

# Solutions

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## Parenting with 1-2-3 Magic

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FAMILY SERVICE EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS



### Could Your Parenting Use a Little Magic?

“The children are our future.” It’s a beautiful sentiment, and probably true...but what drives most of us parents crazy is what our children are doing in the present. If we’re being honest, we’ve all had at least one parenting moment when our “Inner Parenting Critic” says: “You have no idea what to do right now, do you?!” With all of the parenting books, shows, and helpful advice from our own parents and grandparents; our kids’ teachers; the yoga instructor; and even complete strangers (let’s face it -- everyone has an opinion), it can leave even the most confident parent reeling. Some simplicity, and clarity please!

Enter Dr. Thomas Phelan, and his 1-2-3 Magic approach to parenting. It consists of only a few core components, and even if you only get to know the first one - “How to deal with undesirable behaviour” - you’ll be surprised by the positive difference it can make in the life of your family.

In the spirit of keeping things streamlined, I am only going to discuss the first component. For a description of the program in its entirety, please refer to the source book;

**“1-2-3 Magic:  
Effective Discipline for Children 2-12”  
by Thomas W. Phelan**

According to 1-2-3 Magic the two biggest mistakes parents make when dealing with their children’s unwanted behaviour is:

- 1) Talking too much, and
- 2) Letting emotions enter into the situation.

It is so easy as a parent to shift into “Lecture” mode, or “Explanation” mode, when ACTION is what’s required. The fact is 9 times out of 10 kids know that what they are doing is wrong, and they know why it’s wrong. We can save both our time and theirs by cutting to the chase and invoking a consequence without further discussion.

Emotions can also run things off the rails very quickly. The majority of the time when anger gets the better of us with our kids it ends up being painful for them, and we end up feeling sorry and regretful. Dr. Phelan sees our angry parenting outbursts not as discipline strategies but as “Adult Temper Tantrums”.

“So great!” you say, “I’m not supposed to talk much, and I shouldn’t get angry when I’m disciplining my kids. But... how!”

This is where the *1-2-3 Magic* part comes in. What’s needed is a simple script, something easy that a parent can fall back on when they are too tired or angry to think very much. Here it is, when your child does something they shouldn’t --don’t explain, don’t lecture, and don’t rant... just say “That’s one”. Then wait a few seconds. If they keep doing what they aren’t supposed to do then say “That’s two”. If they still don’t stop you say “That’s three, time-out.” And the key is you say all of this with a calm, level voice. It’s much easier to keep the strong emotions out of the equation if you have a script you can run with. After the time-out is over, everything continues on as if nothing ever happened. That’s it!

I should add that there are times when the child genuinely is not sure why their actions are wrong. If this is the case by all means provide a brief explanation - emphasis on brief - before and/or after the time-out, but only if an explanation is absolutely necessary. One question I immediately had when I first encountered this approach was: why give them so many chances? Dr. Phelan addresses this by saying that giving kids a few chances allows them to practice controlling their own behaviour, and encourages good decision-making. Makes sense!

As a parent of young children I’m painfully aware of the complexity involved in the job, but you’d be surprised at the number of situations this very simple approach can work in. Sure, there are lots of particularly tricky scenes, like when you’re in public, or when you’re in the car, etc., and many of these scenarios are dealt with in the book; but don’t let these complexities discourage you. The fact is, less talk, less emotion... and more *action* is almost always a good thing when it comes to disciplining younger children.

So now, when the “Inner Parenting Critic” starts chattering inside your head, you can talk back. Start by saying, “That’s one...that’s two...”, and end by giving it a much deserved time out!

#### Other helpful links:

View the following websites for information about parenting activities in your area;

Parents Canada:

<http://www.parentscanada.com/>

For events and more information, visit Today’s Parents:

<http://www.todaysparent.com/>

**fseap peterborough** offers confidential professional assistance on a wide variety of personal and work-related issues. For information and assistance from your EAP, call:

**705.742.4258**