

Happy Check™ Behavioral Management System

Practical Parenting:
A simple, effective, step-by-step guide for
developing positive behavior in children

Michael Jones, Ph.D.
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INTRODUCTION

The *Happy Check System*™ can be used with children from ages 2 to 11 and is designed to help children learn to exhibit more desirable behaviors. The system is based on the idea that parental approval is a very powerful motivator for children. This is not a new idea. It is one that most parents already know intuitively. However, a problem often observed is that this powerful motivator is often unfocused and not tied in an effective way to specific behaviors.



Parental approval is a type of motivator that is “renewable.” Many of us have a natural desire to please our parents, even into adulthood. Unlike other types of motivators paired with “rewards” of one sort or another, parental approval is not prone to “wear out” over time.

Unlike “stuff,” a child will not tend to get bored with parental approval. A plastic toy is little incentive for a child who has a room full of them. A big expensive toy, like a new car, is exciting at first, but then tends to lose its appeal once we get used to it. We don’t want to use a motivator that readily runs out of power. We have found that parental approval serves as a renewable source of “energy” that doesn’t wear out.

The *Happy Check System*™ is also intended to be very simple and easy to use. Family life these days tends to be busy. There is not always time to keep up with complicated systems that require a lot of keeping track of things such as counting up points or giving out chips. This system’s simplicity intentionally helps to magnify the power of parental approval. It also helps to serve as a tool to be consistent. All of the care givers involved with the children are encouraged to use the same system. This helps the approach to be consistent and the consistency helps the child to learn appropriate behaviors quickly.

Many times we fall into a habit that might be called the “status quo” problem. If everything is running smoothly and everyone is doing what they are supposed to do then we tend to “do nothing.” We don’t do anything because this is how it is “supposed” to be. As a consequence of doing nothing, the power of our parental approval is diluted. The child may not know in a clear sense what is “supposed” to be happening on any given day. Learning how one is supposed to act is what

parenting is all about. Proper socialization is learning the rules for how to act when around other people. This process starts at home, continues at school, in the workplace, and in our dealings with society in general. For those who don't catch on it continues in the criminal justice system.

The *Happy Check System*[™] is based on sound principles from basic research in psychology on patterns of behavior and behavior change. It has been applied to many real life families over the nearly 20 years we have been practicing as clinical psychologists. Most important, we have applied the system at home with our own three children.

Elements of the Happy Check System [™]

Positive Behaviors

The first part of the system is, not surprisingly, the “Happy Check.” This column is represented by a happy face:



The happy face is a universally recognized sign of approval. Even very young children will tend to understand this icon.

A Happy Check is given whenever the child exhibits a positive behavior. What exactly is a positive behavior? Well, that depends on each family. In general, it might include what are called prosocial behaviors. These are such things as being kind, respectful, helpful, friendly, honest, polite, responsible, and so forth. Any given family might have specific behaviors on which they place a high value. To encourage these behaviors to occur more often, the parent would give the child a Happy Check whenever the behavior is exhibited.

The *Happy Check System*[™] is intended to be very flexible. It is directed toward the miscellaneous good and bad behaviors that are a part of everyday family life. You can use it to shape new behaviors as well as focus on behaviors you want to sustain. You can emphasize a particular behavior or class of behaviors on a given week until

those behaviors are established. For example, on one week you might emphasize manners and on another week kindness to family members or cooperation. On another week you might emphasize compliance with directives. Other times, there might be a very specific behavior that you would like to observe more frequently such as putting up toys after playing without being told.

You may choose to direct approval toward behaviors that are part of a “class” of behaviors which are all examples of a similar idea. For example, there are many ways to exhibit the quality known as *good manners*. This quality might be exhibited by saying “yes ma’am or yes sir,” when replying to adults, waiting your turn, or saying “please” and “thank you” when making requests. In this case, very different behaviors might be given a Happy Check but all with the idea of improving the class of behaviors that make up good manners.



TIP Pass out the Happy Checks on an average of about 4-6 a day. More than this tends to be excessive and may reduce power of the check. Less than this should be feedback that you may be inattentive when positive behaviors are occurring. When giving a Happy Check make sure you have the child’s attention and clearly link the specific behavior the child just exhibited with your approval by stating both of these out loud:

I am really pleased that you put your shoes away the first time you were asked. You are really getting to be a big girl. I am going to give you a Happy Check.

Then proceed to make a big production out of getting out the dry erase pen and putting the Happy Check on the board.

Every once in a while Happy Checks can be linked with special privileges or activities. These privileges do not have to be very involved. For example, (especially if you were planning to do it anyway) if you notice that the child has 4-5 Happy Checks and it has been an especially positive day a parent might say something like:

Wow... I just noticed that you guys each got a lot of Happy Checks today. I tell you what, how about we go (insert any special activity of your choice - trip to the park, McDonald’s, movies, etc..).

Wow Jane, you got a lot of Happy Checks today. Tonight you get to (have bubbles in your bath, stay up 15 minutes later, read an extra book with Mom, etc..).

It is important that these links be done randomly. Think “slot machine.” Do not get into a pattern of “if you get four checks, then you get....” This will tend to dilute the system. If you think about it, people sit for hours feeding coins into slot machines. They know there will eventually be a link between the behavior of feeding coins into the machine and a payout. The problem is that the “when” happens randomly. The technical psychobabble term for this is “intermittent-schedule of reinforcement.” This is when reinforcements are tied to behavior, but at a time that is hard to predict. Behaviors formed on this kind of schedule of reinforcement are very resistant to change once established.

Negative Behaviors

What about negative behaviors? Negative behaviors are the behaviors that you wish to see less frequently. They may be thought of as the opposite of positive behaviors. Happy Checks are given for “prosocial” behaviors and MARKS¹ are given for “antisocial behaviors.” MARKS are symbolized by the UN-happy face below:



Again, this is a universal sign that even very young children can understand. It looks sad and represents disapproval for negative behavior.

