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## WHY COUNTING WORKS – PART 1

Perhaps the most useful—as well as the most simple—aspect of the [1-2-3 Magic Parenting](#) program is the use of a procedure known as counting to manage behavior such as arguing, yelling, fighting, whining and tantrums. The counting method has preserved the sanity of many parents and

according to those same parents, it has also saved quite a few marriages as well. Why does counting work so well? Because the procedure minimizes (A) cognitive confusion and (B) emotional aggravation.



Let's analyze a real-life example. Imagine an eight-year-old boy asks his mother for a small bag of potato chips right before dinner. Here's the sequence:

1. Child: "I want some potato chips."
2. Mother: "Not right now."
3. Child: "Why not?"
4. Mother: "Cause we're eating dinner in ten minutes."
5. Child: "Aw, come on. I never get anything."
6. Mother: "You never get anything? Do you have clothes on? Am I making dinner for you? Now don't start bugging me when I'm busy. Go finish your homework."
7. Child: "You go finish my homework!"
8. Mother: "Don't talk to me like that, young man. We're eating in ten minutes!"
9. Child: "I don't want any of your stupid dinner!" Throws magazine across kitchen.
10. "Listen here, buster..."

Statements 1-4 represent a fairly reasonable interchange. The child asks a question and the parent gives an answer. The trouble starts with statement 5, "Aw, come on. I never get anything." The impatient youngster is pushing his parent with a straightforward piece of martyr-like badgering. But at this point (1) the issue (chips before dinner) is still clear and (2) the boy's anger/frustration level is low.



### The Real Issue Needs to be Clear

Unfortunately, Mom's response (statement 6) is an unnecessarily complex one that clearly compounds the problem. Statement 6 arises from the Little Adult Assumption in Mom's brain: If I can just give the child

the right information, the problem will be solved. Unfortunately, however, Mom's complicated reply is now attempting to deal with three problems: the child's apparent view of himself as deprived, his badgering her about the potato chips, and his homework. The confusion has begun! The first part of statement 6 (arguments against the deprived child concept) is irrelevant; the second part ("don't bug me") is the real problem, but the message is buried in a verbal garbage heap; and the third part of statement 6 (homework) represents a weak parental attempt at distraction.

### Emotional Aggravation Should be Kept to a Minimum

In addition to being confused, the child is now also becoming increasingly aggravated by (1) not getting his way and (2) having to listen to a parental lecture. As a result his motivation to cooperate and leave his mother alone has evaporated. The boy is not neutral, however: His irritation erupts in his smart aleck retort in statement 7, "You go finish my homework!" This angry child is mounting a counterattack.

To make matters worse, Mom is also getting frustrated. Inside this parent, emotional and cognitive regression are setting in, so instead of coming up with an effective or more creative approach, she resorts to a spirited power play (statement 8) that involves an instruction about disrespect ("Don't talk to me like that, young man") as well as another try at the Little Adult Assumption ("We're eating in ten minutes!"). This comment serves to irritate her son further and he throws the magazine across the kitchen. Where this battle will end, no one knows.

At any one moment of parent-child conflict, good discipline requires that the real issue be kept clear and also that emotional aggravation be kept to a minimum. Next month we'll explain exactly how counting accomplishes these two objectives.

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#### QUICK TIP: POUTING

Putting is a passive behavior that is designed to make you feel guilty. If you do wind up feeling guilty when your child pouts, that's really more your problem. Why should you feel bad for trying to be a good parent, just because your youngster didn't like the demand or restriction you placed on her? You shouldn't.

So if you discipline a child and she gives you the ultimate in martyr looks, just turn around, say nothing and walk away.

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