10 Tips for Parents of a Spirited Child

By Dr. Alan Kazdin

All of the following tips are based on this simple principle: Attention to bad behavior increases bad behavior (yelling, lecturing, scolding, spanking and punishing are all forms of negative attention), while attention to good behavior increases good behavior.

1) Notice good behavior and give attention to it. Anything you see that you want to happen more often -- let the child know you like it. Say, "You guys are doing so well playing together today! That's great!" Then go over and touch the child affectionately or give a high five. This will help make it happen more often.

2) Positive attention to good behavior can be a smile, a touch or praise -- or all three -- but do it right away and be specific about what it was the child did right every time. "Great job taking your dishes to the sink!" works better than "Great job!"
3) Instead of saying "stop" or "don't" when you see bad behavior, find the "positive opposite": Figure out what you do want the child to do instead. So "Don't leave your socks on the floor" becomes "Please put your socks in the hamper." If they comply, remember to praise them! "Wow, you did what I asked! You put your socks in the hamper!" You will have to say "stop" and "don't" once in a while -- that's normal -- but you will have to say it much less if you are praising the positive opposite.
4) Enthusiasm counts. Let them see how thrilled you are with their good behavior!

5) Start a reward system for a child who rarely does what you ask, but make a game of it. When you are both calm, tell him it is a game and practice giving a pretend request like "Please go to bed." Then give him

praise and a point when he goes the first time you ask him to. If he doesn't do what you ask the first time, say, "I can see you're not ready to do it right now, you don't earn a point right now, but we'll try again later." And they don't earn a point. If the child then turns around after you've said that and does what you asked, then praise her effusively, but don't give her a point. You want to get the child used to doing what you ask on the first try. The key is practice and role play. Give him a reward point for doing a successful pretend. Show him the rewards he can earn by doing what you ask right away without complaint. Rewards can be anything a child really wants, and don't always cost money. Maybe they get an extra story at bedtime or get to go shopping with mom. Once your child can successfully earn a reward during pretend, then he/she is ready to use the reward system for real. Be sure to give the rewards immediately and frequently in the beginning, (especially with 2-3 year olds). Once your child is earning the rewards and following through with the rule then start to wean them off the rewards (instead of immediately then move to one time per day, then every two days, etc.).

6) Give an instruction only once. Don't foster greater disobedience by giving it a lot of attention. If you focus on their defiance, it will actually increase.

7) Learn to ignore -- or actually walk away -- from annoying behavior. When you stop giving attention to annoying behavior, there's nothing in it for the child. When you first start doing it, your child may actually throw even more tantrums -- because they're upset that their usual way of getting what they want isn't working. Eventually they will see that it doesn't work anymore.

8) Your goal in a tantrum is to get past it. Stay calm yourself and your child will calm down faster.

9) When you must punish, make it a brief and don't delay it. Don't add punishment if the child complains. If they can't or won't do time out,

take away a toy or privilege for a specified time. Longer and harsher punishment doesn't make it more effective.

10) Above all, put tip No. 1 into practice. Ideally, you should be praising your child's behavior 90 percent of the time and punishing only 10 percent of the time. Notice your child's good behavior and give it positive attention. They will do more of it. Change your behavior and your child will change theirs!