Parenting that works

Seven research-backed ways to improve parenting.

BY AMY NOVOTNEY


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Search for parenting books on Amazon.com, and you get tens of thousands of titles, leaving new parents awash in a sea of often conflicting information. But thanks to the accumulated results of decades of empirical research, psychologists know more than ever before about what successful parenting really is.

The *Monitor* asked leaders in child psychology for their best empirically tested insights for managing children's behavior. Here's what they said.

1. Embrace praise

Simply put, giving attention to undesired behaviors increases undesired behaviors, while giving attention to good behaviors increases good behaviors, says Alan E. Kazdin, PhD, a Yale University psychology professor and director of the Yale Parenting Center and Child Conduct Clinic.

"When it comes to nagging, reprimand and other forms of punishment, the more you do it, the more likely you are not going to get the behavior you want," says Kazdin, APA's 2008 president. "A better way to get children to clean their room or do their homework, for example, is to model the behavior yourself, encourage it and praise it when you see it."

But parents shouldn't offer that praise indiscriminately, says Sheila Eyberg, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of Florida who conducts research on parent-child relationships. Eyberg recommends parents provide their children with a lot of "labeled praise" — specific feedback that tells the child exactly what he or she did that the parent liked. By giving labeled praise

their techniques in reading to their children. Drawing on research that links language learning to reading readiness, University of Nebraska educational psychology professor Susan M. Sheridan, PhD, and her colleagues work with teachers to promote parent engagement in early literacy in rural Nebraska and Kansas City Head Start preschool classrooms.

Using an intervention called Pre-3T, the teachers Sheridan works with help parents learn strategies to increase children's exposure to language and build verbal expression skills. For example, parents learn to prompt children to share about their day, by replacing yes or no questions like, "Did you have a good day?" with open-ended inquiries like, "Tell me about all the books you read today."

"Children who are given opportunities to converse and have a rich language discourse across their natural environment are then primed to pick up on the tasks necessary to learn to read," she says.

Enlisting parents is also a key component of Stoiber and Gettinger's EMERGE program, which offers family library sessions once a week in Milwaukee's Head Start classrooms, at which parents can see a video offering tips on reading to children. Stoiber's graduate students are there to help parents select developmentally appropriate titles, a task that often confounds many parents and teachers. "Often preschool-age books don't come with the right vocabulary words and many are too dense," Gonzalez says.

In fact, some of the most beautifully written and illustrated books for children don't introduce many words and concepts that children can connect to their lives, he says. Yet others, like the book "The Snowy Day," feature complex words like "melt" that parents and teachers can use to ask children to discuss their own experiences and knowledge about things that melt, he says.

Parents and teachers should also choose books with "print-rich" details — features that draw children's eyes to words and letters, such as dialogue bubbles, words written in crayon or large font, or words that whoosh up and down the page, says Laura Justice, PhD, an educational researcher at Ohio State University and author of the 2010 book "Engaging Children with Print: Building Early Literacy Skills with Quality Read-Aloud Books." In her studies using eye-tracking technology, Justice has found that children look at letters and words more frequently in books that have print-rich details. She's also found that preschool children whose teachers accentuate print details as they read — by talking about how the print moves left to right and pointing out when letters reappear, for example — are better readers and spellers by the end of first grade.

Connecting with the type primes these children for that thrilling moment when a string of letters pops off the page as a word, Justice says. "Knowing about print is an important foundation for developing word reading skills down the road." ■

Psychologist-designed reading intervention in action

Digital Vision

Visit the *Monitor*'s digital edition to watch a teacher use psychologists' techniques that make learning to read more fun and engaging for young students: www.apa.org/monitor/digital/literacy.aspx.

to the child, such as, "I really like how quietly you're sitting in your chair," when a child is having trouble calming down. The parent is focusing on what's relevant to the behavior problem, Eyberg says. Several studies back her up: Psychologist Karen Budd, PhD, found that training preschool teachers to use labeled praise improves the teacher-child relationship and helps teachers better manage behavior in the classroom (*Education and Treatment of Children,* 2010).

Kazdin also recommends reinforcing the praise with a smile or a friendly touch. And feedback should be honest, says David J. Palmiter Jr., PhD, a practitioner in Clarks Summit, Pa., and author of the 2011 book, "Working Parents, Thriving Families."

"I was at a girls' softball game recently and I started to get a headache from all the praising going on for poor performance," he says. "This can often deprive a child of the wonderful learning that comes from failure."

2. Look the other way

Research also suggests that parents should learn to ignore minor misbehaviors that aren't dangerous, such as whining about a sibling not sharing or a toddler throwing food on the floor.

Parents who know what a child is capable of understanding, feeling and doing at different ages and stages of development can be more realistic about what behaviors to expect, leading to less frustration and aggression.

In several studies, Kazdin and his team found that when parents changed their responses to behaviors — for example, they ignored screams but gave a lot of attention to their children when they asked nicely for something — the child learned that asking nicely is the better, more reliable way to get attention ("The Kazdin Method for Parenting the Defiant Child," 2008).

