away
  - If the child uses "aggressive pouting", such as following you all over the house so you don't miss it, you should count the pouting

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### **6 kinds of testing and manipulation:**

1. Badgering: "Please, Please, Please" or "Why? Why? Why?"
  - Basic message "Give me what I want and I'll shut up."
2. Temper (intimidation): child throws herself on floor, screams, kicks
  - Tantrums are prolonged if the child has an audience, the parent does not know what to do, or if the parent continues to talk to the child during the tantrum

3. **Threat:** "I'll run away" "I'll never speak to you again"  
-Basic message: "Something bad will happen unless I get what I want now"
4. **Martyrdom:** "No one her loves me" "I never get anything"  
-Basic message "I am hurt and deprived, and you care about me so you'll give me what I want to make it better"
5. **Butter up:** "You're the prettiest mom in the whole world", promises, apologies  
-"If I make you feel good you won't want to upset me and lose that good feeling"
6. **Physical tactics:** physically attack adult, break something, run away  
-If physically aggressive behavior occurs past the age of 4 or 5 when the child has good communications skills, the child may need professional help for this

- All are STOP behaviors (except buttering up) and should be counted-in the beginning things may get worse, and the child will also switch tactics to see if any of them work on you
- Testing is a purposeful behavior that occurs when a child is frustrated, and is designed to get what the child wants, or to get revenge is he cannot get what he wants
- If your child only uses one method of testing or manipulation, she is doing it because IT WORKS!

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### **The Major/Minor System:**

-The major/minor system a simple punishment system used to handle more serious offenses that are repeated or too serious to be counted. You come up with a list of consequences for major and minor offenses, and when an incident that is too serious to count occurs, choose from your list. The following are examples of possible major and minor consequences:

**-Major:**

- Grounding-2 weeks restriction to room, no TV or electronic entertainment
- Fines-\$25 or double the value of stolen or damaged articles
- Chores-15 hours of house or yard work
- Community service-15 hours volunteer work in community
- Educational activity-8 page research paper

**-Minor:**

- Grounding-2 days restriction to room without electronics
  - Fine-\$5 or double the value of stolen or damaged articles
  - Chores-4 hours
  - Community service-4 hours
  - Educational activity-2 page research paper
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## **Encouraging START behaviors**

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Once you begin using 1-2-3 Magic, use counting for the first 10 days to diminish STOP behaviors before tackling START behaviors.

### **7 strategies to encourage good behavior**

**-Positive reinforcement:**

- "Thanks for doing the dishes!"
- Praise in front of other people
- Give praise in unexpected situation
- Children should receive 2 or 3 positive comments for every 1 negative comment

- Decide to give your children 5 positive comments a day-can also be used with other loved ones

Simple requests:

- State request in a matter-of-fact tone of voice
- Don't use "we" statements for action you want your child to take: "Don't we think it's time to start our homework?". Instead you could say: "I want your homework done by supper at 5 o'clock".
- Try to structure chores so that spontaneous requests are seldom necessary; kids are more likely to comply when they are not interrupted by spur of the moment unpleasant tasks
- If your child does not follow through with a simple request that it asked in a matter of fact manner, use another strategy, including counting if appropriate
- For example, you tell your child to change his school clothes before playing outside. His friend calls him out to play and he goes to the door without changing his clothes. Your child did not follow your request, so you could use a timer, dock, allow natural consequences, or count since this is a brief behavior.

-Kitchen timers:

- This creates "child against machine (timer)" rather than "child against parent"
- Timers are not testable, and cannot be emotionally manipulated
- Can be used as part of a routine such as
  - brushing teeth "can you brush your teeth for 2 minutes until the timer goes off?"
  - getting ready for bed "You have 10 minutes until it is time to get ready for bed"
- Can be used to lessen the blow of spontaneous requests "I would like your coat and backpack hung up and the toy on the floor put away. I am setting the timer for 7 minutes. Do you think you can beat it?"

-The docking system:

- The basic principle is that if your child doesn't do the work, you'll do it for him, and he'll pay you
- Appropriate for kindergarten age and above
- Requires your child has a source of income such as allowance
- To begin, explain to your child how much allowance he will be given each week, what chores are expected to be done and when and how they should be done, and what the fee will be if you have to do the chore yourself
- If money does not seem to motivate your child, use another privilege such as TV time, or the use of a toy

-Natural consequences:

- Let the world teach the child by letting him experience what naturally happens as a result of his choices
- If your child does not want to wear her jacket in the winter, let the cold teach her that she should wear her jacket
- If your preschooler repeatedly will not get dressed in the morning, send him to school in his pajamas
- If after several tries, this method does not work for your child, move on to another start tactic
- Remember: it is better for the child to learn from small mistakes early in life than from larger mistakes later in life

-Charting:

-Use a calendar-like form to keep track of how well your child is doing with specific start behaviors

-If your child completes the task, put a sticker on the chart

	Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Th.	Fri.	Sat.
Clean room							
Feed cat							
Set table							

(ages 4-9), or a grade or other mark for older kids

-Positive reinforcement comes from the chart itself, from parental praise, and the satisfaction of doing a good job (called natural reinforcers)

-Often, children need artificial reinforcers, meaning they will earn a reward for completing the chart

-For small children artificial reinforcers should be small things given often, while older children may do better with larger items that take longer to earn

-Some possible artificial reinforcers include small toys, money, staying up past bed time, a trip for ice cream, renting a game or movie, a sleepover, and outing with a parent, a snack of choice, a card or other item for a collection, comic book or magazine, a “no chore” voucher, making and eating cookies, etc

#### -Counting for brief start behavior:

-Counting for start behavior can be used only if the behavior will not take more than 2 minutes to complete

-If your child throws her coat on the floor and you immediately ask her to pick it up. You say “that’s 1” and continue with counting and a time out if necessary. If she does not pick up the coat when you ask her after the time out, another time out would follow.

