



The Trouble with Time-Outs: Why the Most Popular Parenting Technique Can Cause More Harm than Good

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Josh and Sandy have two children: Jake, seven, and Tabitha, who turned four about a month ago. They love their kids and do everything they can to be great parents. When Jake was five, they started having problems with some of his behaviors. Sometimes Jake seemed not to be able to listen at all, ignoring anything his mom or dad asked of him. Other times he would get aggressive with Tabitha, wanting to play roughly or hit her. They asked their pediatrician what to do and he recommended using time-outs. He explained that when children misbehave, parents should give them one minute of time-out in his or her room (or in another designated area) for every year of his age. Immediately, Josh and Sandy started using five-minute time-outs with Jake when he would “act up.” For a year or so this seemed to work most of the time, and they were thrilled. Jake either stopped the behavior immediately to “get out” of the time-out or he would behave better when he came back from his room. However, lately the time-outs have stopped working and things have gotten worse. When his parents threaten a time-out these days, Jake just says “I don’t care” and goes to his room and stays there. At the same time, his behavior is getting worse and worse. By the time Josh and Sandy came to see me for help, they were feeling frustrated and powerless.

The Greatest Human Need

Before we explore the origins and potential dangers of time-outs, let’s set the stage by talking about what children need more than anything else for healthy psychological and emotional development. This will explain the basis for most behavior issues.

The need for connection and closeness with those we love is the greatest human need. A well-established area of developmental psychology, Attachment Theory, is dedicated to studying this phenomenon. One of the rules of Attachment is that most of our behavior as humans is determined by how well we are able to “hold on” to those that we love—how well we are able to feel deeply connected, even while apart. When we have deeply rooted connections, we thrive.

When we feel alone or disconnected, we want to be connected. We want not to be alone. At first, we seek “positive” attention from those we love. If we can get it, it is wonderful. However, if we cannot get positive attention, we will get attention

any way we can—even if it is more “negative” attention. The fear of separation, of not being connected to those who are most important to us, is so huge, so primal, that any connection is better than none.

The Origins of the Time-Out

Time-outs are often introduced to parents as a “less harmful” alternative to spanking, a practice that was very common not too long ago but that has mostly become a thing of the past. This is good. It’s good that we don’t spank our children any more, and we should never go back to it.

As was the case with Josh and Sandy, many parents these days are introduced to time-outs by their pediatricians. In fact, the American Pediatric Association recommends the practice of “one minute for each year.” I am not questioning the intentions of these doctors—they are trying to provide parents with a helpful tool—but I disagree with the position that time-outs are not harmful.

Why Time-Outs are Harmful and Don’t Work

Children who are acting out are trying to tell us that something is wrong. They might not even know what it is, but their behavior tells us. Usually they are feeling disconnected or struggling with some difficult feelings. Using separation-based discipline like time-outs tells a child that when he is in need, we will answer his pleas for connection with the exact opposite of what he is asking for. The reason time-outs appear to work at first is that a child who is seeking proximity is very alarmed by the threat of greater physical and emotional distance. He’ll do anything he can to stop feeling this alarm.

What happened with Josh and Sandy is a perfect example. At first this threat works. Jake is so alarmed by the thought of having even more distance from his mom or dad that he stops doing what he’s doing. However, as time goes by Jake becomes desensitized to this separation and *stops caring*—because it hurts too much to want closeness and not get it. He puts an emotional wall around himself. When this happens often enough kids will turn to other people and things—such as friends, video games, or the internet—to get their needs met in a less vulnerable way. This makes it more difficult to do our jobs as parents.

“Sometimes when I am getting really angry with my child, aren’t time-outs the best thing I can do?”

I often say in my talks and in my consults with parents, that when we are at the boiling point with our kids and not seeing clearly, it may be true that *somebody* needs a time-out. It just may be the parent, not the child. It is not that all time-outs are all bad all the time; it’s just crucial that we understand their potential

downside and that we become more conscious about how we use them.

One of the most important goals of parenting is to communicate the message to our children that even if *what they are doing* is not OK, our relationship with them *is* OK. Even if our intentions are wonderful, some of the discipline methods we are being encouraged to use these days (like time-outs) can result in a child feeling that your relationship is *not* OK—that *they* are not OK.

“But I’ve been using time-outs and they work. Sometimes all I have to do is threaten a time-out and the bad behavior stops.”

I hear this all the time from parents, and that’s why I told the story of Josh and Sandy. I know that time-outs—even just the threat of them—can appear to work at first; but they will stop working over time as your child becomes desensitized in order to avoid feeling the hurt of separation. This can cause real damage to your relationship with your child. This doesn’t mean you can’t repair this damage—you almost always can—but it will make things more difficult for a while.

