

REVISED 4th EDITION

25th
ANNIVERSARY

1-2-3 Magic

Effective
Discipline
for
Children 2-12



Winner of the
National
Parenting Publications
Gold Award

*"It's time for my yearly thank you. Four years ago,
my therapist recommended your book. 1-2-3 Magic
saved my marriage and my sanity."*

— Tanya Boone-Alva, Sonoma County, California

THOMAS W. PHELAN, Ph.D.

MORE THAN 1,250,000 COPIES SOLD!

1-2-3 Magic

A humorous look at parenting, a
serious look at discipline.

Here's what people are saying:

Thank you for all you do!

"I am a school social worker and I recommend 1-2-3 Magic to ALL parents with whom I work. It is without doubt the very best in parenting strategies!"

This book is like oxygen.

"Neither my wife nor I knew how to discipline our two year old. A toddler was running our house and our lives. Being out of ideas seemed like being out of oxygen and we were squirming—until 1-2-3 Magic was loaned to us."

Mental health professional: Best discipline system, period.

"As a mental health professional for over 16 years, I've found 1-2-3 Magic to be the most powerful method of managing kids ages 2-12 years that I've ever come across. I've been recommending it to my clients for over 7 years and for many of them it really does work like magic. Down-to-earth, straight-forward, humorous and practical, 1-2-3 Magic is truly a godsend for kids and families."

Happy Grandparent.

"I am thrilled with 1-2-3 Magic. I am raising my grandson who is ADD and ODD. I wish I had had it when I was raising his mother! It would have saved me a lot of heartache."

Not just for the kids.

"In my opinion, it is just as much for cooling off the parents as directing the kids. Using 1-2-3 Magic gives me a recourse against my own frustrations."

Hospitals should send this home with EVERY BABY!!!!

"This is the best book about raising children without anger or frustration. It changed me from a screaming out-of-control mom to a much calmer and in control"

mom. Now people compliment me on how well-behaved my girls are and how polite we are to each other.”

An end to yelling and arguing!

“This book and the 1-2-3 program were a lifesaver for our family. Our older son is very willful and would argue and fight and throw fits over anything and everything that he didn’t like. Giving him a time-out or taking away a privilege used to turn into an hour-long battle. With this program, he quickly learned that we meant business and there was no point to arguing.”

A preschool/daycare must!

“This book is a must-have for any childcare facility. We have been using 1-2-3 Magic for many years and IT WORKS! We did a workshop for the parents and had nothing but positive responses. One four-year old could not believe that her mom knew the same tricks as her teachers.”

Thank you for giving us back our family.

“When I started researching child rearing approaches, I was really green. But after this last year, I feel quite comfortable saying that your approach is the only one that works.”

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1-2-3 Magic

Fourth Edition

Thomas W. Phelan, Ph.D.

ParentMagic, Inc.
Glen Ellyn, Illinois

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Contents

Preface to the Fourth Edition

Introduction

Job Available: Long Hours, No Pay, Excellent Benefits

PART I: THINKING STRAIGHT

1. Orientation to The Parenting Profession
2. Your Three Parenting Jobs
3. The Little Adult Assumption
4. The Two Biggest Discipline Mistakes

PART II: CONTROLLING OBNOXIOUS BEHAVIOR (Job #1)

5. Counting: Simple But Not Easy!
6. Frequently Asked Questions
7. Out in Public
8. Sibling Rivalry, Tantrums and Pouting
9. Getting Started with Counting

PART III: MANAGING KIDS' TESTING AND MANIPULATION

10. The Six Types of Testing and Manipulation
11. Counting in Action
12. More Serious Problems in Tweens

PART IV: ENCOURAGING GOOD BEHAVIOR (Job #2)

13. Establishing Positive Routines
14. Up and Out in the Morning
15. Cleaning Up and Chores
16. Suppertime
17. Homework
18. Going to Bed – And Staying There!

