

TIME-IN, NOT TIME-OUT

By Judy Arnall

Tired of holding the bedroom door handle closed when your child is trying to leave during a time-out? Fed up with your child trashing his room during time-out? Frustrated because you can't get your child to calm-down and think about restitution during his time-out?

Perhaps it's time to re-think the way a time-out is used. Some parents use a time-out for punishment and it often erupts into a power struggle. Other parents use time-out for a "calm-down" period, designed so that the child will regain emotional control. In both cases, the child is usually forced into an isolating time away from parents and usually in a boring place. Originally, a time-out consisted of removing the child from a positive situation. However, often the child is acting up or blowing up because of the negative emotions he's feeling. The emotions are not generated from an environment of pleasantness, but rather, a negative situation that is occurring. For example, a child is fighting with a sibling and is feeling angry. He hits the brother because he is feeling angry and frustrated. Removal from a negative situation is what a child often needs, but he also needs help to calm-down. So ideally, a time-out should not be a punishment, but instead, a calm-down strategy for an upset child. Many parents call this a Time-In.

The Trouble with Time-out

Time-outs have many concerns, but the five most common are as follows. First, children in time-out don't really know why they are there. Although most adults hope the child is thinking about their part in the previous situation and how to make restitution, most often the child is really thinking about revenge or how unfair the situation is and how they will get even when they are done jail time. Secondly, as mentioned, time-outs escalate anger, both the child and the parents when the child won't stay and the erupted anger leads to power struggles that nobody wins. Third, often as child get older and acquire more "attitude" parents can't force them to move or stay in time-out. Spirited children openly oppose time-outs with a vengeance. Many parents have marks on their doors to prove it! In addition, giving a child a time-out models power, not peace. The fourth problem is that they learn that when someone is bothering them, it's better to force that person to go away, rather than the real-life skill of removing oneself when things get too intolerable.

Lastly, time-outs address the symptoms, not the underlying needs or feelings (NOF). Many children go to time-out 25 times in a day because their underlying feelings are not addressed, acknowledged or validated.

Adults often take time-outs for themselves when they are angry and frustrated. They go for a walk, blow off steam at the racquetball court, or just stay in their rooms and listen to a soothing piece of music. The time-out is a useful skill to teach your children, but the way that it is used is a big factor in achieving the results that you desire. You want your children to think a time out is a great idea, not something to be dreaded. The Parent Directed Time-out is used as a punishment and is not recommended. If you want a great way to calm down your children, focus them on their emotions, actions, and restitution, and connect your parent-child relationship in the process, try the Child Directed Time-out. Here are five differences between the two types:

Parent-Directed Time-out (Not Recommended)

WHAT: Used as a punishment or a "Calm-down" strategy

WHEN: Send the child away for a certain number of minutes per year of age.

HOW: Give the child nothing to do and instruct the child to "think" about his actions. Often, the older child is really thinking about his anger, the unfairness of the situation and/or how to retaliate. Or, the younger child is often confused and overwhelmed by his strong emotions and doesn't understand why he is abandoned.

WHO: Parent requires child to be isolated, unproductive (not allowed to do anything) and away (from anyone or anything).

WHERE: Parent decides the location such as an empty chair, stripped bedroom or the "naughty" step. The time-out location is usually a place that is unpleasant and boring which is designed to punish the child.

Child-Directed Time-In (Recommended)

WHAT: Used as a Calm-down strategy only.

WHEN: Suggest the child take a time-in away from the situation, either physically or emotionally. Let the child decide when he's calm enough to start problem-solving the issue.

HOW: Parents stay calm! Give the child tools to calm down, to suit his learning style, while he sorts out his feelings. The auditory learner needs soothing music. The visual learner might wish to watch an aquarium, video, or draw a picture. The kinesthetic learner might benefit from hugging stuffed toys, or having a parent rub his shoulders or hands, or deep breathing practice. Show the child how to breathe. Offer touch – hugs, caressing strokes, back rubs to help the child calm-down. Hold or rock the child in your lap. You are not reinforcing the misbehaviour with cuddles, but are using physical touch to help the child regain enough emotional calm to move his brain from emotional overload back to logical thinking and learning.

Then, when he is calm, you can teach, show and problem-solve and then he will hear you!

WHO: Ask the child if he wishes you or another adult to stay, comfort, and talk with him. An extraverted child may need a sounding board, whereas an introverted child may need solitude. Let it be their choice decided in a calm time.

WHERE: Child chooses the location such as a bedroom, special fort, going for a walk, or even the basketball hoop.

Don't get into a power struggle! Remember the benefit of parent time-outs for yourself to control your anger. Stepping back from a power struggle doesn't mean the child "wins". It means you are mature enough to take a self-imposed time-out and calm down. Isn't that what ultimately, you want to teach to your children?

The goal is to teach your child the appropriate ways to calm down when they are experiencing strong feelings rather than to punish your child for having those feelings and expressing them in not so appropriate ways. Don't forget to come back later and problem solve the original trigger when both you and your child are calmer. For example, teach the child different ways to handle fights with his brother, other than hitting, when he is calm, not distressed.

The best time to discuss the Child Directed Time-In with your child is not in the emotional heat of the moment. Do it during a neutral time, where you both are in good moods. Observe how your child usually calms himself and ask for his input. Welcome the connection in your relationship! Herald the incredible learning that occurs! Expect a real change!

Judy Arnall is a professional international award-winning <u>Parenting Speaker</u>, and Trainer, Mom of five children, and author of the best-selling, "Discipline Without Distress: 135 tools for raising caring, responsible children without time-out, spanking, punishment or bribery" She specializes in "Parenting the Digital Generation" www.professionalparenting.ca (403) 714-6766 jarnall@shaw.ca

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