

## **Parents Ask by Karen Spring**

- 1. I feel like I'm always raising my voice and bribing my elementary children to behave. Can you tell me about a more positive discipline system that works?**

I felt the same way many times! Finally, my husband and I decided to come up with a point system for my children to try and change some of their behaviors. We had a lot of success with our plan, but I'll caution you that it takes time, and follow-through to work.

My daughter Lindsay had just turned 9 and my son had recently turned 7 years old when we started our point system. Tim and I grew tired of the dirty clothes lying all over their bedroom floors. We grew irritated with constantly reminding our children to brush their teeth and hair. We grew more and more agitated with their limited palates and being treated like short-order cooks. I felt myself losing my temper too often and heard myself sounding like a nag. I recall feeling very eager for change by the time my husband Tim and I implemented our plan. *Surely the long-term results had to be worth any effort in the short term*, I told myself, when I buckled down and got serious about creating a simple version of a behavior modification system for our home.

This point system was appropriate to start now that my children were over 6 years old and understood responsibility and fairness. They knew Tim and I were being reasonable! So Tim and I rolled up our sleeves and used our Montessori principles to create a system. We allowed my children to be part of the planning process; ensured that the expectations were appropriate for their ages; set up my home to aid their success, and stayed consistent and positive throughout the process.

### **Family Point System**

#### **Step 1: Get focused and determine behaviors.**

You and your spouse first need to determine which behaviors in your child you hope to modify. Choose wisely and don't be overly ambitious. We created three categories in our home: Chores, Hygiene and Eating Healthy. We chose two to four behaviors within each category and created a big chart on poster board. You need to keep a different chart for each child.

#### **Step 2: Discuss with your child daily. Assign points to each behavior.**

I discussed with my children their behaviors and tracked progress daily. I recommend keeping it consistent and simple. We chose 1, 2 or 3 points for each behavior and my children recorded points in pencil on the chart every day over breakfast. Lindsay and Matthew enjoyed keeping track of their accumulating points and our discussions reinforced the correct behaviors.

### Step 3: Visit “Point Shop”.

My family holds family meetings on Saturday mornings. Lindsay and Matthew kept track of their points each week. We discussed the progress of our point plan at the meeting and the kids redeemed their 4-week total points for valuable rewards once a month. Tim and I developed a fun list of rewards and varied them each month. The discussions and “point shop” motivated Lindsay and Matthew to work towards certain rewards.

### Step 4: Follow through for four to six months.

We talked to my family upfront and explained to them how the point system works. Be honest. Your child should understand its purpose and desired effect. Establish an understanding that you don’t expect the behavior to change over night but you expect him or her to work at it. It took us about 4 months, with consistent attention to the point system, for behaviors to change. I still smile every time my daughter puts her clothes in the hamper and organizes her room! We held a formal end to the point system at the end and called it a celebration!

(Sidebar)

## Lindsay’s Family Point System

<b>Responsible Chores</b>	<b>Good Hygiene Habits</b>	<b>Eating Healthy</b>
Straighten room on Wed	Brush teeth 2x per day	Try new food
Make bed every am	Brush hair in am	Eat 2 fruits every day
Put dirty clothes in hamper	Showers on Mon, Wed, Fri	
Keep toys organized	Clip nails on Sunday	

(Side Bar)

## Point Shop Rewards for Lindsay

<b>50 points</b>	<b>75 points</b>	<b>100 points</b>
Fresh flowers in room	Family movie night	Go with Dad to work
Play date	Go out for ice cream after school	Pick the airplane seats for the upcoming family trip
Homemade brownies for after school treat	1 hour extra computer time	Family outing of choice

**2. My four year-old son needs glasses. I'm so worried about his self-confidence and how other children might respond to him. Do I need to prepare my child?**

I don't think so, or at least not overtly. My son, Matthew, needed glasses for a condition called Strabismus when he turned 5 years old. The Eye doctor told me this news after Matthew's Montessori teachers observed his eyes crossing when he became tired. I projected a "no big deal" attitude and made choosing the glasses fun and an adventure. I allowed Matthew to be part of the decision-making process and we chose glasses that fit his face perfectly. I thought they looked adorable!

The day he started wearing his new glasses, we went to a family get together at my father's house. My son walked into his grandpa's house feeling a bit nervous with his new look. He immediately took note of everyone in the room. My four siblings were there and Matthew noticed that all of his aunts and uncles wore glasses! His cousin, Alex, wore glasses too! Grandma and Grandpa wore them as well. In fact, almost everyone in the room had glasses on. They all made a fuss about Matthew's new eyeglasses and had fun comparing colors, styles and shapes of each other's glasses. By the time we left, my daughter Lindsay, asked when she could buy a pair of eyeglasses for herself!

I intentionally planned this get together expecting this outcome and for a little while, I stopped wearing my contact lenses and wore my glasses too. I gave Matthew a nice case and we set up a spot on his end table for him to lay his glasses at night. I showed him the process of keeping his eyeglasses clean and for the first few days, we cleaned our eyeglasses together.

Matthew adapted easily to wearing eyeglasses. It was a non-issue. The Montessori children showed only respect and interest in his new look. The glasses didn't interfere with sports or other activities. The only problem we encountered was the need to replace them after our dog, Lucy, decided to make the glasses her toy! Matthew doesn't wear glasses anymore as he outgrew the Strabismus after four years. I think of these years and I only smile at that adoring face and glad that Tim and I didn't worry nor get concerned with the old stereotypes about children and glasses.