MARKS work a little differently than Happy Checks. MARKS follow a 1-2-3 format. The 1-2-3 format emphasizes the need to deal with negative behaviors before they have a chance to chain together and become a pattern. It is like “three strikes and you’re out.” Think of “nipping it in the bud” when a negative behavior starts. The 1-2-3 format is:

¹ The term “MARKS” mirrors terms often used in classroom discipline routines. You can use whatever term you like. You might choose to contrast with “Happy Checks” and call them “Sad Checks.” For purpose of this manual we will use the term “MARKS.”

- 1 - warning
- 2- lose a privilege
- 3- lose *all* privileges

Before you give a MARK it is important to give a **warning**. A warning is something that tells us what, usually negative, is about to happen. When you observe a negative behavior that has risen to the level that you wish to give a MARK, make sure that the child has first been warned that if the behavior does not stop they will receive a MARK. However, make sure the warning is a single event. DO NOT give 4 warnings, 3 final warnings, then an absolutely this is your last chance warning. This allows parents to avoid what they hate doing most, yelling! The problem with yelling is that, unintentionally, the child is gradually shaped to NOT listen UNTIL you start yelling. Anything that came before the yelling was not really serious. Only when your face is red and your voice is loud are you really serious, otherwise, they tune out. **One warning and then the consequence**. No repetition, no negotiation, and no yelling. **One warning and then the consequence**. Consistency is the key—they'll know you mean business.

Giving a warning may sound like the following:

I told you to put those toys away. This is your warning. If you don't do it right now then you will get a MARK.

After a behavior has been clearly established as negative and has been corrected in the past or earlier in the day, you may choose to forgo the warning and give a MARK immediately. The single warning allows the child to use the cue to redirect themselves with minimal fuss. It is important to establish attention to these cues so that the cues themselves act to correct the behavior. Think of parents you admire in terms of their children's behavior. Have you noticed that many times the parent will simply give that "certain look" and the child will correct their behavior. The child in this case has learned to associate this "look" with consistent consequences (that are undesirable). Over time, when children are given the cue that predicts that the consequence will occur without fail, they learn to avoid the consequence by responding to the cue. So the warning is not to soft peddle or avoid the punishment, but to help the child learn how to anticipate consequences. This is especially effective when the consequences are clear and very consistent. The child quickly learns that:

Hmm.... each time I ignore Mom when she warns me I get a MARK. If I ignore the warning again, I lose a privilege and if I ignore her a third time I lose ALL of my privileges. This happens every single time. Hmm... Maybe I better listen to the warning.

✓ One MARK = no problem. It is just a warning. You place a check under the sad face in the yellow column. It is a cue that the child has moved from green light to yellow light. The message to the child is: *Observe caution because you are on notice for negative behavior.* Nothing happens at this point except a heads up that if another instance of negative behavior occurs then losing something of value is next.

✓✓ Two MARKS = the child loses a privilege. Again, make sure that the child is warned and given an opportunity to correct the behavior on their own. The child should be reminded that they already have one MARK and if they continue with the negative behavior they will lose a privilege.

I told you to put your shoes away. You already have one MARK. If you don't put them away now you will have two MARKS and you will lose a privilege.

What privilege should the child lose? That depends on the child. A good place to start is to analyze what is the most reinforcing for the child. Good candidates are activities that the child prefers or tends to engage in if not directed to do other things. In other words, what the child is most likely to do if they have free reign. Would they play on the computer, ride their bike, watch TV, talk on the phone? Their most probable activity is likely a privilege of some sort. Removal of something of value is called negative reinforcement. Negative reinforcement tends to make behaviors happen less frequently. The child begins to learn that negative behavior is associated with loss. The child's world at school or in society in general operates pretty much the same way. Negative behavior is associated with increasing loss of privilege which tends to escalate when one does not learn to attend to cues to change course. Some kids have problems making these connections which is why it is important to have the cues and consequences be very clear.

✓✓✓ Three MARKS = isolation. Life as the child knows it stops. Three MARKS means a loss of ALL privileges: no toys, t.v., friends, playing, no interactions, nothing. The child goes to isolation which is basically a boring place somewhere

in the house where nothing is going on. The child's bedroom is fine as long as there are no readily available things to do. A better choice would be a guest bedroom with nothing with which they can play. Isolation is different from Time-Out because of what happens next.

What happens next? How long do you stay in isolation? It depends. As long as the child has 3 MARKS he or she will stay in isolation FOREVER!!!! However, there is always a path to redemption. It is possible to ERASE MARKS. No, not with a finger on the dry erase board. The child may erase MARKS by engaging in an *Act of Kindness*.

An Act of Kindness is basically what it implies – a behavior that is kind in some way. This follows the idea that MARKS are usually received for behaviors that are not kind. In other words, your “punishment” for getting three MARKS is to lose all of your privileges until you perform acts of kindness to erase them. Instead of being in isolation until the parent is no longer mad, or until a certain amount of time goes by as in Time-Out, you remain in isolation *until you change your mind*. It is very difficult to think up kind things to do if you are still holding onto an angry mind. Usually when a child engages in negative behavior the driving force behind it is a lack of consideration or awareness of others or the impact of their behavior on others. By having to pause and stay paused, they are forced to reflect until they are able to reorient their thinking in such a way that they consider what might be positively received by someone else.

Children are naturally self-centered, especially when young. A two-year-old does not care that you are talking on the phone. They want something to drink “NOW!”

Examples of Acts of Kindness

- sweeping the kitchen floor
- cleaning up a sibling's bedroom
- drawing a pretty picture
- writing a note to express regret
- letting a sibling play with a favorite toy
- helping do someone else's chore

The idea is that the child do some action that is prosocial and is for someone else's benefit.

Gradually, through socialization and emotional development, they begin to be more able to take on the perspective of other people and consider how others might feel. Negative behavior is often when the orientation is on ME, I, MINE, etc...rather than how someone else might feel. So, the consequence for behavior that results from this frame of mind is to pause until the child is able to get a more skillful perspective in their own mind. The

good part about this is that the parent is not enFORCING anything other than the pause. The child makes a decision on their own to change their own mind.