PART V: STRENGTHENING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILDREN (Job #3)

- 19. Sympathetic Listening
- 20. Real Magic: One-on-One Fun
- 21. When Can You Talk?
- 22. Solving Problems Together
- 23. Kids, Tweens and Tech

PART VI: ENJOYING YOUR NEW FAMILY LIFE

- 24. Staying on the Wagon
- 25. Your New Life

Appendix: Further Readings & Resources

Index

1-2-3 Magic Stories and Comments



Preface to the 4th Edition of 1-2-3 Magic

1-2-3 Magic is a simple, precise and effective way of managing—gently and firmly—the behavior of children in approximately the two-to-twelve-year-old age range. It is not magic. The reason for our unusual title is that so many parents, teachers and other child caretakers have said, “It works like magic!” *1-2-3 Magic* certainly does work if you do it correctly, which means following a few basic rules. The 1-2-3 is what you might call a “parents-in-charge” strategy, but no arguing, yelling or spanking is allowed. Raising kids is *unexpectedly hard*, and it really, really helps to know what you’re doing.

If you are raising young children, *1-2-3 Magic* might be your ticket to effective and enjoyable parenting for several reasons:

1. The book has sold over *1,250,000 copies*.
2. *1-2-3 Magic* has been translated into 20 languages.
3. Over the last several years, the 3rd Edition has consistently been the *#1 child discipline book* on Amazon.com.
4. The program is *dad-friendly*.
5. It’s evidence-based—that means *it works*.

For Best Results

This Fourth Edition of *1-2-3 Magic* describes straightforward methods for managing the behavior of children from the ages of approximately two to twelve, whether they’re average or special needs kids. You can actually start at about 18 months with a typically developing youngster. To get the best results, keep in mind the following:

1. The strategies should be used exactly as they are described here, especially with regard to the No-Talking and No-Emotion Rules.

2. If both parents are living at home, ideally both adults should use the program. If one parent refuses to use *1-2-3 Magic*, however, the other parent can still use it on his or her own (while hoping, of course, that their partner or spouse is doing something reasonable with the kids).
3. Single, separated and divorced parents can use our methods effectively by themselves. It is preferable if all parents—even if they are in different locations—are using the same program, but that isn't always possible. In fact, single parents greatly benefit from a simple and effective system like the "1-2-3." If you are parenting on your own, you are very likely to feel overloaded, and you don't have a lot of time to spend learning discipline programs. Also, because you're by yourself, you cannot afford to be inefficient when it comes to managing your children. You only have so much energy!
4. Grandparents, babysitters and other caregivers have also found the 1-2-3 very helpful in managing young children. Actually, many grandparents first discovered *1-2-3 Magic* on their own and then shared it with their children. In addition, we hear more and more these days that grandparents are raising their grandchildren themselves, and these adults often find *1-2-3 Magic* to be a lifesaver.
5. Make sure your kids are in good physical health. It is a well-known fact that illness, allergies and physical pain can aggravate both behavioral and emotional problems in children. Regular physical exams for the kids are of critical importance. It's also important to know and respect your children's natural daily rhythms regarding food, sleep and bathroom. A child who missed a nap, who feels hungry or who has to go to the bathroom can be much more challenging.



Quik Tip

If you are parenting on your own, you are very likely to feel overloaded, and you don't have a lot of time to spend learning discipline programs. Also because you're by yourself, you cannot afford to be inefficient when it comes to managing your children. You only have so much energy!

Psychological Evaluation and Counseling

When in the process of using *1-2-3 Magic*, is it necessary to get a mental health professional involved?

Psychological evaluation and counseling are indicated *before* using *1-2-3 Magic* if any child has a history of excessive separation anxiety, physical violence or extremely self-punitive behavior. These children can be very difficult to manage during the initial testing period when they are still adjusting to the new discipline.

