

The
**CHALLENGING
CHILD TOOLKIT**



THE 7 STEP APPROACH
TO MORE COOPERATION AND
BETTER COMMUNICATION

 | DR. TIMOTHY DAVIS

The Challenging Child Toolkit:

The 7 Step Approach to More Cooperation and Better Communication.

By Dr. Timothy Davis

Having a challenging child is a sometimes wonderful, often stressful experience. It's exhausting to deal with a child who won't listen, won't cooperate, argues, is disrespectful, defiant, throws tantrums, and resists virtually every limit you try to set.

You're not alone. As a father of three and as a psychologist with over twenty years of experience, I know how heart-wrenching these conflicts can be. Because I've been there – wiped out, at the end of my rope and losing my cool with a child who won't cooperate – I know you need help now!

This tip sheet lays out actionable steps to put in place right away. Your child is very fortunate to have a dedicated parent like who striving to learn and grow as a parent in order to make a better life for your whole family.



Tool #1: Understanding

STEP 1: Understand that your child is doing the best he can.

A cycle of tantrums, meltdowns and struggles *feels* like it is caused by your child's *willfulness* when it is really caused by his lack of *skillfulness*.

Challenging kids frequently are behind their peers in developing the ***executive functioning*** and ***self-regulation*** skills needed to avoid power struggles.

It might not seem like it, but your child wants to get along well with you just as much as you want to get along well with him. He just doesn't have the skills.

It's not your fault. You aren't a bad parent. It's not his fault. He's not a bad kid. Let go of blame and focus on building your son's skills for managing challenging situations.



Tool #2: Parenting Journal

STEP 2: Start a Parenting Journal.

Start a journal and use it to keep a record of each time your child has a tantrum, explosion, power struggle, etc...

Write about each event in as much detail as possible:

What happened in the moments leading up to it?

What did your child do?

How did you react?

What did you both feel afterwards?

Your parenting journal entries will provide the data that you will need to identify your child's triggers.



Tool #3: Know your Child's Triggers

STEP 3: Examine the entries in your parenting journal to discover your child's triggers.

With a challenging child, it can feel like you have to be on alert for an explosion 24/7/365. It's exhausting!

Fortunately, power struggles, tantrums, meltdowns and explosions typically follow predictable patterns and are caused by specific circumstances, referred to as ***triggers***.

If you know your child's triggers, you can relax when they are not present.

Knowing your child's triggers will tell you what situations to avoid, when to be on alert that a power struggle is likely, and what skills your child needs to develop in order to better handle challenging situations.



Examples of triggers for all kids: (remember “HATS”)

Hungry

Angry/**A**nxious

Tired

Sick

Other common triggers:

- Transitions (e.g., Being asked to stop playing a video game, Getting ready for school)
- Homework
- Being told “no”
- Sensory sensitivities (e.g., loud noises, itchy clothes)
- Parents stressed by work or other concerns
- Lack of structure



Tool #4: Have an Emergency Plan

STEP 4: Develop and Emergency Plan.

Knowing your child's triggers, enables you to make an emergency plan for dealing with struggles, tantrums and explosions when they arise.

A good emergency plan has two parts:

1) Tools to help you stay calm in the heat of the moment.

Deep abdominal breathing

Repeating a calming mantra to yourself like “he’s not opposing me, he’s showing me he doesn’t have the skills to handle this situation.”

2) Predetermined actions you will take to deal with a power struggle once it occurs.

Giving yourself a “parent time out” where you disengage from your child to give you both a chance to calm down.



(Predetermined actions continued)

Listening empathically to what your child is upset about (no matter how trivial, or unreasonable it may seem) and reflecting your understanding back to your child.

Deciding in advance what the consequences will be for misbehavior (consequences thought up in the moment tend to be too harsh and/or unenforceable).



Tool #5: Have a Discipline Strategy

STEP 5: Decide on the Discipline Strategy that is right for you and your child

Although, “discipline” is commonly used to mean “punishment.” Discipline really is about teaching your child the skills he needs to get along in life.

All child discipline approaches fall into one of three categories: *limit setting*, *positive reinforcement*, and *emotion focus* based on the assumptions and methods used to teach skills.

Limit Setting

Key Assumption: children get anxious and misbehave when parents aren't in charge.

Parents take charge by setting clear limits that they consistently enforce.

Positive Reinforcement:

Key Assumption: It is more effective to reward kids for behaving well than to punish them for behaving badly.



Positive reinforcement has the advantage of being “win-win.” Parents get the cooperation they want. Kids get the rewards they want.

Emotion Focus:

Key Assumption: How a child *feels* determines how he will *behave*.

Bad behavior is seen as a sign that a child is feeling something “bad” – anger, frustration, guilt, shame.

Cooperation is established through soothing the bad feelings that lie behind misbehavior.

Emotion focused parents seek first to understand and validate their child's feelings *before* attempting to limit or re-direct the child's behavior.



All three approaches teach children important skills (controlling your impulses, working towards a goal, knowing your feelings, etc...).

Chose the approach (or combination of approaches) that best enables you to handle struggles and misbehavior in a calm and respectful manner.

Resources for choosing a discipline strategy:

Limit Setting:

1-2-3 Magic by Thomas Phelan

Positive Reinforcement:

The Kazdin Method for Parenting the Defiant Child, by Alan Kazdin

Emotion Focused:

How to Talk So Kids Will Listen, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish



Tool #6: Nurture a Positive Relationship

STEP 6: Work on your relationship with your child.

The most powerful part of your plan is a commitment to take daily actions to nurture a positive, affirming relationship with your child.

Children feel better about themselves and listen more when parents consistently engage them in positive ways.

Parent-child relationships which are consistently positive nurture the development of self-esteem, self confidence, and resilience.

Positive expressions to cultivate include:

- listening
- treating your child with respect
- being accepting
- taking your child's feelings seriously
- being affectionate
- being appreciative
- celebrating success
- laughing together
- playing together
- spending time together



Tool #7: Reduce Your Stress

STEP 7: Take care of yourself.

Stress creates impatience, inattention, and irritability in us which negatively impacts our children.

Stress causes problems in marriages. Problems in the parents' marriage are a major cause of misbehavior.

Taking time to care for yourself isn't selfish, it's what your kids need.

Here are some great stress busters that take 10 minutes or less

Do the 7-minute work out created by exercise physiologists for maximum benefit in minimum time. (Search YouTube for “7-minute workout”)

Do another brief work out (climb stairs, 10 min. of yoga)

Listen to a self-hypnosis relaxation recording



Stress busters continued

Take time for gratitude. Write in your parenting journal about the things that you are grateful for in your life and especially *in your relationship with your child.*

Take 10 minutes to read or watch something humorous, inspiring, or relaxing.

Take a 10 minute power nap.



Putting it All Together

You've learned a lot and are well on the way to solving your problems with your challenging child!

You learned that your struggles are the result of your child's lack of *skillfulness* rather than his *willfulness*.

You learned his triggers.

You have an emergency plan for dealing with your child when he is triggered.

You have decided on the discipline strategy that you will use to help your child develop greater executive skills.

You also have plans for nurturing your relationship with your child and for taking better care of yourself.



As you implement your plan, record the results in your parenting journal. You will find that certain aspects work well and that others need revising.

Parenting any child is an ongoing, day-by-day process of increasing your understanding of your child, yourself, and how to bring out the best in each other.

All my best to you and your family.

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