My mentor Dr. Gordon Neufeld, author of the must-have book *Hold On to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More than Peers*, likes to talk about what time-outs would do in a marriage. What if your spouse threatened separation (like making you sleep on the couch) every time you did something wrong? You might be motivated at first to shape up but eventually you’d probably become resentful and stop caring.

Parenting *Without* the Time-Out

Let’s go back to Josh and Sandy. When they first came to see me for parenting consultation they didn’t know what to do. Time-outs had worked well for a while and they had become dependent on them. The problem was that time-outs stopped working and they didn’t like the way they were relating to Jake these days.

I started working with them on shifting their entire parenting approach. I explained that we are supposed to do most of our jobs as parents *proactively*, not *reactively*. We need to provide for our children’s needs for closeness and connection *before* there is a problem. If we don’t, we will spend our time figuring out the best way to react to their problem behavior. This is like reacting to symptom after symptom rather than addressing the underlying disease.

In this particular case, I worked with Josh and Sandy on improving a few fundamentals in their home. I encouraged them to shift their perspective from reactive parenting to insight and proactive behavior. I suggested that when things were not going well they ask themselves, “what is my child’s need here?” and,

“what is going on with him right now?” Learning to read a child’s emotional state and needs is critical.

We worked on improving how often they were “collecting” their kids. This is a term Dr. Neufeld uses often in his work. To collect a child means to provide the connection and proximity she is seeking—preferably before she seeks it. It means that we need to connect with our children before we do anything else. For Josh and Sandy, this meant incorporating lots of new rituals, big and small. With two children and a busy schedule, they realized that sometimes they might have just assumed Jake was OK, when actually he needed some more connection. Sometimes this meant spending extra time reading with Jake in the morning before school. Sometimes this meant “special time” with Mom in the afternoon. Sometimes this simply meant surprising him with a big hug and kiss when he wasn’t expecting it.

Most importantly, I worked with them on being more conscious of communicating the message to Jake that no matter what happened, they loved him, and that their relationship was OK. At first Sandy was almost offended when I brought this up. She said, “Of course he knows we love him.” However, she soon realized that although this was obvious to her, at times it wasn’t obvious to Jake. He is a sensitive boy and needs a lot of attention and reassurance at times.

Being more proactive immediately made a big difference in their home, but they still wanted to know what to do when incidents actually happened. I told them that the guiding principle with incidents was to try to do no harm and to avoid the temptation of teaching a lesson in that moment. If Jake was doing something they found unacceptable, they should let him know it’s not OK in a way that is firm but loving. Then it’s usually best to take control of the situation, to change things up. When the situation has calmed down and they are feeling a strong connection to Jake, they can talk to him about what happened and why it was unacceptable—in a way that Jake can hear.

These days, they don’t have nearly as many of the kinds of incidents that used to lead to a time-out. But when they do have a difficult situation, Josh and Sandy have a completely different way of handling it. They are more confident and empathetic and they make a priority of not making the situation worse with more feelings of separation. They communicate that the behavior is wrong, but they also communicate that *they are OK* and *things will be OK*.

Summary

Time-outs are used by the majority of parents in North America and are endorsed by lots of well-meaning professionals. They are used in many of our schools. Don’t judge yourself for using them in the past; that won’t help you or your child.

If you are feeling frustrated and overwhelmed with your child and you just need to regroup, then maybe some form of time-out wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. You can give yourself a time-out and take some deep breaths, or have your child sit quietly while you're in the room. Just have more consciousness about the situation and the language you use. Realize that by the time your child is acting out, something is really wrong and your child needs you to help make it right. Separation problems are at the root of most of our problems as humans. Don't make them worse by using more separation.

What To Do Now:

1. Work on "collecting" your child more often, especially at transition times in the day—such as in the morning, after school, and after dinner. Provide some connection, even brief ones, when your children are not expecting them and definitely before there are signs they need it. Try this out for a couple of weeks to see what a difference it makes.
2. Help your child "hold on" to you emotionally through separation and through incidents. When she is going to be away from you, give her ways of feeling connected to you until you are reunited. Let her know you'll be thinking about her with a surprise note in her lunch, or even something physical to hold on to like a bracelet of yours or a special token. And when you have an incident, communicate the message, "We're ok and we'll get through this."
3. Work on growing your awareness, especially when incidents occur, of what's going on emotionally for both you and your child. Take responsibility for your emotions and your actions. Keeping a journal can be very helpful for this. Parenting is a hard job, and it will bring up all of your unhealed emotional material. Working through these issues with compassion towards yourself will reap enormous benefits.

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