What would be an acceptable act of kindness? This depends on the nature of the infraction. Perhaps a large infraction would entail a pretty good size act of kindness. A minimal infraction would warrant a smaller act of kindness. The important thing to attend to is whether or not the child's mind has changed. A complete change in attitude might result in all the MARKS being erased. A slight change in attitude, only one.

This type of "punishment" is an exercise in self-control. The idea is to have an attitude change be the punishment. The idea is also to have the child realize that his destiny is in his own hands. He can continue to have angry thoughts or get about the business of figuring out something kind to do. As long as he continues to harbor angry thoughts, he begins to realize that this will get him nowhere. He will remain in this boring situation *until he changes his mind.*

This is very different than thinking that:


"I am stuck here until Mom and Dad are done being mad. Not only does my destiny lay in their hands I am in this situation until their mood changes. There is nothing to do here so I might as well think about how I am being done wrong and compile my list of wrongs that have been done to me and how life is unfair.....blah, blah, blah....."

Instead, the thought process is more like:

"This is boring...I wish I hadn't screamed at my sister that way then I wouldn't be stuck here....I feel a little calmer now...now it's boring...I guess I better start thinking up something kind to do or I am going to be stuck here all afternoon. Hmm....I wonder if I could do....."

Once the MARKS are erased the child can get back to life as usual. No hard feelings. No lectures. No long reviews of the transgression. After the attitude has readjusted make sure you readjust your own. No sense in holding a parental grudge.

Note: One mark can also be erased by performing an Act of Kindness and the child can then have their privilege returned to them as a result.

 **Tip** When responding to negative behaviors it is important to maintain a matter-of-fact tone of voice. This will help the child understand that you are focusing on the behavior itself. You may disapprove of the behavior, but you still love your child.

It is important for the child to come up with the Act of Kindness on their own if possible. This helps them to practice changing their mental focus. However, if they are having trouble coming up with something and ask for help you can make suggestions. Do not allow the child to engage you in a lengthy discussion of possibilities. If they don't like your suggestions, let them continue to think on their own for a while. What is an appropriate act will depend on the age and abilities of the child. The idea is that the child do some action that is prosocial and is for someone else's benefit. Coming up with the Act of Kindness on their own helps the child refocus their mind away from the frame of mind that led to the wrong behavior.

When addressing a negative behavior it is important to show the child a behavior with which they should replace the negative behavior. Demonstrate the desired behavior for the child so they know what you expect. For example, the child was being corrected for grabbing a toy and yelling "gimme that." After correcting this inappropriate behavior you might then demonstrate the correct way to ask for something from someone.

Johnny, you got a MARK for grabbing that toy away from your sister, The right behavior that I want to see next time would be for you to say: "Mary, may I play with the ball when you are through with it?"

You would then have a brief lesson in manners and demonstrate dialogue where two people are using the kinds of manners you want to see in your family.

Time Frame

There are several important considerations regarding the time frame within the *Happy Check System*. First, everyday is a new day. The overall unit of time is one day. Neither Happy Checks nor MARKS carry over onto the next day. Each day starts fresh. The board is wiped clean each morning.

Second, consequences, both positive and negative ones, are more likely to make a connection with behavior if they occur immediately after the behavior occurs. Have you ever come home and found your dog has made a mess of some sort while you were away? You may get angry and yell at the dog, but he will just look at you with confusion. The problem is that he cannot connect your yelling with his actions earlier in the day. Children, particularly young children, are much the same. It is hard for them to connect a punishment to a behavior if a long time passes between them. The same is true for rewards. This is why systems that require “good behavior” all week long and a reward at the end of the week or the semester many times are ineffective.

Schedules of Reinforcement

A schedule of reinforcement is simply when the reinforcement occurs. Reinforcement can happen each time a behavior occurs, every five times exactly, or an average of every five times. The way a reinforcement occurs is called its schedule. There are different types of schedules and each one has certain advantages.

A *fixed schedule* means that it happens in a set way. A 1:7 fixed-schedule would mean I get a payoff after every 7 behaviors. For example, if you make your bed every day for 7 days you will receive one reward. A 1:1 schedule would mean you get a payoff each time the behavior occurs. In this case, think soda machine. I press the button and out comes a soda. Frequent reinforcement at low fixed schedules are useful in getting a behavior established for the first time. As the schedule gets higher, that is if I have to do the behavior more times to get the payoff, then the behavior will have more of a tendency to keep going once the reinforcement stops. It is not necessary to administer Happy Checks to your child for the rest of their lives. Once prosocial behaviors are established, they tend to continue on their own because they are strongly reinforced in a variety of ways in the social environment. Children like other kids who are kind. Teachers like

students who are polite. There is a whole social fabric that supports these behaviors, *once established*.

An *intermittent schedule of reinforcement* is when a desired consequence is tied to a behavior, but at a frequency that is hard to predict. The best example of this type of schedule would be a slot machine. The slot machine may pay off “on average” every 20 times. However, sometimes it pays off after 3 pulls, sometimes after 50 pulls, sometimes after 12 pulls. You just don’t know. This makes people keep pulling the handle over and over again. If a slot machine was actually broken and was not paying out at all, many people would still pull the handle for quite a while before giving up. Compare this to a soda machine. A soda machine is a fixed ratio device. One push of the button, one soda. If it is broken most people will give up after a couple of button pushes. Not so, with the slot machine. Therefore, payoffs that are reliably tied to behaviors, but in a way that is somewhat random as to when, tend to produce behaviors that are very resistant to change when the reinforcement stops.

Maintaining Good Behavior

Once a positive behavior is established it is important, every once in a while, to provide focused attention on the behavior. This will help to maintain the behavior and will also give the child a reason to continue to perform the behavior. For example, once basic manners are exhibited on a regular basis, comment from time to time how you appreciate how the child has been practicing good manners lately. Ask them if they notice if other people also appreciate the manners.