### **Specific start behaviors**

#### -Up and out in the morning:

-For 2-8 year olds, you can use charting, alone, or along with a timer to get each task completed

-For 9 and up, see that the child has the skills or items he needs to accomplish morning tasks on his own such as an alarm clock or knows how to prepare breakfast, and then use natural consequences; explain that you will not be waking the child up more than once or nagging, and that consequences will occur if he gets to school late or doesn’t eat breakfast-your child may not believe you but will find out quickly that you are serious

-Other start tactics may also be used

#### -Cleaning bedroom:

-You can close the door and ignore it (and use any start technique to deal with dirty laundry and dirty dishes in a messy room)

-Create a weekly cleanup routine

-Use a daily chart and check the room at the same time each day (this may be unrealistic so be nice and offer lots of praise)

#### -Picking up:

-Use a kitchen timer or docking

-Garbage bag method-inform your kids of what time each day their things need to be picked up, and that if they are not, they will go in the bag and they won’t get them back until the same time the next day

#### -Chores:

-Praise your child whenever she helps out

-When your child is 5 or 6, divide up family chores so they are not spontaneous requests

-Use charting or docking

-Pet care-do not use natural consequences as not caring for the pet is not an option, but other start strategies will work

-Mealtime:

- Use small portions and a kitchen timer-tell the child he has 20 minutes to finish his meal, and if he does not it goes in the kitchen for half an hour, and then can be reheated and tried again-the child does not get dessert if he does not eat the food-if the child whines, count it
- 3 out of 4-allow your child to eat 3 of the 4 food items on her plate-if she doesn't she won't get anything else to eat before bed, and that will be learning through natural consequences
- Divide and conquer-let the children occasionally eat before you, eat what they want, or eat by the TV if they bring back the dishes-sometimes the break is nice for everyone

-Homework:

- Make it a part of a daily routine in order to avoid spontaneous requests
- Use natural consequences (if homework trouble goes on for long periods of time, you need to look closer at why your child has such a hard time with it)
- Use an assignment book that the teacher completes or that the child completes and the teacher signs, and then follow through by checking that all the work is completed
- PNP-positive-negative-positive-when your child first brings homework to you, make a positive comment, then, if necessary, a negative, and then another positive-this approach will keep the child coming back
- Rough checkout-set a threshold, such as 80 or 90 percent, and if your child's work meets that criteria of being done and neat, call it good-this may be unacceptable for some parents, but for many it can be a major improvement in family life in the evenings
- Charting-use a point system, such as 1 point each for being neat, complete, correct, no complaining, and staring on her own

-Bedtime:

- Set and stick to a bedtime
- If your child gets out of bed, calmly put him back in bed, and sit by the door facing away from the child and not talking, and keep putting him back in bed-in a week or two, your child should stay in bed on his own-if the child is too big to carry, guide him by the arm
- Remember that the longer the child is out of bed and the longer he stays up, the more reinforcement he gets, and the more he will get out and stay out of bed
- If the child is not ready for bed, you can put her in her bed in her clothes without shoes, or put her in her pajamas if she is 2 or 3

-Nighttime waking:

- Some nighttime waking is normal
- No talking not emotion
- Assume the child may have to go to the bathroom
- Be gentle and quiet
- No lights
- Don't go in the child's room unless you have to
- Don't let your child sleep with you on a regular basis
- Using a floor fan or small fan set on a dresser or table (not blowing on the child) helps some children sleep by creating white noise that drowns out other small noises

### **No talking no emotion rule revisited**

- There are some appropriate times to talk and explain, but also inappropriate times,
- Do not talk and explain while you are enforcing the rule:
  - It is not a good learning moment for your child
  - Explaining at this time encourages arguing
  - Your child is not open to your thoughts and ideas while being disciplined
- You should explain something right away
  - If it is a new, unusual, or dangerous behavior
  - Swearing or hitting is another time when you should explain
  - Remember to keep the talk short and to the point
- Before explaining, it may be wise for you to ask your child some questions to help him think the problem through. With a calm child and calm adult, this will help the child remember the lesson better. Questions followed by a *brief* explanation can be an effective teaching strategy. You can ask questions like:
  - What would happen if you did that?
  - Why do you think I want you to do your homework?
  - Why is it bad to push someone?
  - How did you feel when I said that to you?
- Remember that it takes children a while to learn how to avoid stop behaviors and complete start behaviors, so be patient and realistic. The child needs insight into the behavior, but also practice to change it.

### **In addition to explanations, children learn through**

- Parental modeling
- Behavior modeling by other children and siblings
- Watching TV, books, and music
- Praise that follows good behavior
- Counting that follows obnoxious behavior
- Adult's comment's about the behavior of other children and adults
- Behavioral experimentation-trying out something and seeing what happens
- And more!!

### **Your child's self-esteem**

- Healthy self-esteem is built on 4 elements:
  - Good relationships with other people
  - Competence in work and self-management
  - Physical skills and caring for one's body
  - Character-courage, effort, following the rules, and concern for others

These skills take practice for parents as well as children. If you make a mistake, simply say you forgot the rules and you need to start over, or that you'll do better next time, and then follow through! If you have questions or want more information, please refer to the whole book.