



The Spirit of an Effective Time-Out

By Sandy M. Wolf, MFT

I have often gotten clients coming into my office exasperated because the techniques they've been trying to employ to discipline their children are "not working". To take one example, time-outs have become quite popular and common-place in our arsenal to rein in our unruly children. However, what I have found is that many parents non-intentionally implement this technique incorrectly. Most parents seem to know the "rule" of putting their child in a time-out approximately 1 minute per year of life, thus, a 3 year old would warrant about a 3 minute time-out, and so on. What many parents are missing in the implementation is the "spirit", if you will, of how an effective time out should be put into place.

Parents often inadvertently reinforce the negative behavior they are trying to quash by implementing the time-out in an angry manner...yelling, moving the child around gruffly, perhaps some name-calling (e.g., "stop being a baby", "you're being a brat", "why do I put up with you", among other things I've heard parents say). I am a parent, and I am the first to admit that your child(ren) can certainly raise some intensely angry feelings in you at times. The thing is that by reacting to your child in an angry manner, you can actually reinforce the negative behavior, making it more likely to occur in the future. Some children simply try to get a reaction out of you, even if it means a negative one, because attention, good *or* bad (as crazy as that sounds) is a reinforcing event for humans, as we are social creatures, seeking to establish connection with those around us.

Another thing I have seen is that the parent keeps talking to the child while in time-out. Again, usually out of anger, in order to feel they've gotten their point across...to the max! However, as mentioned above, because this increases interaction with you, it will also provide reinforcement to the child to continue the behavior that got them into time-out in the first place and therefore defeats the purpose of time-out.

I also see parents giving lengthy explanations that especially really young children are just not going to get. Keeping the explanation to no more than a concise sentence or two regarding the behavior that is putting them into time-out is most effective.

Another mistake often made is giving a time-out numerous times per day. This defeats the purpose. Your child will become "immune", if you will. Have a list in your mind of what warrants a time-out and what doesn't. Learn to pick your battles. Some things really can slide because they are so minor.

Also, are your expectations of your child developmentally appropriate? For example, are you expecting a toddler to act like a 10 year old? That is going to set you up to have

a very tense and battle-filled relationship with your little one. The "mood" or "flavor" of your relationship with your child set now, from your end, will be a hint of what your relationship with your child as a teen will be like! In other words, you will get back in attitude from a teen what you gave when your child was younger.

What should you do? Catch your child when they are doing the *right* thing (say you put your child in time-out for throwing something at their sibling when angry, and next time you see them becoming angry, they don't throw their toy....*praise that* behavior!). I truly believe that parents want the best for their child(ren) and do not (in all cases) intentionally do some of these things. The parents I have worked with in my practice are usually grateful for having these pointed out to them to become more effective in their parenting. We generally are not given a guideline of best parenting practices when we have our children and often learn as we go, hopefully getting the sound guidance along the way from other knowledgeable and experienced parents.