INTRODUCING THE HAPPY CHECK SYSTEM

Below is a sample dialogue of a parent introducing their children to the *Happy Check System*[™]:

Parent: Kids gather round, there is something I want to show you.

Kid: What is it?

Parent: It’s called the Happy Check Board.

Kid: What's it for?

Parent: Well, it's something we want to use to let you guys know when you do something that makes us happy. We are going to put it up on the refrigerator door. See this column here? It is for your names. See the column with the Happy Face? This is where we will put a check when you do something that is a good example of right behavior.

Kid: What do you mean?

Parent: All sorts of different stuff. Mostly things that as parents we are happy to see our children do. Things like being polite and using your manners, helping out, following directions, being kind... things like that. Whenever I notice you doing a particularly good example of one of those things I'll let you know, but also will put a Happy Check next to your name.

Kid: What do we get for a Happy Check?

Parent: You don't get anything. You just know that your Mom and Dad are happy and proud of you.

Kid: What if I get a gazillion happy checks? Can I get a new plastic toy thing?

Parent: No. The Happy Checks don't add up for toys or anything like that. But, you will probably notice that when Mom and Dad are happy with your behavior then nice things tend to happen more often.

Kid: What are the yellow and red parts for?

Parent: Those spaces are if you do something that is not good behavior. When parents see their child do wrong behavior we tend to feel UN-Happy.

Kid: Like what?

Parent: Pretty much the opposite of right behavior. Things like being disrespectful, refusing to follow directions or help out, and doing mean things. If you do these things I will let you know by giving you a MARK in these columns.

Kid: What happens if I get a MARK?

Parent: Well, if you get one MARK I will put it in the yellow column. That is to let you know that you did something wrong. It is a warning, sort of like when we drive in the car and come upon an intersection. If the light is green then everything is fine and you can keep driving on through. If the light turns yellow it means “be careful, get ready to stop.” So the yellow is like that, like a warning to stop bad behavior and start doing right behavior. Other than being warned, nothing happens.

Kid: What happens if I get a gazillion MARKS?

Parent: Let’s talk about what happens when you get two or three first. MARKS really only go up to three. When you get two MARKS that means that you will lose an important privilege.

Kid: Like what?

Parent: For example, you know how you like to play on your computer after you get your homework done? Well, being able to play on your computer is a privilege. If you have two MARKS then you cannot play on the computer.

Kid: What if I have three MARKS?

Parent: Three MARKS means that everything stops and you lose ALL of your privileges. That means you have to go to “isolation.”

Kid: What is that?!

Parent: You have to sit in the guest room. No t.v., no computer, no toys, no friends, no privileges at all.

Kid: WHAT!!!!?? For how long?

Parent: That would be up to you.

Kid: What do you mean?

Parent: You have to stay in isolation either forever or until you erase your MARKS, whichever comes first.

Kid: How do you erase a MARK?

Parent: By doing an Act of Kindness.

Kid: What is that?

Parent: An “act” means action or doing something. Kindness is when you are nice to other people. So an act of kindness means to do something nice for someone else’s benefit.

Kid: Like sweep the kitchen or help my brother pick up his toys?

Parent: Yeah, like that.

Kid: Does that erase all of the MARKS?

Parent: That depends on how kind your act was. It might erase one, two, or all three if it is really nice.

PROBLEMS, FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS, and TIPS

Low Level of Positive Behaviors

I love my child but he never exhibits any positive behavior. What should I do?

The first step would be to try and be a better observer of behavior. Do you really mean never? Never is a pretty extreme word. I am going to guess that you mean not as often as you would like. Is there really a complete absence of positive behavior or is there a problem in noticing? It is hard for even the most difficult child to be a monster ALL of the time. Some of the time the child may be resting in between his work at generating chaos. If he is resting on the couch quietly watching cartoons do you give him a Happy Check?

The idea to apply in this situation is called “shaping.” Let’s suppose I want my child to be polite and say “please” and “thank you.” Unfortunately, you observe that your child often exhibits behaviors that are rude and bratty. It is important to start at the lowest level of behavior that is in the desired direction. Look at the following progression (exaggerated to make the point):

Johnny, I like that for the last 30 minutes you have not used any swear words when talking to other members of the family. I am going to give you a Happy Check.

Johnny, I like that for the last 2 hours you have not used any swear words when talking to other members of the family. I am going to give you a Happy Check.

Johnny, I like that you were hardly rude at all today. I am going to give you a Happy Check.

(Then proceed to give Johnny Happy Checks whenever he goes a significant period of time without being rude.)

Then you might observe that during one of these intervals when Johnny was not being rude he said “*thanks*” when you passed the butter. Proceed to shape this budding effort at manners. “*You’re welcome, Johnny, that was very polite of you.*”

The basic idea of shaping is to reinforce any behavior that is in the desired direction of the goal behavior. Once a behavior is moving in the desired direction, require behaviors that are gradually closer and closer to the goal behavior.

Overemphasis on Negative Behaviors

All my child ever gets is MARKS. What should I do?

Who is passing out the MARKS? If you notice that your child is only getting MARKS, it might be because you are only paying attention to negative behavior and ignoring positive behavior when it occurs. When no negative behaviors are occurring what is going on? What is happening that you like, respect, appreciate, and would like to see happen more often? These are the things to sometimes formally notice with a Happy Check. Sometimes a child will begin to exhibit

negative behaviors when they are getting very minimal attention for positive behaviors. Some children would prefer to be punished than to be ignored.

Another thing to try is to describe what is happening in terms of the positive version of the behavior. For example, one way to approach things is to decrease how often the child is disrespectful. The target behaviors might include the class of disrespectful behaviors such as rude words or tone of voice directed toward a parent. Every time one of these behaviors is exhibited the child gets a MARK. Another way of framing things is not that *disrespectful* behaviors are happening too often, but that *respectful* behaviors are not happening often enough. You might start passing out Happy Checks for polite words like “yes sir” or “please” and “thank you” made in respectful tones of voice. This will have a tendency to gradually push out the frequency of the negative behaviors.

