

JANUARY

# HELPING KIDS OUT OF BAD HABITS

ACTIVATION GUIDE



homeroom

MARRIAGE & FAMILY MENTORING MEMBERSHIP

Every bad habit your child indulges has a pay off.

It feels good to whine when you're irritated.

Ignoring commands makes you feel in control.

Bad table manners are entertaining.

You must have a way of making bad habits costly and good habits have a pay off.

Training kids out of bad habits has a simple structure. You must reverse the incentives.

Most parents know this and when they get really serious about it they pull out a single tool - **discipline**. But there's a problem with that tool alone when it comes to bad habits. Often good discipline takes so much time and effort that we lose energy when trying to consistently use it to correct things as small and frequent as our kid's bad habits.

Instead of discipline alone the secret to training kids out of bad habits lies primarily in two other tools - corrections and rewards.

Let's look at these tools by walking through a concrete example.

Mandy is seven and during the last few weeks her parents have noticed that she whines and complains almost every time they ask her to do something.

They understand, it feels good to whine and Mandy needs help breaking this annoying habit so that she will learn to maintain a positive attitude and so that the family's culture isn't degraded by this constant whining.

When Mandy's dad comes home from work the next day he calls her over for a chat.

Mandy, we've noticed you tend to whine when we ask you to do something. I'm going to ask you to do something you don't want to do and I want you to give me a good whine.

Mandy's dad takes some time helping Mandy really understand the negative behavior.

Now Mandy I have a challenge for you and I know you can do it but first tell me about your favorite dessert. As soon as you complete this challenge you and I are going to celebrate by getting that dessert, are you ready for the challenge?

Mandy's dad shows her a bowl of marbles and an empty jar.

As soon as you get 10 marbles in this jar you and I are going to get that dessert. Would you like to get three marbles in your jar right now? The easiest way to get a marble is, when we ask you to do something you say, 'Sure mom or sure dad.' Let's try! Mandy, can you put your shoes away?

Sure dad says, Mandy.

As soon as your shoes are away you can put a marble in your jar.

When she gets back, walk her through how to lose marbles.

OK, now when I tell you to do something I want you to give me your best whine.  
Mandy, help your mom empty the dishwasher.

Whining ensues.

Mandy, take a marble out of your bowl.  
See how that works, you can keep whining but you'll lose marbles and if you just say "Sure, mom" you'll earn marbles.  
Now that you're down to zero marbles let's work together to help you earn your first three marbles.

Give Mandy three simple tasks and every time she says, "Sure dad" give her a marble until she has three.

Only seven more to go and we'll celebrate!

In his book Atomic Habits James Clear points out,



We will naturally gravitate toward the option that requires the least amount of work. Create an environment where doing the right thing is as easy as possible. Reduce the friction associated with good behaviors. When friction is low, habits are easy. Increase the friction associated with bad behaviors. When friction is high, habits are difficult. Prime your environment to make good habits easier.



Keep in mind the above is just one example. There's lots of ways to do this with kids at different stages with different currencies so let's break down five key elements in the example.

**1. YOU NEED A SYSTEM.** Systems are simply designed to increase friction for bad habits and increase rewards around good habits in a way that is simple and sustainable. A system like marbles tends to work well for kids from about 5-11 years old. Younger kids often lack the ability to delay gratification and older kids need systems that aim more at the heart (see below).

**2. YOUR SYSTEM NEEDS A TOOL FOR SIMPLE CORRECTION.** Telling a child to take a marble out of the bowl should not feel like a heavy discipline. Make it quick and simple. Train your child to do it quickly and with little emotion by giving them opportunities to earn them back. Simple correction is the greatest key to training out of bad habits because they allow us to create a negative consequence to bad behavior but in a way that doesn't create too much work for the parents. Remember we're just dialing up the friction around a bad habit.

**3. YOUR SYSTEM NEEDS A REWARD.** Human beings are hardwired to seek rewards. Some parents worry that this will create mercenary kids who learn to manipulate systems to get rewards. But keep in mind we're not using this tool to shape our kids character but to give them the incentive to break bad habits. Once the bad habit has changed you can remove the reward and use the reward to address another habit.

**4. DISCIPLINE IS THE BACKSTOP.** With bad habits we try to avoid using discipline. We want them to want to stop doing the bad habit even if, for now, it's just to get the reward. Keep the association with this training positive. If they totally ignore any attempt at training then discipline can work as a backstop but it's still best to keep it as a separate issue from this training if possible. If your child does something worthy of discipline don't use this system by saying for example, "take all the marbles out of your bowl." Have separate tactics for discipline and protect this system as primarily positive.

**5. HELP THEM GET AN EARLY WIN.** Calibrate the system to where your child is and not some objective standard. You want your child to feel what it's like to succeed and you want them to really enjoy the training process. Over time as your child succeeds more and more you can increase the standard but focus on working together to get that early win.

Since we used such a specific example here are some ideas on how to implement this with kids in other stages.

**TRAINING TODDLERS:** When working with toddlers everything must be immediate. It still works well to show them exactly what's the wrong habit and exactly what would be the correct act. For example several of our kids tested out screaming at the table as toddlers. As a family that goes out quite often this was not going to fly in our family culture. My favorite toddler correction was to sit next to them during the meals and the instant they began to scream I'd give them a firm cheek cub and say a firm, "No." If it continued they would be removed. We also would teach them sign language to help us understand what they wanted with lots of praise for expressing themselves clearly and quietly.

**TRAINING TEENS:** Around the age of 10 we removed the marble system and began to work with our kids in a highly relational manner as they entered the teen years. Both April and I spent lots of one on one time with each of our kids and as bad habits cropped up I'd address it first at a heart level. In a very positive conversation I'd bring up the pattern we had been noticing and have an open discussion to get to the root of why. I'd cast a clear vision for the family culture we are building together and ask for their help out of their love for the family.

I'm sure there are lots more questions and the rest of this month use the Facebook group and the live q and a to dive into the specifics of your situation.

**Remember that nothing works instantly and all effective training requires consistency but we can do so much to help our kids overcome their bad habits and create a family culture that everyone enjoys.**