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The Negative Effects of a 'Time-Out' on Children

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I am embarrassed by it now. I was a bratty, entitled, and sometimes just plain nasty teenager. On a night where my attitude was as entitled and self-righteous as ever, my mom lost her ability to reason with me.

“You go to your room and you think about what you’ve done!” she ordered.

I stormed to my room and slammed the door so hard I thought I had broken it. I cranked up my Henry Rollins CD as loud as I could. (Mom hated that CD.) I grabbed my belt from my bed and slapped the wall as hard as I could. I was proud of the hole the belt left in the wall, even though I knew there would be a price to pay later.

As the music blared, adrenaline coursed through my brain and body. But I didn’t follow Mom’s instructions. I was not thinking about what I had done. I was thinking about how much I hated her. I was plotting my revenge on whatever sibling had upset me. My focus was on me, me, me! And all I could think about was how *unfair* the whole world was.

Time-Out Is Not Discipline

As more and more parents accept that hitting children—even a ‘light tap on the bottom’—is not an effective or appropriate discipline strategy, time-out is becoming the go-to discipline tool. Parenting programs advocate time-out as a crucial strategy for controlling children (or, as they put it, for “managing their behavior”).

Time-out is a polite term for solitary confinement. It is a forced isolation for our child. Even when enforced in a soft, gentle manner, time-out is a punishment. It says to a child, “I don’t like what you did and I’m going to make you pay a price for it.”

But discipline and punishment are not the same. While punishment is about hurting someone for their actions, discipline is about teaching, instructing, guiding, and problem-solving.

What Does Time-Out Teach?

If that is the case, what are our children learning when we place them in time-out? Time-out teaches, “when you do something I do not like, I will reject you.”

It teaches children that when they struggle, we do not want to be around them until they can behave in a way that is pleasing to us. Psychologists call this ‘conditional positive regard.’

Substantial research describes how humans, and particularly children, cope with distress and difficulty best when they have the support of those around them. We need to be soothed and cared for by people close to us. When children are challenging, they don’t

need reprimanding. They need understanding. Putting them in time-out leaves them suffering alone. When our children act out, they are telling us (in challenging and uncivil ways) that they have an unmet need. The acronym, *HALTSS*, can help us identify those needs. Is our child **H**ungry, **A**ngry, **L**onely, **T**ired, **S**tressed, or **S**ick? Isolating our child when she is feeling any of these things, regardless of her age, will rarely assist her to regulate her behavior.

It is at the times that our children ‘deserve’ our love the least that they need it the most. (Of course, they always deserve our love, but we often make it contingent on their behavior.)

How Does Time-Out Impact Our Children?

With the development of MRI technology (a technique for measuring and mapping brain activity), scientists have discovered that the experience of rejection causes blood flow to increase to the same areas of the brain that light up when physical pain is experienced. Making our children feel isolated and rejected causes the brain to respond the same way as it would if we were to physically hurt our child. The emotional pain is just as real, to the brain, as physical pain.

Furthermore, time-out:

- Makes our child angrier.
- Decreases our child’s capacity to develop effective coping skills.
- Ruptures our relationship.
- Ignores the reasons that underlie our child’s behavior.
- Makes our child more selfish as they think less about their behavior, and more about how unfair the world is.
- Makes them feel worthless as we ignore their needs at the time they need us the most.

We often think that time-out is helping our child calm down. With enough time, this may be true. There are times when our children do need some space to create some distance between themselves and whatever the problem is. But in the main, our children are only aware of how they’re not good enough, and how no one loves them—especially their mom or dad. Whenever we use time out as a punishment, we create the negative outcomes above. When we use it in a supportive way, we can create an opportunity to improve outcomes through much more effective discipline.

An Opportunity

When our children challenge us, we can *turn away* from them by ignoring. We can *turn against* by punishing or issuing a time-out. Or we can *turn towards* them and see their difficult behavior as a chance to solve problems together, and a chance to develop empathy and perspective. Our children will act as children. As adults, how we will act?

Discipline that involves conversation, perspective, and teamwork allows our children to develop skills like empathy, and creative thinking. It builds our relationships rather than rupturing them. It facilitates responsible, respectful, and empowered decision-making by children who are learning better ways to control themselves.

Try a 'Time In'

There will be times when a child is so worked up that you cannot talk, collaborate, reason, or teach. When this happens, explain (calmly) that you know he is upset. Ask if he wants a hug. (You will be rejected.) Go to a quiet place together. Stay there and offer a hug. (You will be rejected.) If your child allows it, stay with him. If he doesn't, agree to leave, and offer a hug. (You will be rejected.) As you leave the room, offer a hug. And promise that as soon as he wants a hug, you'll be right outside.

In this way, you are not punishing or rejecting. You are being as available as he will let you. And if he doesn't come to you within a minute or two, return, and ask once again, whether he wishes to have a hug. Once he is calm, begin talking, problem-solving, asking questions, and teaching.

Next time that you are tempted to time-out your child, try a 'time-in'. Connect. Understand. Talk about emotions. Problem-solve together. Build your relationship. It will be enriching, lead to better behavioral outcomes, and build a more resilient child.

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