Another way of balancing attention to positive and negative behaviors is to use focused attention (via Happy Checks and other forms of attention) for positive behaviors and use planned ignoring for some negative behaviors. Obviously, there are some negative behaviors that are not suitable for planned ignoring. If your child is playing with matches, of course, you cannot ignore the behavior. However, other things like tantrums in young children or rolling their eyes in older children are effectively met with planned ignoring. Planned ignoring is not having your parental head in the sand. It is planning ahead of time to not give the child any desired attention when exhibiting the negative behavior. For example, if a three- year-old throws himself on the floor and kicks his feet for not getting a cookie before dinner, treat such behavior with extreme parental boredom. Walk away and go into the other room until the child also becomes bored with the behavior. Many negative behaviors are sustained through the unwitting attention that is directed toward them.

Child Refusing to Participate in the Happy Check System

My kid says the checks are stupid and he isn't going to do the system.

This raises an interesting issue regarding control. As a parent it may come as a shock to realize that you do not control your kids! You may think “What!! Of course I control my kids. I am a responsible parent. I am the one in charge.” In reality this is not the case. You do not control your children, but you do control the contingencies. A two-year-old will illustrate this point. All of us would say,

yes, of course I am in charge of my two-year old. However, if the two-year-old decides to throw a tantrum in the middle of the grocery store you quickly realize you weren't in control as much as you thought you were. A parent might even begin to feel more out of control as they try to "make" the two-year-old quit the tantrum, in the process feeling more and more out of control and ineffective.

The effective parent in this situation seems to understand a basic truth: You do not control your kids, you only control what you choose to do as a parent. You control the contingencies, the kids control the choices they make at any given point in time. In our tantrum situation, the parent realizes that they have no control over the two-year-old picking this time to throw a tantrum, but the parent can choose to administer a Time-Out in response. The difference is more than just a semantic one.

If the child says they aren't going to participate in the system, they too have a mistaken view about control. The best reply is a simple "okay." Don't argue, plead, beg, or yell. After explaining the system, just do it. Pass out Happy Checks for behaviors that you approve of and MARKS for the ones you don't. Junior will bear the fruits of his behavior: your approval for some behaviors, and MARKS for others. Two MARKS lose a privilege, three lose them all. The access to privileges is what you control as parent, not your child. Junior might reassess and determine that it is in his enlightened self-interest to get with the program, because it is happening whether he likes it or not. The funny thing is that some version of the *Happy Check System* is in operation outside of the family whether he likes it or not. If he observes carefully, his school did not check with him to see if he approved of their discipline policy or not. His friends don't check with him if they may disapprove of his behavior. He just suffers a logical consequence for his own actions. The *Happy Check System* is not intended to be an artificial bending of how the world works. Quite the contrary, it is intended to, as much as possible, closely approximate how society works. In the broader society people are pleased by prosocial behaviors and annoyed by antisocial behavior. Society tends to react by granting access to privileges for following prosocial norms for behavior and taking away privileges for antisocial behavior. Our job as parents is to help our kids catch on to how it works.



Keeping Track of Patterns - Using a Behavior Diary

I notice that the negative behavior happens on some days but not on others. Am I doing something wrong?

Sometimes it is helpful to keep track of specific behaviors that your child is having trouble overcoming. If you

are like most busy parents, it is hard to remember what happened three days ago in the morning. To aid our memory, try keeping a diary. This makes it easier to recall exactly what happened and some of the situational factors that might have contributed to the behavior.

Identify a behavior and try to describe it in specific, observable terms. Write down when the behavior occurred, what was going on right before the behavior and what occurred right after the behavior. It is helpful if you describe the behavior in numbers, such as how many times a specific behavior occurs or rate a behavior on a scale of 1 to 10. After you collect data for a few weeks, review your diary and see if you can identify any patterns. Does the behavior happen with specific people? Does it happen at certain times more than others? Why might that be? How consistent are the consequences that follow? What are the consequences teaching the child about the behavior? Did the consequence have a positive outcome or a negative one on average? Then make the behavior a target of the *Happy Check System*. Does the behavior increase or decrease as desired? If not, can you identify why not?

Refusing to Follow Directives

I can't get my child to follow a simple request without having to tell him 8-10 times and by that time I am yelling.

Unintentionally, you may be shaping your child to not listen to you until the 8th or 10th time. Because of past patterns the child may have learned that you don't really mean it when you give a directive. You don't really mean it until you have

said it several times and have an angry tone of voice. You might try out these points:

- Avoid giving a directive unless you are prepared to follow through. A directive is a command. Yelling some vague command from the other side of the house while you are distracted and busy will undermine the communication.

- Try the **1, 2, 3 Approach**:

Step 1: Give a command. “*John, please put your shoes away.*” If the child follows through show your approval by giving a Happy Check. “*John, I really appreciate you putting your shoes away the first time that I asked you. I am going to give you a Happy Check.*” If the child does not comply with the command then go to step 2.

Step 2: Repeat the command. This time make sure that you have eye contact with the child. Ask the child to repeat what he hears you saying. (e.g., “*John, look at me. What did I just tell you to do?*”). Then maintain eye contact until the child complies. If the child refuses to comply then warn him that he is about to get a MARK.

Step 3: Give the child a MARK. Warn him that if he continue to refuse to comply he will get two MARKS and lose a privilege. Then give two MARKS. Repeat the directive and warn him that if he does not comply he will go to isolation. When the message is sent, received, understood and rejected – we call this willful noncompliance. It is important to **pick your battles** and not make a major stand for every trivial event. In very young children it is important to assess whether or not their noncompliance is due to being tired and cranky or not feeling well. It is important to be more flexible if you determine that the root cause is something like being overdue for a nap. Setting firm limits at these times will not bear much fruit in the long run. However, when faced with willful noncompliance not due to these kinds of factors, make sure that you win this battle 100% of the time. The child should experience the predictability of the consequences for noncompliance. It always ends with the parent being in charge. Period. Better to have these battles over things like picking up shoes when the child is 3 or 4. Otherwise, the battles during the teenage years will be much more taxing.



