

Time Out:

How It is Abused

by Roslyn Duffy

Typically time out is . . .

- **A new name for punishment.**

One child hits her playmate. The teacher marches over and tells the child to “TAKE A TIME OUT!” Although the words “AND SUFFER” remain unspoken, they reverberate in the air. Children hear the unspoken “suffer” loud and clear.

- **Used as a threat.**

“Bobby, do you want to have to take a time out?” Again, the unspoken message is that Bobby better change what he is doing or he will suffer for it. Is a suffering child your goal? Is fear the means by which we want children to learn acceptable behavior?

- **The only way the adult knows how to respond to a child’s misbehavior.**

Imagine if the only way a driver could control a car was with the brake pedal. There would be no steering wheel, no way to adjust the gas pedal to reduce speed, and no rearview mirror to monitor traffic. Would you want to drive such a car? If time out is your only tool, it is time to get a better equipped vehicle.

- **Rarely discussed with children except when they are being sent to it.**

It is up to the child, with her two year old or younger reasoning ability, to figure out what time out is, why she is being sent there, and how she should act now. Many a child sits on that time out chair deciding: I am a bad person; no one likes me; or she even sits there smiling because she is now the center of attention. Are those the messages we want children to receive?

- **A black hole where children disappear.**

You plop Mary in the time out chair and suddenly Sally is throwing up her lunch. By the time you have Sally cleaned up, find her mom’s emergency phone number, and call to leave a message that Sally is sick, 20 minutes have slipped past. With a jolt, you remember that Mary is still in time out. . . .

- **A way to make children “pay” for their misbehavior.**

When we focus on controlling a child’s behavior, we must win each battle. If we win, what role does that leave for the child? Is time out a “You Pay — You Stay” corner of your classroom?

- **Only for children.**

First of all — who needs the time out? Sometimes it is the adult. An upset adult placing herself in time out teaches a powerful lesson. For many children, the only response they have ever seen to adult anger is violence. Adult use of time out provides valuable lessons about life.



Time Out:

What It Could/Should Look Like

Positive time out is . . .

- **A chance for the child and adult to cool off.**

Cooling off takes the “heat” out of the moment and creates more space between the upset feelings and the typically hurtful reactions of both the child(ren) and adult.

- **A place where we go to feel better again.**

We each do better when we feel better. Imagine a scene where you are eating a luscious ice cream sundae. Your spouse comes by and reminds you how fat you are and says you shouldn’t be eating all those calories. Don’t you immediately smile and thank him for his helpful words and toss the rest of the sundae to the dog? Probably not. Your spouse will be lucky if you don’t toss the ice cream at his head. Discouragement does not motivate anyone.

- **A means by which children learn to change disruptive behavior into constructive behavior.**

One child lands a blow at a classmate’s block tower and prepares for a second jab at the classmate. A teacher intervenes, sending both children to time out. Time out gives both children a break, a chance to regain composure, and provides needed damage control.

- **Most effective when the attitude of the adult is kind and firm.**

The adult who sees time out as positive does not use it as a threat, try to manipulate children with it, or stomp around ordering a child into time out. Modeling self-control is the adult’s responsibility.

- **Discussed in advance and the details planned by both adults and children.**

An explanation and discussion of positive time out takes place at a calm moment. Children help decide where time outs will take place and what objects (cuddly teddy bears, koosh balls, or silky fabrics) or furniture to use in the time out area. They understand that the time out area is a place where they may go to help them feel better again.

- **Available to a child for as little or as much time as she decides.**

Children have control over when they are ready to leave the time out area. Remember: The goal is for the child to feel better again.

Children want parents and teachers to set reasonable limits, guide and teach them, and follow through with dignity and respect. Positive time out is a tool that meets these goals even when the adult is correcting misbehavior or helping a child learn more appropriate responses.

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