

## THE USE AND MISUSE OF TIME-OUT

The term “time-out” initially began in laboratory experiments with rats. “Time-out” referred to the time off the food pellet reward to see how long the rat could sustain his memory of hitting the lever to get the reward. It has been used in sports and was introduced into parenting as a way to control a child’s behavior. It has become the modern parent’s alternative to spanking. Clearly it is better than hitting, name-calling, or using words to belittle or shame a child. Any parent who fears slipping into those old habits will do better to use a time-out. But it should never be the goal of positive discipline.

Time-out isolates the child in a chair, on the stairs, or in his room and is expected to be a soul-searching time for the child to mend his ways and come back with a positive attitude. Rarely is this the result. Mostly time-out is just another punishment. And, as is true of most punishments, it evokes more anger and resentment in the child who ends up feeling unheard and misunderstood. It tells the child you disapprove of her (she really doesn’t understand that it’s just her behavior you disapprove of) and does not teach her what *to* do—only that what she did do was not okay. As with most punishments, it is much easier for the parent to send a child off than to engage in problem-solving on the spot.

When a child feels he is not accepted or approved of, he is likely to either implode or explode. A sensitive, adaptive child will see himself as not worthy of approval, a disappointment to his mother or father, no good. He will acquiesce and “be good” out of fear of more reprimands or by taking responsibility for his parent’s emotions and reactions. A stubborn, persistent child will likely feel unjustly accused, decide life isn’t fair, and set out to prove himself by fighting back with defiance, disrespect, and controlling behavior. If punitive discipline continues, he will eventually spend as much time away from home as possible.

But time-out (or taking a break—a more appropriate title) can be used effectively if it is understood differently. There are certainly times when behavior and emotions—either the parents or the child’s—get out of control and need calming.

## THE PROPER USE OF TIME-OUT

When YOU are out of control:

Time-out is always better than physically or emotionally abusing a child. If your button has been pushed, and you are afraid you will explode or do damage to your child with your words or your hands, by all means send your child to a safe place. For maximum effectiveness, this plan should be set up with your child ahead of time. You might say something like, "Sometimes I get so mad that I am afraid I might do something wrong. (This is good modeling for your child too—nothing wrong with setting up a contingency plan for when you are angry enough to do something you know you will regret) When I am afraid of that, I will tell you to get to your safe place. I will come and get you as soon as I am calmed down." Together determine what her safe place will be. Your goal is to use this only until it becomes obsolete, not as a means to allow your inappropriate reactions to continue. This happens when buttons are pushed. Hopefully you will learn how to defuse your buttons and to respond more effectively in the moment. For most of us this takes time and lots of practice.

When YOUR CHILD is out of control:

Rather than sending your child into isolation where emotions will fester, and little will be learned except that he is unacceptable to you, pay attention to what he really needs—connection to you—and go to him to calm him down. Stop whatever you are doing, make physical contact if you can, and say, "We need to take a break. Come with me, and I'll help you so you can get back to what you were doing." It is imperative that this time you give your child becomes your priority in that moment. Your agenda must go on hold for the time being. Pick your child up or hold his hand and go to a quieter room. Read a book, talk to a stuffed animal, cuddle, wait until any tears subside, whatever you discover works with your child. You may want to start your break with an acknowledgment of his feelings. "You wanted that truck and didn't want Billy to play with it anymore. You felt so mad when he wouldn't give it back that you wanted to hit him." No "buts" yet. Acknowledging doesn't condone the behavior. It merely means that you understand how he felt at that moment. Empathy will definitely begin the calming. Read a book, cuddle quietly, whatever works, and then say, "You are definitely back in control of yourself now. If you still want the truck, what do you think you need to do differently this time?" After emotions are down, problem-solve with your child by facilitating his thinking to come up with a solution. Refrain from telling him what he should do. Remember that this is a key opportunity for learning and he

will learn much more by talking it through himself. You can offer suggestions if he is at a loss, but he must come up with the final solution. In addition to how to appropriately handle the situation, what he will learn is that you are there for him no matter what.