If your family is *currently* in counseling, this program should be discussed with the counselor before you use it. If your counselor is not familiar with *1-2-3 Magic*, take a copy of the book, DVD or audio CD for him or her to become familiar with.

Psychological evaluation and counseling are indicated *after* using *1-2-3 Magic* if:

1. Marital instability or conflict are interfering with the effective use of the methods. *1-2-3 Magic* is normally an excellent way to get Mom and Dad “on the same page” in dealing with the kids. Sometimes just a few counseling sessions can help right the ship.
2. One or both parents are incapable of following the No-Talking and No-Emotion Rules (see [Chapter 3](#)). Life stressors, as well as problems such as anxiety and depression, can make it hard for some parents to calm down enough to effectively use *1-2-3 Magic*. Drug and alcohol use can also make moms and dads volatile, obnoxious and ineffective.
3. Behavior problems, as well as testing and manipulation by the child, are continuing at too high a level for more than three weeks after starting the program. Your child was hard to manage before *1-2-3 Magic*. Now he’s better, but you still feel managing him is too much of a grind. Check it out with a professional.
4. Trust your instincts. Here’s a good rule of thumb: If you have been worrying about a particular problem in your child *for more than six months*, that’s too long. See a mental health professional and find out if there is, in fact, something wrong. If there is, try to fix it or learn how to manage it. If there’s nothing wrong, stop worrying.

Serious psychological and behavioral problems in young children frequently include persistent difficulties with the following:

- Paying attention or sitting still
- Language development, social interaction, and restricted interests
- Negative, hostile and defiant behavior
- Excessive worrying or unusual anxiety about separation
- Loss of interest in fun activities and irritability
- Excessive verbal and physical aggression

- Disregard for age-appropriate norms and rules
- Unexpected learning difficulties

What's New in the Fourth Edition?

The Fourth Edition of *1-2-3 Magic* has many changes. These changes reflect our own opinions about what should be different, but they also include over three dozen ideas that came from our readers, viewers, listeners and other clients. The changes include:

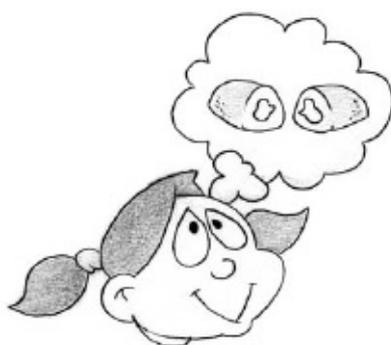
1. A new, more thorough, easier-to-use Index
2. A new Appendix for further reading. In order to keep *1-2-3 Magic* simple and easy to learn, we have not elaborated on certain topics. These topics are listed, and further readings for each are suggested, in the new Appendix.
3. New illustrations (over 90 percent of them).
4. Reorganized parts and new chapters: The old chapter on Stop Behavior and Start Behavior has been included in the new chapter, Your Three Parenting Jobs. The Kickoff Conversation and how to get started have been clarified for each of the three parenting jobs. The Family Meetings is now part of [Chapter 22](#), Solving Problems Together, and [Chapter 21](#), When Can You Talk?, has been expanded. [Chapter 24](#), Staying on the Wagon, is mostly new, and several chapters in [Part IV](#) have new names.
5. Tweens (nine-to-twelve-year-olds) and the issue of kids and technology are on everyone's minds these days. Information relevant to tweens has been included in [Chapters 12](#), More Serious Problems in Tweens, and also in [Chapter 23](#), Kids, Tweens and Tech, which examines our kids' use of cell phones, computers, texting, social networking and so on. As always, we make specific recommendations for handling these situations, some of which may surprise you!
6. People have often asked what the relationship is between *1-2-3 Magic* and emotional intelligence. The critical skill of frustration tolerance, encouraged by counting (Parenting Job #1), plus the relationship-strengthening strategies of Parenting Job #3 (especially sympathetic listening) are a large part of what emotional intelligence is all about. Explanations to this effect are included throughout the book.



