

Build a Parenting Tool Kit
Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.
Today Contributor

After three decades of working with kids and their families I've learned a few tried and true rules of family human nature. One of the most important is that parents need to step up to the plate and to take control of misbehavior, regardless of whether the kids will be happy with their actions. Parents have the right, and the responsibility, to discipline effectively in a loving, involved manner. Too often, though, I see moms and dads who are inconsistent, who use consequences that are not intense enough to have meaning to their children. Putting a seven-year-old in time-out for seven minutes is probably a waste of time—a longer period is often necessary to bore the youngster into considering changing their attitude or their actions. Taking away a possession for a day or even a week is usually water off a duck's back—kids can adjust to temporary losses, and usually move on to the next toy or video game until the object is returned.

I've found several objects, most of which can be purchased at your local drug store, that can be helpful tools in your quest to become a more effective parent and disciplinarian. Let's take a look at a few of these:

- **Refrigerator magnet, treats, glass jar** (about \$10)—use the magnet to post a “smiley face sheet” on the front of the refrigerator. Draw three smiley's on the sheet, and tell your child that every time he or she misbehaves significantly (doesn't do as told when told, talks back, fights with sibling) that one of the three smileys will be crossed out. In the morning, put three treats (candy, dollar store prize, IOU to play a board game with the child, IOU for extra TV time, poker chip as described below) in the glass jar (with the child's name on it). Every time that the child loses **all three** smiley faces you can remove one of the treats from the jar and put it away. I would also suggest that the child go to time-out following loss of all three smileys. When the kid comes out of time-out, put up a new smiley face chart and work the system again. Three smileys lost, and another treat is taken away, and another stint in time-out! Hopefully that's all the smiley's lost, and the child receives all of the treats that are left in the jar toward bedtime. So, if you started with three treats in the jar and one was lost then the child receives two treats around bedtime. If two treats were lost, then only one treat is earned, and if all three treats were lost the child receives no rewards. Try it...works like a charm! Check out the tips below to use in conjunction with this system.
- **Digital timer** (about \$6)—if your children are pokey at times, set the timer and have them play “beat the buzzer”. This is great to use to quickly get them dressed in the morning for school, to turn off the computer and begin to set the table, to get off of the phone or to begin or complete their homework. A timer takes the gray area out of your requests. There is now a time limit and if the child does not beat the buzzer then a negative consequence (loss of a privilege, loss of a smiley face if a charting system is being employed, or five minutes earlier bedtime imposed) should follow. Timers turn “now” into NOW—not “at the next commercial break” or “whenever I feel like doing it”.

- **Poker chips** (about \$4 for a pack of red, white and blue chips)—I strongly believe that kids should earn their privileges (money, extra clothing, and special activities) and not be given these just for existing. That's how we teach them good work ethic! Consider having them earn the chips daily for good behavior, attitude and chore accomplishment. The red chips can be used as a money allowance system to be saved up to purchase toys, CDs, DVDs—anything that the child is allowed to own, but now they will have to save up and pay for the object themselves. The value of the red allowance chip can be worth 50 cents to \$5 a day—depending upon the age of the child, the family's finances and what is appropriate for your social environment. The blue chip can be used to save and purchase clothing. Some families use it for extra or special clothing requests, and mom and dad purchase the bulk of the child's wardrobe. Other folks up the ante and place a greater dollar value on the blue chips—but the child must buy most of their clothing. If a foolish purchase was made and too much money spent on the designer jeans, the kid will learn to budget for the next item that she desires. It's a great way to teach real world financial planning, especially if the parent does not bail the child out with loans or slipping her a \$20 bill! The white chips can be used to save up for privileges—driving through McDonalds for a treat after school, earning extra computer/internet/TV time, renting a video, going to Build-A-Bear, having two friends spend the night, etc. Many of these activities are just given to kids, but in my opinion they need to earn these extras by cooperating with parental requests, completing homework in a timely manner, and being pleasant in the home environment.
- **Disposable video camera** (about \$30 at CVS pharmacy)—a really great find as well as an addition to your parenting tool kit. This beauty is so small that it can easily fit into a car glove compartment, kitchen drawer, or better yet—Mom's purse. It has 20 minutes of audio/video time but “segments” can be taped and deleted as you desire. Most parents that I've seen use this camcorder are able to get a few years of use out of it, before the battery runs out. Catch the kid throwing the mother of all meltdowns—usually they stop the tantrum if they see that they are being recorded. Afterward, have them view the video—pretty embarrassing stuff and usually an eye-opener. If just taping their fight/tease fest, meltdown, or ornery behavior doesn't seem to get their attention, consider showing the segment to Grandma or Grandpa. Most kids cherish the special relationship that they have with their grandparents, and would not want to tarnish it by letting grandparents see their nasty side. It does work, and it does give the child the chance to make the choice—“Settle down or I'll tape your behavior and show it to Grandma”. Many commercial grade tantrumers suddenly gain self-control when they decide that the fussing is not worth upsetting grandparents, the neighbor kid's mom, or even their teacher!
- **Paper shredder** (about \$30)—you probably already have one of these in your home and use it to shred paper and unnecessary charge cards. Well, consider another use for these dynamic machines—shredding CDs or DVDs. Sound a little harsh? Yes, it definitely is. But it can be an intense and very effective disciplinary tool that is fair if used appropriately. With many of my families we set up rules regarding appropriate behavior, chore/homework completion, and general

attitude. If a few of these are broken on a daily basis, it's no big deal. If the child is just not trying, then we take away the poker chips noted above, and possibly suspend electronics usage (TV, computer, video games, and telephone) and outside play (including swimming) for 24 hours. If that doesn't work, and it's obvious that the child can behave better but just isn't motivated to do so, then we move on to the big guns! If there's gross misbehavior (physical aggression, disruptive in school, too many smiley faces lost, or too many bad points earned on a home behavior management system) then the child's favorite CD or DVD can be put through the shredder. Of course the kid will be angry—but it was **their** choice to misbehave in the first place! As long as the rules are clear, consistent and your children are capable of success, then this consequence is fair. It is their choice to lose the smiley, or to get a bad point, as well as to lose the poker chips if the misbehavior continues, or even to have a DVD shredded. Remember, it's **their** choice and all that you are doing is being consistent with the rules that have been established!

- **Masking tape** (about \$2)—tired of putting your child in time-out and having to constantly tell him to “get back in the corner?” It usually starts with a foot moving out of the corner area, and then a leg, and finally you see him inching his way down the wall. I've found that making the time-out situation more black-and-white (again, try to stay away from those pesky gray areas!) is generally more effective. Take a roll of masking tape and make a “box” on the floor (shouldn't damage the carpet, tile or even wood). Tell your child to stay “in the box”, and that if he doesn't, he'll lose a privilege or even a possession (shred a DVD or take a toy away permanently (thrown in the outside trash or given to charity—whichever is more effective)). The masking tape box seems to keep kids in time-out much better than just sitting in the corner, or on a chair or bottom step. And, use the digital timer to let him know when to come out—if the child leaves the “box” before the buzzer goes off, then set it again from the beginning or use another consequence such as loss of a privilege (TV time later in the day) or loss of a possession.

There are many other tips and techniques to be placed in the parent's tool box, but hopefully these few inexpensive ones will help you to become a more effective disciplinarian!