Tip Don't ask a question. "*John, would you put your shoes away for mom?*"

Don't give a directive with even a question-mark tone-of-voice at the end of the command. If what you are saying is a directive, you are not looking for the child to answer a question

In some very young children (and in some older ones as well) there can sometimes be a tendency to resist a directive just because it is a directive. This is often observed in two-year-olds who are experimenting with the use of the word "No!" Sometimes a way to avoid a power struggle in this situation is to frame the directive as a choice between two commands. This might be considered an exception to the no question rule. For example: "*Do you want to put your shoes up first or put away your backpack?*" By framing the directive as a choice the child is still directed but may feel a sense of self-control by being able to choose which one is done first.

Happy Check System versus Spanking

All this Check stuff is well and fine, but why not just give the kid a good whack on the butt?

This question might be addressed by reversing it. Some parents do believe in spanking, but why do it if there are more effective techniques that avoid many of the common side-effects of corporal punishment?

Physical punishment does result in increased compliance in some situations. Unfortunately, it is based on the fear of punishment. A more powerful approach is compliance that is based upon a wish to please and the good feelings that come from exhibiting positive behaviors. Our general approach is to develop a system that is in line with how our society works. In the real world you cannot hit people when you are mad and it is considered poor form for a big person to hit a much smaller person, regardless of the provocation. So part of the objection to corporal punishment is that it does not track well with how the rest of society operates.

A second objection is about effectiveness. Spanking has the illusion of working, but the scientific evidence would seem to be less supportive of its effectiveness. As parents it can make us feel in control because we are doing something immediate. However, we may not effectively track the long-term effects. When studied systematically, corporal punishment is just not all that effective.

Here are some common rationales for corporal punishment:

“My parents spanked me and I turned out okay.” That may be so. You may also have an uncle that smoked three packs a day and lived to be 95 years old. That does not mean that cigarettes are good for people. Studies on spanking do not really support its effectiveness and usually find many down sides for whatever effectiveness there might be.

“There is nothing wrong with a good swat on the rear to get a child’s attention.” Perhaps not. There is also nothing wrong with kneeling down, looking the child in the eye, and using a tone of voice that is kind, firm, yet predictable about what is going to happen next if the behavior continues.

“If you don’t spank your kids they won’t respect you.” One might consider the loss of respect that occurs when hitting is the only thing the parent can think of to address the situation. Do we tend to respect people in any other contexts that rely on hitting to get people to comply?

Happy Check System versus Time-Out

When should I use the Happy Check System and when should I use Time Out?

The *Happy Check System* can be used for miscellaneous behaviors that you are trying to shape. Time-Out works best for two classes of behavior. The first is “willful noncompliance.” This is when the child knows exactly what they are being directed to do and is overtly refusing to do what the parent has directed. The second is for any type of aggression towards other people or objects (hitting, pushing, throwing things to break them or at someone, etc.).

How to Use Time-Out

To make Time-Out more effective keep in mind these points:

- Time-Out should be a place with little or no stimulation and out of view of other people. Time-Out is short for “Time-Out from positive reinforcement.” In other words, it is an absence of any fun stuff and attention from others. It is also a time for children to learn how to calm themselves down and regroup. Good candidates for Time-Out locations are a hallway area, guest bedroom, dining room, or utility room. The area should not have a line of sight towards siblings or parents if possible but still situated in such a way that the parents can monitor. Do not use bathrooms or closets for Time-Out areas.

- The amount of time should be approximately 1 minute for each year in age. The time starts when the child is quiet and compliant with Time-Out.

- There should be no talking to the child during Time-Out. This starts when you say “Time-Out” and continues until Time-Out is over.

- Try to use a timer instead of simply declaring Time-Out is over. This reinforces the idea that it is a set amount of time to calm down and not whenever the parent is no longer mad. Timers that make noise while ticking down are best.

- After the timer goes off ask the child to state why they went to Time-Out. If they cannot put why into words simply state the rule that they violated.

“Why did you have to go to Time-Out?” (shrug) “You went to Time-Out because you hit your sister. The rule is No Hitting.”

This works best if there is not a lot of “parental speech-making” at this point. Simply state the rule and go on to the next thing.

- Young children might have to be gradually shaped to the Time-Out procedure. They may have to be gently held until they get the idea that Time-Out is not optional. This is one that is important to invest time in on the front end. If you invest the time on the front end than later on you can enjoy the luxury of staying in your recliner and merely saying “Time-Out” without having to get up.

Disagreement Between Parents

I think my spouse comes up with stupid consequences for the kids. I call him on it when this happens so my son doesn't think I agree with him. Am I wrong?

Yes. You are undermining the other parent and doing so openly. If your son has not figured it out yet he soon will discover that he can “divide and conquer” so that he answers to neither of you. A general principle is that anything short of what you would report to child protective services is a difference of opinion. Take ALL differences of opinion behind closed doors. Support your partner in front of the child and if you have a different point of view work it out with your partner outside of the child's view.

It is not unusual for one parent to be more lenient and another to be a little stricter. When parents do not undermine one another the child can benefit from the balance sometimes being “cut some slack” and sometimes having the “chain yanked.” However, if the parents begin to undermine one another they push each other farther and farther from the original positions. This is sometimes called the “teeter totter” effect. One parent thinks the other is being too loose so tries to make up for the perceived deficits of the other parent by being stricter. The other parent thinks their partner is being too strict so tries to make up for the rigidity by giving the kid a break. If not careful, the couple push each other farther and farther away from a balanced middle until they become exaggerations of their original positions.

Support your partner in front of the child even if you do not agree. Take the disagreement behind closed doors. If you cannot agree on a common approach then get a consultation with a therapist. Sometimes conflicts that are between parents come out as difficulties with the kids. It is important to be very aware of any relationship problems that might be acted out as disagreements regarding the children.