**3. I have little time to plan a birthday party for my 3-year-old daughter. I feel the pressure of our community to make it the event of the century! I'm so stressed, what should I do? I want my daughter to be happy!**

I wish I knew then what I know now. I feel ridiculous when I think back to the time, money and absurdly, developmentally inappropriate parties I threw for my children for many years. I admit that the more creativity, children, and activity I included at the parties, the better the Mom I was, or so I thought! When Lindsay turned 3, I gave her a *Barbie and Ken* birthday party for the whole class. I wrote a play and had the children create puppets for the characters. The intent was for the children to perform the play with their newly created puppets.

Of-course, the children couldn't read the script, nor could they create such lavish puppets. Instead, their moms did the work and acted out the parts. The children lost interest and ran off and left the moms looking at me for direction. What now? I lost total control of the party, and, had a big mess on my hands from a lot of unfinished activities!

I love birthday parties. I like to give my kids' parties each year. That doesn't make me a better Mom than a Mom who doesn't give parties. Here is what I recommend if you do choose to plan a birthday party for your child, using Montessori principles:

**Invite the number of children of the age of your child.** If your child is turning 3, invite three children. And, don't ever make my mistake and invite the whole class! A young child cannot enjoy such a large group. The party becomes too overwhelming. And, by the way, I also recommend allowing your child to attend only the number of birthdays as their age, per year.

**Don't over schedule.** I have tried many different types of parties, from the Lion King party to a baseball party to an art party. The fact is, children enjoy just hanging out with their friends. I always seem to schedule too many activities and try to organize too much and my children always say, "*but we just want to play!*" The point is don't go overboard, and leave time for the children to just enjoy time together.

**Keep it simple.** I think that birthday parties have gotten too complicated. I recommend buying simple invitations to fill out and sending out a small number to friends. Keep the party to 1-1/2 hours unless the child is at least 9 years old. That's long enough for children to enjoy some time together. Order pizza to be delivered or just serve cake if the party is after lunch. Organize a single activity, e.g. a baseball game, or an art project, and allow time for children to play. Invite parents to stay to help you if your child is less than 8 years old.

**Open gifts after the party ends.** I prefer my child open his gifts later with just family. It allows the festivities to continue after the party concludes. Children under 8 years old don't enjoy watching their friend open gift after gift. They would much rather run around and play. Be sure to role model for your child in the proper etiquette for accepting gifts including writing thank you notes to his friends soon after the party day.

**4. My husband and I are dying to get away with the kids, but our children are 1 and 3 years old. Can we take our children with us? Should we attempt to go to Disney World for our vacation?**

I think you can take your children with you on a vacation but choose your spot wisely. Traveling with children can be anything but a vacation. I recommend planning travel in increments. Start small. Take your time. Remember, the best trip with young children might just be to your local hotel. Swim in the pool. Order room service and you might decide to make that an annual tradition!

We always bring our children with us on vacations – partly because we don't have babysitting coverage for them. Tim and I chose beach trips the first few years. We rented a house directly on Bethany beach in Delaware, a three hour drive away, so one of us could easily go indoors with the baby if need be. We usually invited family members to join us to add an extra set of hands. The house had a full kitchen – of-course, an essential while the children are young!

I recommend waiting until your child is at least 7 before taking on Disney World. The stimuli and activities exhaust the parents, not just the child. We enjoyed our Disney trip when my children became 7 and 9 years old but still limited the amount of park activity to the mornings and hung out by the pool in the afternoons.

My family started traveling to Washington DC when my children were born. The 4-hour drive is reasonable and we get to see my cousins who live outside the city. We go every year as a family tradition. We go for a weekend and stay in a decent, kid-friendly hotel. We started out visiting one museum, for my husband and my benefit, and now we get to maybe three museums, during our stay. The museums in Washington DC are free – a real plus, but we still don't want to overdo it! The kids love the pool and room service. I read a lot while

my husband does the pool thing. These weekends get us out of our daily routine and give us quality family time.

The time goes fast. Last summer, my children turned 9 and 11 and we took them to France and Spain on an ambitious adventure. The hotels and miles traveled over three weeks were only doable given their traveling experiences growing up. The reality? My kids still recall the hiking experiences and hotel pools the most when asked about this international vacation!

**5. My husband and I are thinking of getting a family dog. We have children 7 and 9 years old. Is this a good idea or a mistake?**

Well that's difficult to answer because getting a dog is the best and worst decision we ever made! My daughter, Lindsay, is responsible for feeding our dog, Lucy, and giving her water. Pets offer an opportunity for children to learn responsibility and commitment, big reasons for getting a puppy in the first place.

Lucy is now a 3- year old Bernese Mountain Dog that happens to be one of the largest dogs in existence. She weighs over 100lbs. and looks like a big bear. Lucy is playful and cute. She loves us unconditionally, and Lindsay and Matthew adore her. Lucy also barks a lot at night when she hears noises outside. She needs constant attention and lots of exercise. She hates the kennel and makes it unbearable when we drop her off. She jumps on our guests when they first arrive, and leaves her fur all over the house. We love Lucy, but we need to think about her, and care for her at all times.

I come from a dog family. We always had dogs while I grew up and my entire family owns dogs today. When my family gets together the dogs take part in the festivities. The activities center around dogs. We hike with the dogs. We camp with the dogs. We play with them. The house is unbearably quiet when Lucy is not there. I realized a long time ago that Lucy adds life to our home. Her personality and love are infectious. We love Lucy despite the dirty paws, ticks and noise she brings with her.

No doubt, Lucy demands a lot from us, but we consider her part of the family. I guess getting a dog is a great idea but be ready for more work than you bargained for. Be sure to ask yourself, "Is your family prepared for all the work involved in taking care of a dog? Do you have a plan for your dog when you're out of town? Are your children old enough to help take care of the dog? Do you want a puppy or older dog that is already trained? And, do what I did. Give yourself six months and if you still feel that it is a good idea, go for it!