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Kids Behaving Badly

All children embarrass us or are rude at times. It's one thing being able to manage this at home but another to deal with it in public. So what's the best way to handle things when, for example, your child says something charming like 'I hate you' or 'That lady's ugly' loudly enough for everyone to hear? The 1-2-3 Magic technique is a good strategy to use for children aged 2-12.

First you need to decide what behaviours are unacceptable and let your child know, so when they launch into it you start counting. "Jack that's 1" and indicate with your finger. Count to 10 under your breath if the behaviour continues. Still behaving badly? "Jack that's 2" and count to 10 again. Hasn't stopped? "Jack that's 3." At this point you need to put your child on time out for a few minutes.

The 10-second countdown is designed to be non-threatening and allow your child the option to decide for themselves to stop what they're doing. We need to teach our children how to use their own internal brake rather than relying on parents to do the stopping.

Once you have practised the technique at home, it's time to try it in public. Start by telling your child exactly what behaviour you are expecting. I know they know exactly how to behave, but tell them anyway. Spell it out along these lines... "When we go to the shops, I want you to stay beside me and I want you to use language that is friendly and respectful. That means no words like 'hate', 'ugly' and 'stupid'. These are not acceptable." If the banned behaviour starts, use your counting and, if you reach step 3, then you need a place for time out. This could be in the toilets or back in the car.

Recently I watched a parent calmly and confidently using 1-2-3 Magic with a whingeing older child. She counted to 1 and the whingeing stopped immediately. I also saw a parent use it inappropriately. Mum asked a three-year-old to put their shoes on. The child said "no". Mum immediately said: "Put your shoes on or I will smack you!" The toddler looked at her long and hard and said "no" as three-year-olds do. Mum moved into the counting with a "that's 1, that's 2, that's 3" in rapid succession. Mum didn't notice the child smiling at her as all this unfolded.

She lost control of the situation and became annoyed and the shoes still didn't end up on any feet. Mum could've bypassed this situation by counting the 1-2-3 Magic in the manner in which it was designed (with 10-second intervals). If the child still refused, it would then have been time to pick her up calmly and leave for time out.

To find out more about how you can use the 1-2-3 Magic technique effectively, book an appointment with child psychologist Nicole Pierotti or go to www.parentshop.com.au.