Sometimes differences between parents can be related to different ways of doing things that were learned in each parent's family while growing up. Each family of origin has its own customs. We often follow subtle ways of doing things that was our experience growing up. If one parent's experiences growing up was very different than the other's these differences can result in conflicts with the kids. Minor differences can be worked out with a little awareness and discussion. Major

differences also may be worked out, but might require the help of a mental health professional experienced in these matters.

Happy Check System and Allowance

Is it okay to dock my child's allowance when they act up instead of or in addition to using MARKS? Can I also give allowance bonuses if he gets a lot of checks one week?

There are pros and cons in this area. In general, it is important to have the main reinforcement be parental approval. It is okay to randomly link Happy Checks to preferred activities, but generally refrain from linking Happy Checks to material rewards because it will be more susceptible to habituation. Systems based on material rewards tend to lose their punch over time.

Sometimes in the real world we are financially rewarded for doing positive behaviors (like working hard) and penalized for doing negative behaviors (like speeding or paying a bill late). The problem with money is that it is symbolic and not all children have sufficiently developed the reference points to the symbol. Also, it is very difficult to gauge the right "amount" of the reward and the penalty. What if you have a saver with lots of spare change? They might not be affected by a monetary penalty or incentive because they have "plenty" of money.

In general, our opinion is that it is a good idea to use a modest weekly allowance as a means of teaching your children how to handle money: save, comparison shop, spend wisely, and balance security and enjoyment. It should generally be separated from most everyday behavior management. The exception might be if the misbehavior involved some cost such as carelessly breaking a window. In this case, contributing to the cost of repairing the window might be an effective consequence.

We believe that allowances should be separated from the positive side of the equation as well. If money is tied too tightly to behaviors like helping out and doing chores, then an unintended consequence is that the child may not wish to do these behavior unless they "get paid." Helping out around the house is part of being a member of a family group. The house functions because people pitch in and do things to make it function. Unfortunately, the fairies do not take out the garbage, feed the dog, set the table, or sweep the kitchen. Kids that have nothing

asked of them for being a member of the family often grow up believing in fairies. They often get stuck in a sense of entitlement, taking but never figuring out how to give without immediately expecting something in return. By linking chores and helping out to parental approval these activities over time become intrinsically rewarding.

Being intrinsically rewarded is gratifying in itself. Receiving extrinsic rewards is gratifying because we get paid in some way as compensation. There was an interesting social psychology experiment conducted years ago that demonstrated what happens when you pay someone to do something that is intrinsically rewarding. Young children are observed to enjoy playing with colorful markers. Researchers secretly observed the children and how many minutes a day they played with the markers. Nobody had to tell the kids to play with them, they did it because it was intrinsically enjoyable. Then the researchers announced that they would pay the kids a sum of money for each minute they used the markers during free time. Not surprisingly, the time spent using the markers shot way up. After a period of time, they then announced that they would no longer pay for playing with the markers. They then secretly observed how many minutes the children would play with the markers. The interesting part of the study was that after the kids were no longer paid they did not reduce the time spent playing to what it was before. It was actually reduced to near nothing. In short, what was once done for the joy itself was changed by being paid for it.

For this reason, it is important to develop positive behaviors that over time become intrinsically rewarding and be very careful about paying a child for behaviors that are already so. For example, some children like to read. If you pay a child who already likes to read for reading it may increase reading in the short run and greatly diminish it in the long run.

When to Seek Professional Help

We have followed the suggestions exactly as described but we are still having trouble managing our son's behavior. He seems to genuinely want to do better, but he seems like he cannot control himself, even when he wants to. He refuses to follow-through with directions and seems to act without thinking. Afterwards, when corrected he seems to feel bad, then he will turn around and do the same behavior again.

The *Happy Check System* is a good way to clear up what might be termed “background noise.” It is a way of correcting how the child’s environment is working. Are positives emphasized, are negatives dealt with before they get out of hand, is there a clear connection between behavior and consequence? When most of these factors are in place and you still have difficulties, then there might be a problem that is not in the environment, but in the child. Some children may have a condition such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder that may influence their ability to attend to directives, maintain their focus on the task at hand, or delay impulses. A situation such as this may require the additional guidance of a mental health professional.

A mental health professional will be very interested in how the child responds to the *Happy Check System* because it will help them to determine what kind of problem the child might have. If you have faithfully followed these suggestions and the child is still having behavior problems it is important to get a mental health consultation. Getting to the root of the problem as early as possible helps to correct the problems before they have a chance to become too entrenched.

Consider seeking professional help if you observe one or more of the following:

- Marked change in performance at school. A typical A/B student who begins to fail classes on a regular basis should be a red flag.
- Trouble with performing in school even though cooperative and apparently trying hard to learn.
- Persistent changes in sleeping patterns or in appetite.
- Sudden changes in social relating either with family members or friends.
- Persistent disobedience or aggression (longer than 6 months). Consistent opposition to authority figures at home, school, and with strangers.
- Frequent, unexplainable, extended temper tantrums.

In general, seek a consultation if the child changes significantly in a major sphere of his life (e.g., school, friends, family), if the problems persist over an extended period of time, or if other people who care for the child express consistent concerns.

Family Meetings

One helpful tool for addressing behaviors can be to hold a family meeting. This can be a time when the parents raise any specific concerns they have regarding recent behaviors. The children also get a chance to express any “complaints” they might have. Some things to keep in mind:

- Announce that you are holding a “Family Meeting.” Make it a “formal event” rather than an impromptu chat. Turn off the t.v., cell phones, and anything else that might serve as a distraction. This adds to the importance of the ritual.
- Set the ground rules for the meeting. Say that Mom and Dad have a few things they want to talk about. Everyone will have a chance to share as well. No one interrupts while someone else is speaking.
- Model basic problem-solving skills. Step 1: Identify the problem. Step 2: Brainstorm possible solutions. At this stage do not throw out any solutions. List as many as possible. Step 3: For each solution listed in Step 2 identify the pros and cons for each option. Step 4: Identify the best solutions from the list. Step 5: Parents choose the solution or, if appropriate, have the family vote.

