

Playing the Numbers

WHEN IN DOUBT about how to handle a situation with a child, try counting. For example, you might say, “I’m going to count backward. Let’s see if you can get dressed before I reach zero.” This prompts quicker cooperation than simply stating, “We have to leave in five minutes; you better be ready.” For older children, count by fives or backward skipping every other number.

Numbers can help adults lighten a wide variety of situations that might otherwise end in power struggles or conflict. The success of the discipline system “1, 2, 3 Magic” reflects the idea that children imbue numerals and counting with a kind of mysterious power, at least when they are young. Counting how often particular behaviors actually occur can help parents and teachers hold on to a positive outlook. Wouldn’t it be nice to know that your children only disagreed twice in one day?

To energize and distract: See how many jumps it takes to get to the door or the car. Look for the numbers of animals or Halloween pumpkins you can locate on the way to school. See if you can find numbers on license plates and play a game taking turns naming them in sequence—one, two, three, four, five. Count the number of blue objects in a classroom.

To promote sibling harmony: Set a timer while children take turns. Think of a number between one and 10 and ask each child to guess—the child who gets closest to the number gets to go first. Arguing who got the largest piece of cake? Have children measure the pieces.

Count successes: “You hung up your coat four days this week.” Make a chart of going to bed on time or turning the TV off as soon as you ask (but ignore the times it didn’t happen). Put marbles in a jar every time your child cleans up promptly and count them together after a week.

Time positive communications: Some statistics say that adults only converse with children in a non-directive way a few minutes a day. Teachers and parents can get a sense of how often they engage in conversation with individual children by periodically writing down the length of time of interchanges that actually explore a topic. Talking about everything from the day’s events to current thoughts and feelings helps everyone feel closer.

Create a behavior curve: Are you offering praise when a child shows self-control but wondering if it’s working? Draw columns on a page and make a mark when you see the positive behaviors you want on one half and those you don’t want on the other. Which are increasing? Even tiny increments of change are important. This needn’t take a lot of time and has the benefit of making you feel successful.

Count out gratitude: Remember the expression “Count your lucky stars!” If your family notes all the moments, people, and things they are grateful for, the process will promote a feeling of abundance.

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