

## IN THIS ISSUE

- Why Counting Works – Part II
- Quick Tip: Be Decisive and Calm



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## WHY COUNTING WORKS – PART II

Last month we visited a parent who didn't quite know what to do with her son's pre-dinner potato chip request. Now let's take a look at the same scene, but we'll have our parent equipped to use the 1-2-3, or counting, method along with our "No-Talking, No-Emotion" rules. Why does counting work so well? As we'll see, Mom's focus on doing no extra talking during the brief conflict will eliminate cognitive confusion in her son. In addition, her focus on remaining calm will minimize his level of frustration. These two factors will help insure his cooperation.

1. Child: "I want some potato chips."
2. Mother: "Not right now."
3. Child: "Why not?"
4. Mother: "Because we're eating dinner in ten minutes."
5. Child: "Aw, come on. I never get anything."
6. Mother: "That's 1." Parent holds up one finger.
7. Child: "Please, just this once."
8. Mother: "That's 2." Parent holds up two fingers.
9. Child: "Oh, brother." Leaves room.

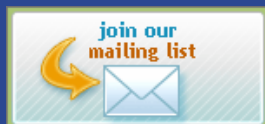


Statements 1-4, as we noted last month, are a reasonable interchange. The child asks a question and the parent gives an answer. At statement 5 the child pushes further with "Aw, come on. I never get anything." Since Mom has already given the explanation for her denial of the boy's request and her son has apparently ignored it, further explanations from her will be unlikely to help. The problem has not disappeared, however, because the boy is pressing her ("Aw, come on.") and also offering a potential sidetrack in his martyr-like testing ("I never get anything.")

### THIS TIME MOM IS READY!

This time, however, Mom is ready. First, she thinks realistically. She knows kids are just kids; her son is not a little monster—he's simply frustrated. Second, Mom ignores her son's alleged martyrdom. His statement about never getting anything is ridiculous and they both know it. Not only does his comment not merit a response, but responding to it would introduce a confusing sidetrack to the conversation and also further aggravate both mother and son.

So Mom responds with a short signal which has a simple verbal part, "That's 1," and an equally simple visual part, holding up one finger. The counting procedure has been previously explained to the child. It is understood that the youngster will get two chances—the first two warnings or counts—to stop the minor but undesirable behavior. If the undesirable behavior continues so that the child hits a third count ("That's 3"), a mild and



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usually brief consequence will follow. The consequence can be a time out (one minute per year of the child's life) or a "time out alternative," e.g., fifty cents off allowance, no electronic entertainment for two hours, bedtime fifteen minutes earlier, brief chore, etc.

### **CALM, CLEAR COMMUNICATION IS IMPORTANT**

The counting signal is perfectly clear: In this situation each warning notifies the child that what he is doing (badgering after he has been given an explanation) is out of line and that if he persists there will be an unpleasant consequence. Although the child doesn't like this parental response, he is more likely to accept it because his aggravation is still minimal at this point. His anger has not been unnecessarily amplified by a stupid conversation. ONCE CHILDREN ARE ANGRY ENOUGH, THEY DON'T CARE WHAT THE CONSEQUENCES ARE.

The parent is also calm but firm—the boy knows that his chances of getting what he wants through extended nagging are nonexistent. Consistent, confident and reasonable firmness always minimizes testing and manipulation.

When children (with a mental age of at least two) have been exposed to counting for only a few trials, they quickly learn that "That's 1" from a parent or teacher means the following:

1. I'm doing something I shouldn't be doing.
2. I'd better figure out what it is.
3. I'd better stop or there will be a consequence.

This type of calm and clear communication keeps the focus on the misbehavior, puts the responsibility for change where it belongs—on the child and gives the youngster a chance to cooperate before he becomes so angry that he doesn't want to anymore. That's the secret of [1-2-3 Magic Parenting](#).

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### **QUICK TIP: BE DECISIVE AND CALM**

Remember that—even with more serious offenses—fits of temper and righteous indignation from you can ruin the effectiveness of whatever punishments or consequences are chosen. You need to be decisive and calm

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