Key Concept

The critical skill of frustration tolerance is encouraged by counting (Parenting Job #1). This, plus the relationship strengthening strategies of Parenting Job #3, is a large part of what emotional intelligence is all about.

Our goal for *1-2-3 Magic* is to make a dramatic and positive difference—in a fairly short period of time—in the lives of the parents and other caretakers who use our program, and also in the lives of the children these folks are responsible for. We know you love your kids, but for many reasons it is critically important that you also like and enjoy your children—every day.



Job Available: Long Hours, No Pay Excellent Benefits

Parenting is not for the faint of heart.

“Can I have a Twinkie?”

“No, dear.”

“Why not?”

“Cause we’re eating at six o’clock.”

“Yeah, but I want one.”

“I just told you you couldn’t have one.”

“You never give me anything.”

“What do you mean I never give you anything? Do you have clothes on? Is there a roof over your head? Am I feeding you in two seconds?!”

“You gave Joey one a half-hour ago.”

“Listen, are you your brother? Besides, *he* eats his dinner.”

“I promise I’ll eat my dinner.”

“Don’t give me this promise, promise, promise stuff, Monica! Yesterday—at 4:30—you had half a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and you didn’t eat anything at dinner!”

“THEN I’M GOING TO KILL MYSELF AND THEN RUN AWAY FROM HOME!!”

Welcome to 1-2-3 Magic

Parenting is one of the most important jobs in the world, and it can also be one of life’s most enjoyable experiences. Small children are engaging, affectionate, entertaining, curious, full of life and fun to be around. For many adults, parenting provides profound and unique benefits unequalled by any

other area of life.

Yet being a mom or a dad can also be unbelievably frustrating if you don't quite know what you're doing. Repeat the Twinkie scene above a thousand times and you have guaranteed misery. In extreme but all-too-common situations, that misery can become the source of emotional and physical abuse. That's no way for anyone—child or adult—to live.

Children don't come with a How-To-Raise-Me Training Manual. That's why there is a program like *1-2-3 Magic*. The 1-2-3 program is currently being used all over the world by millions of parents (single and divorced), teachers, grandparents, day care centers, babysitters, summer camp counselors, hospital staff and other child caretakers.

The "1-2-3" is also being taught and recommended by thousands of mental health professionals and pediatricians. At parent-teacher conferences, teachers recommend *1-2-3 Magic* to the parents of their students (and sometimes parents recommend *1-2-3 Magic for Teachers* to the teachers!).

Why all the enthusiasm? As one parent put it, "*1-2-3 Magic* was easy to learn and it gave me results. I went back to enjoying my kids and being the kind of mother I knew I could be." Now, at the 25th anniversary of the program, we're hearing from parents who say, "My kids were great kids and now they're nice adults. We enjoy being with them."

1-2-3 Magic helps children grow up to be self-disciplined adults who are competent, happy and able to get along with others. In other words, it helps produce emotionally intelligent people—people who can manage their own feelings as well as understand and respond to the emotions of others.

The methods described in this book are easy to master and *you can start the program right away*. Depending on whether you use the book, audio CD or two DVDs, the technique takes about 3-4 hours to learn. You do not have to be a saint, genius or professional psychotherapist to use the 1-2-3 properly.

How to Get Started

When you finish learning the *1-2-3 Magic* program—whether in book, DVD or audio format—it is a good idea to start immediately. Make sure you understand all three parenting jobs. Talk with your spouse or partner, if both of you are living at home, and then get going right away. If you are a single parent, take a deep breath and then explain the drill to your youngsters. Do the same thing if you're a grandparent. If you don't start right away, you may never get around to it.

Exactly how you start depends on how much energy you have. If you feel like you're barely hanging on by your fingernails, you might want to start with only counting (Parenting Job #1). Then add the good behavior and relationship parts after you're more in control and the kids know you mean business.

