

HOW TIMEOUT SHOULD BE USED

Timeout doesn't work as it is used in many families because it is being used as punishment and not as it was originally designed. Timeout should actually be a method for teaching a child how to control himself or herself, and should only be used when a child is out of control and NOT for any other situations. When timeout is used as punishment the child does not learn lessons of any value, and instead picks up unhealthy messages that he or she is a bad child and less than whole. Sticking a child in timeout simply serves as a way for the adult to control a child or get even, and gives the caregiver a sense of satisfaction or revenge for what the child did.

WHAT IT SHOULD BE

Timeout was designed to be used effectively only when a child is out of control and must be removed from a situation so as to regain some self-control and calm down. In this out of control state, some sort of emotional "thunderstorm" has blown in for the child. He may be getting angry and be unable to understand the impacts of his behavior on others around him, nor can he understand any instructions from the caregiver. In this uncontrollable state, he is likely to hurt himself or someone else. By being in the timeout space, the child is given a break from the situation and an opportunity to calm down emotionally. Once he regains some composure, he may be able to return to the activity or previous space.

BUILDING THE SPACE

The timeout space should not be a corner or a "naughty chair." Instead, it should be a predetermined space that the adult and child create together. For best results, the timeout space should be a special, reserved spot in the house that will always be there for the child to go to when an emotional outbreak occurs. I even suggest renaming it to avoid the negative connotations associated with the word "timeout." One parent I know used a tiny closet in the house and removed the door. It wasn't convenient for this family to lose the use of this closet, but the need for that space was less important than teaching the child about self-control. Items should be placed in this new space that help use the senses of touch, sight, and sound to soothe the child. A poster with calm, pleasing graphics can be hung and an oversized pillow or a blanket can be placed on the floor. The parent with the tiny closet bought a bean bag chair and placed a small CD player to play gentle, calming music. Allow the child to pick for the space, one special toy or item that the child loves to touch, such as a teddy bear, a koosh ball, or even playdough.

SETTING UP THE MODEL OF GETTING THEM THERE

Once the space is created together, the adult must use role play to help the child learn how to associate the overwhelming "stormy" feelings with the process of going to that special place. This role play should be done often and only at times when the child is open to learning and in a positive mood. The adult can even participate in the role play by first playing the role of the child having the fit to help show what the behavior looks like. The mother with the small closet asked her son what it feels like when he gets so angry he wants to hit and throw things. He told her that he "felt growly like a tiger." This helped her put a label on the feeling so she could refer to the role play as "let's play the growly game." Then, when the real moment arrives and the child is overcome with the out-of-control emotion and behaviors, the child should then be guided to that special place in a loving and silent manner. The adult can say, "It looks like you need to go to your special place," but should remain silent after that. In the beginning, the child may have to be carried to the special place. The adult must do so in a completely unconditionally loving manner. If done correctly and consistently by the adult each time, the child will eventually learn to identify the arrival of the emotion and bring himself to the special place. Every child is different and it could take many

incidents before the child learns to bring himself to his special place. It's worth mentioning here that the parent with the tiny closet put this into practice consistently over several months of "storms" before she saw results. Then one day when a "storm" hit and her son was about to hit, he stopped himself and screamed, "I'm going to my special place!" He ran down the hall, fell onto his bean bag chair, and fell asleep. The process had finally worked and he brought himself under control.

The message to the child in using this true timeout method is that the child is responsible for bringing himself or herself under control, not anyone else. Think about the opposite message caregivers communicate to children when they act as if to say, "I am responsible for bringing you under control." What inappropriate lessons will the child learn about personal responsibility for behavior as he or she grows older? All we have to do is turn on the news or read a newspaper to see examples of adults with a misguided perception about not being responsible for one's actions.

Two final points that I must make here are the time limit and modeling. First, it is my opinion that a child should NOT be kept in the timeout according to a time limit identified by the adult or by the age of the child. Instead, we should teach our children that they can come out of the special place when they feel they are ready. It is certainly okay for an adult to determine that a child needs more time before coming back to the play area, but the ultimate goal is to teach a child to identify when he can return to the family or classroom situation. This exercise is all about teaching self-control, not control-by-someone-else. The other point is modeling. A parent who wants to successfully teach a child to know when to go to timeout should first have one of her own to model. All too often it is really the parent who needs the timeout, not the child.

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