3. Learn about child development

Parents are also more effective when they read up on child development to understand the misbehaviors that are common for each developmental stage, says Eyberg. Often, when a child displays a behavior that a parent doesn't like, such as making a mess while eating, it's because the child is simply learning a new skill, she says.

"If parents understand that the child isn't making a mess on purpose, but instead learning how to use their developing motor skills in a new way, they're more likely to think about praising every step the child takes toward the ultimate goal," she says. Parents who know what a child is capable of understanding, feeling and doing at different ages and stages of development can be more realistic about what behaviors to expect, leading to less frustration and aggression.

4. Do time-out right

Three decades of research on time-outs show that they work best when they are brief and immediate, Kazdin says. "A way to get time-out to work depends on 'time-in' — that is, what the parents are praising and modeling when the child is not being punished," Kazdin says.

Research also suggests that parents need to remain calm when administering time-outs — often a difficult feat in the heat of the misbehavior — and praise compliance once the child completes it. In addition, he says, parents shouldn't have to restrain a child to get him or her to take a time-out because the point of this disciplinary strategy is to give the child time away from all reinforcement. "If what is happening seems more like a fight in a bar, the parent is reinforcing inappropriate behaviors," Kazdin says.

5. Prevent misbehavior

John Lutzker, PhD, who directs the Center for Healthy Development at Georgia State University, has even stopped advising parents to use time-outs. Instead, he teaches parents to plan and structure activities to prevent a child's challenging behaviors, based on previous research:

- Plan ahead to prevent problems from arising.
- Teach children how to cope effectively with the demands of the situation.
- Find ways to help children stay engaged, busy and active when they might otherwise become bored or disruptive.

"We've found in our work over the past 20 years that if you do a good job teaching parents planned activities training, there's no need for time-outs," Lutzker says.

6. Take care of yourself first

Parents receive some of the best parenting advice every time they take off on an airplane, says Palmiter: If the cabin loses pressure and you must put on an oxygen mask, put one on yourself first before you help your child.

"I see households all across America where the oxygen masks have long since dropped and all of the oxygen is going to the children," says Palmiter.

Yet the research makes it clear that children are negatively affected by their parents' stress. According to APA's 2010 Stress in America survey, 69 percent of respondents recognized that their personal stress affects their children, and only 14 percent of children said their parents' stress didn't bother them. In addition, 25 percent to 47 percent of tweens reported feeling sad, worried or frustrated about their parents' stress. Another study published last year in *Child Development* found that parents' stress imprints on children's genes — and the effects last a very long time.

That's why modeling good stress management can make a

APA's Violence Prevention Office offers the **ACT Raising Safe Kids program,** which provides parenting skills classes nationwide through a research-based curriculum delivered by trained professionals. The program teaches parents and caregivers how to raise children without violence through anger management, positive child discipline and conflict resolution. For more information on ACT, visit http://actagainstviolence.apa.org or the ACT Facebook page or contact Julia da Silva, the program's national director, at jsilva@apa.org.

very positive difference in children's behavior, as well as how they themselves cope with stress, psychologists say.

Palmiter recommends that parents make time for exercise, hobbies, maintaining their friendships and connecting with their partners. That may mean committing to spending regular time at the gym or making date night a priority.

"Investing in the relationship with their partner is one of the most giving things a parent can do," Palmiter says. Single parents should establish and nurture meaningful connections in other contexts. A satisfying relationship with a colleague, neighbor, family member or friend can help to replenish one's energy for parenting challenges.

1. Make time

Too often, Palmiter says, the one-on-one time parents offer their children each week is the time that's left over after life's obligations, such as housework and bill-paying, have been met.

"We often treat our relationships — which are like orchids — like a cactus, and then when inevitably the orchid wilts or has problems, we tend to think that there's something wrong with the orchid," he says.

To combat this issue, Palmiter recommends that each parent spend at least one hour a week — all at once or in segments — of one-on-one time with each child, spent doing nothing but paying attention to and expressing positive thoughts and feelings toward him or her.

"It literally works out to about .5 percent of the time in a week," he says. The most effective time for a parent to create those special moments is when the child is doing something that she or he can be praised for, such as building with Legos or shooting baskets. During that time, parents should avoid teaching, inquiring, sharing alternative perspectives or offering corrections.

Palmiter says many families he's recommended the strategy to over the years have told him that adding an hour of special time in addition to the quality time they spend with their children — such as attending a baseball game together — has significantly improved the parent-child relationship. In addition, a study published in January in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* shows that, particularly among younger children, a parent's demonstration of love, shown through nurturing behavior and expressions of support, can improve a child's brain development and lead to a significantly larger hippocampus, a brain component that plays a key role in cognition.

"The metaphor I use is, what an apple is to the physician — 'an apple a day keeps the doctor away' — special time is to the child psychologist," Palmiter says. ■

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How to prompt good behavior

Visit the *Monitor*'s digital edition: Dr. Alan E. Kazdin, director of the Yale Parenting Center, describes his research-based intervention on how to prompt good behavior in children: www.apa.org/monitor/digital/parentingtips.aspx. You can see more of Kazdin's research in action at www.alankazdin.com/press_room.htm.