If you have more energy, begin with a combination of counting ([Chapter 5](#)) and shared fun ([Chapter 20](#)). More energetic than that? Start with counting, daily praise and shared fun. See [Chapter 9](#) for more suggestions on getting started with Kickoff Conversations.



Quik Tip

Exactly how you start depends on how much energy you have. If you feel like you're barely hanging on by your fingernails, you might want to start with only counting. Then add the good behavior and relationship steps after the kids know you mean business.

After learning *1-2-3 Magic*, you will know exactly what to do, what not to do, what to say and what not to say in just about every one of the common, everyday problem situations you run into with your kids. Because *1-2-3 Magic* is based on only a few basic but critical principles, you will not only be able to remember what to do, *you will be able to do it when you are anxious, agitated or otherwise upset* (which for many of us parents is every day!). You will also be able to be a kind-but-effective parent when you are busy, in a hurry or otherwise preoccupied.

If you are a mental health professional or pediatrician, suggest that your clients or patients get a copy of the *1-2-3 Magic* book at their local bookstore. Or you can provide them with a copy of the book, DVDs or audio CD. If it's the DVD, make sure you get a deposit or credit card swipe, or else—sooner or later—you'll never see the DVD again!

What to Expect When You Begin the 1-2-3

When you do start *1-2-3 Magic*, things will change quickly. But there is good news and bad news. The good news is that initially about half of all kids will fall into the “immediate cooperators” category. You start the program and they cooperate right away—sometimes “just like magic.” What do you do? Just relax and enjoy your good fortune!

The bad news is that the other half of the kids will fall into the “immediate tester” category. These children will get worse first. They will challenge you to see if you really mean business with your new parenting ideas (see [Chapter 10](#), The Six Types of Testing and Manipulation). If you stick to your guns,

however—no arguing, yelling or hitting—you will get the vast majority of these little testers shaped up pretty well in about a week to ten days. Then what do you do? You start enjoying your children again.

Believe it or not, you may soon have a much more peaceful home and more enjoyable kids. You will go back to liking and respecting yourself as a parent—all in the foreseeable future!

Before we get into the details of the 1-2-3 and Parenting Job #1, controlling obnoxious behavior, we need to clarify some very important concepts that are the fundamental building blocks of *1-2-3 Magic*:

1. *The most effective orientation to—or philosophy of—parenting (Chapter 1)*
2. *The three basic parenting jobs (Chapter 2).*
3. *The dangerous assumption* parents, teachers and other caretakers make about young children ([Chapter 3](#)).
4. *The two biggest discipline mistakes* made by adults ([Chapter 4](#)).

Part I

Thinking Straight



Chapter 1
**Orientation to
The Parenting Profession**



Chapter 2
Your Three Parenting Jobs



Chapter 3
The Little Adult Assumption



Chapter 4
The Two Biggest Discipline Mistakes



1

Orientation to The Parenting Profession

With no training manual, kids come as a bit of a shock.

There's no way you know what parenting is like until you do it. Whatever thoughts you may have had about becoming a mom or a dad, bringing that first child home is a jolt—a big jolt. It's a lot like getting married. Maximum excitement and maximum stress.

1-2-3 Magic is based on the idea that parenting should be looked at as a profession. Some training, in other words, will make the job much easier. But that training shouldn't have to take years or involve bringing tons of books home from the library. One book should do it.

Your Basic Parenting Philosophy

The place to start is with your basic parenting philosophy—your overall orientation to the job. Even though the job changes as the kids get older, effective parents have two important qualities. They are:

1. *Warm and friendly* on the one hand
2. *Demanding and firm* on the other

Warm and friendly means taking care of kids' emotional and physical needs. It means feeding them, keeping them safe, warm, well clothed and making sure they get enough sleep. Warmth and friendliness also mean being sensitive to the children's feelings: sharing their joy over a new friend, comforting them when their ice cream falls on the ground, listening sympathetically when they're angry at their teacher, and enjoying their company.