This basic strategy can also be used for some problem behaviors. Many times children will come to the same conclusion as parents or may come up with a solution that is acceptable to parents that they had not considered. Either way, the children will be more cooperative because they will have taken more ownership over the outcome.

Vocabulary

Here are some “psychobabble” terms that are important for any behavior change system. It is not important that you memorize the vocabulary (there will not be an exam at the end of this booklet)! However, the words reflect important concepts related to managing behavior in children. Try to notice examples of these concepts as you observe your child’s (and other children’s) behavior.

Act of Kindness - This is an action that is done with a wish that someone will experience happiness from the action.

Behavioral Class - A class in school is made up of many individuals who are all members of the same group. The individuals may be very different, but they share the common membership in the class. A behavioral class is the same idea. For example, good manners is a behavioral class that is made up of many examples of specific behaviors such as saying “please” and “thank you,” using respectful tones of voice, saying “yes sir,” and so on. One technique is to label a behavior as a member of a desired behavior class when passing out Happy Checks. (e.g., “*I like the way you said please and thank you when you asked Dad to pass the rolls. That is an example of very good manners. I am going to give you a Happy Check.*”)

Contingencies - A contingency is like an If-Then. If X occurs then Y will follow. Y is contingent on X. If you eat your dinner, then you can have a dessert. Eating dessert is contingent on finishing your dinner. Access to dessert depends on finishing dinner. Watching t.v. *after* finishing homework is a common example.

Habituation - A fancy way of saying bored. In habituation a reinforcer loses its effect. If I am rewarded with a brownie after a certain behavior (if I love brownies) I will tend to exhibit that behavior more often in my quest for brownies. However, after I have eaten a whole pan the brownie will no longer have the same effect on my behavior. This is one reason why tons of plastic toys don’t work very well in managing behavior.

Negative Reinforcement - Removal of a valued item or activity that when paired with a specific behavior makes the behavior less probable.

Positive Reinforcement - A valued result, when paired with a behavior, that tends to make a behavior more probable. If the reinforcer does not make the behavior more probable, then by definition it is not reinforcing.

Premack Principle - If access to a high probability behavior is contingent upon exhibiting a low probability behavior then the low probability behavior will become more probable. This sounds much more complicated than it is. It is more simply put as “Grandma’s Cookie Principle” – if you finish eating your veggies (low probability behavior) then you can eat a cookie (high probability behavior). Over time eating veggies will become more probable.

Privilege - Access to an item or activity that is granted as a function of a parent’s good will. It is important that children learn very early the difference between a

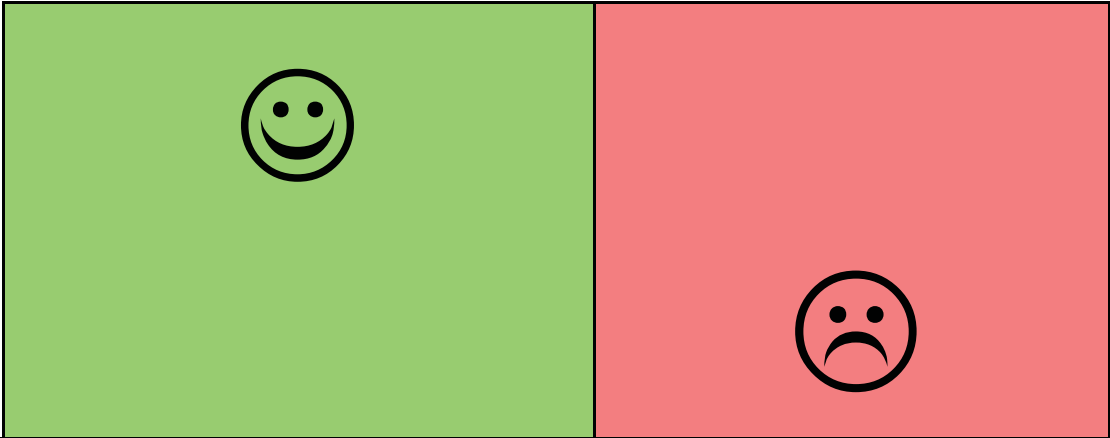
privilege and an entitlement. An entitlement is something that I deserve because of my position alone. A child is entitled to a safe place to live, three meals a day, and a loving relationship with his parents. He is not entitled to a computer, free access to cable t.v., and all the toys that his parents' money can buy. Activities that a child engages in for fun are, by and large, the ones that his parents have decided that he will be allowed.

Punishment - Anything administered following a behavior that tends to make a behavior less probable. It is important to note that if a punishment is given and the behavior does not become *less* probable, then the “punishment” is not punishment.

Reciprocal Inhibition - In short, it is hard for me to be bad when I am busy being good. Some behaviors are incompatible with one another. I cannot use a regular voice and a whiny voice at the same time. If I reward the “big girl voice” it will have a tendency to push out the negative behavior.

Shaping - This would be the idea of applying a reinforcement to movement in the right direction. It is sometimes called successive approximation. If I want to shape a desired behavior that is complex, I will start with efforts that are in the general neighborhood and gradually require behaviors that are closer and closer to the goal.

Target Behavior - A target behavior is a specific behavior that is emphasized for either increasing in frequency or decreasing in frequency.



Max	✓✓✓		
John	✓✓		
Zack			✓✓✓
Maggie	✓✓	✓	✓

Hurray for Max getting an A on his spelling test!!!!!!!!!!

About the Authors

Drs. Jones and Zinn graduated from Auburn University with Ph.D.'s in Clinical Psychology. They completed clinical internships at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas. They have practiced psychology in the Houston area for over 20 years. The development of the Happy Check System was in response to parents needing help in shaping their children's behavior. It has been used in a wide variety of families, including the authors' own family of three children. We are grateful to our children for serving as our in-house practice for testing out this system and proud of the wonderful teenagers that they have become.



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