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Time-Out: Civilizing the Wild Ones

Children come into the world without a sense of “right” or “wrong”. As infants they function from a view of “what works” and “what doesn’t work”. Only with parental involvement do our children learn how to manage their impulses and follow social rules.

A principle way that we teach pro-social values is through the use of the technique of Time-Out. This technique is based on the principles of learning and, when applied exactly as described, can be highly effective in helping our children learn the rules of cooperative living.

Three qualities of Time-Out form the power of the technique. These are: (1) Consistency, (2) Persistence and (3) Quickness in Action. These qualities are found in those learning situations where we need only one lesson to learn the realities of our choice.

As an example of how we learn in a “one-trial” situation think about how even very little children learn not to touch something that is hot. The quality of consistency is noted in the rule “When something is glowing red and feels warm as my hand goes near it I get burned when I touch it”. Persistence is found in the rule “Every time I touch something that is glowing red and feels warm as my hand goes near it I get burned”. Given the “Quickness in Action” in feeling the burn when we touch something hot it is clear that we don’t need to repeat the experiment. We learn the first time!

Time-Out is not about punishment. It does not require yelling or screaming...in fact the best communication in carrying out the consequence is total silence. What Time-Out does is use the concept of social isolation based on a clear rule and immediate consequence.

Think of a pro-social value you would like to teach your children. Perhaps the value of cooperation over physical aggression. When setting a rule with your child make sure that it is something that can be seen and measured. Don’t say “Don’t fight with your brother”. Instead make the statement “If you touch your brother without permission you will go to Time-Out”. Make sure you have the child’s attention when you state the rule and have them repeat it back to you.

Then, when you observe the rule being broken (as your child pushes, hits, or otherwise touches without permission) you take immediate action. No warning, no threat of “if you do that again”, just immediate action. Move quickly (and without a sound) across the room and take the child by the arm or pick them up and go immediately to the Time-Out area.

Ideally the Time-Out area will be a separate room with a door that can be closed. If such a private space is not available then set up a chair or other “spot” in a location where the child cannot visually see others.

Taking the child to Time-Out you should have already conducted a “practice run” of what Time-Out is and what the child is expected to do to earn their way out. When you arrive at the Time-Out area simply direct the child to sit in the Time-Out “Spot” and then close the door or otherwise walk away. If the child attempts to get out of the room then stand at the door and hold the knob so that they cannot

exit. Even if they know you are on the other side of the door they will still be unhappy that they cannot see you.

Determine the length of time the child will stay in Time-Out based on their age. Time-Out is best used with children under 10 because they are usually much smaller in size than the adult and are more easily dominated without the risk of physical injury. A five year old child would be expected to stay in Time-Out for five minutes. Have a wind up timer near-by to measure the time. Such a timer is also helpful in how it will usually have a bell chime when time is up.

Time-Out is completed when the timer goes off or, in the event the child is attempting to get out or otherwise is yelling or screaming, one minute pass when they become quiet. So the actual time can be as short as the age in minutes or it might extend to an hour or more if they are out of control. The important point is not to interact with the child when they are out of control as it teaches them that their inappropriate behavior gets your attention. Only enter the room or area when they are quiet.

At the time you enter the room the child must be seated in their "Spot". This is a chair or other identified location (in the bathroom this might be the toilet or bathtub) when they must be when you enter. Practice this step with the child during the "practice session" when you are demonstrating to them the technique. If they are not in the "Spot" then you simply, without a word, close the door or walk away and re-set the timer.

If the child is in their "Spot" then proceed to the next step, that of verbal recognition of your authority. When you enter the room or area and the child is in their "Spot" you say something like "Are you now ready to obey me" or "Are you now ready to follow the rules". It is important that all the adults involved with this technique use the same wording as this helps in generalizing authority across different settings.

If the child does anything other than say "Yes" (e.g., they are silent, start to argue or cry) then you immediately turn and walk out or away from them and again repeat the entire exercise. Only when the child has performed the two steps of (1) being in the "Spot" and (2) saying "Yes" in response to your command can they be released from Time-Out.

This does not necessarily mean that they are actually going to go along with whatever directive or rule you placed them in Time-Out for. It only means at first that they learn that this is the only way to get out of Time-Out. Therefore you must be fully prepared to immediately put them back in Time-Out if they do not comply with the rule again.

As they learn to follow the pro-social rules you instruct them in it is critical that you reward their cooperation with a strong measure of love and affection. No matter how angry you might feel as you place them in Time-Out it is critical that you be positive and openly affectionate as they return to the family. This emotional "Re-Connect" is essential to getting the child to feel that there is a positive relationship with adults around him and that he/she is accepted and loved when they follow the rules.

Time-Out is an important technique of parenting and, when used with young children will help set the stage for cooperation and less turmoil as they move into their teenage and young adult years. How many of us still twinge when mother points her finger at us or when we get the "momma look" that reminds us of a day when we once sat in a small chair. Loving our children can be one of the most rewarding parts of our lives, and teaching them the "rules of society" can help them to become productive adults and loving parents.