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FAMILY

Family Feuds

How to make "timeouts" less like bar fights.

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The "timeout" has replaced the swat on the behind as many parents' default punishment for a misbehaving child. It's worth noting, then, that this parenting tool is widely misunderstood and frequently misused.

Most parents already have a rough working notion of how to use timeouts. When a child does something wrong, you send him off to sit somewhere by himself and do nothing for a set amount of time, like a hockey referee putting a player in the penalty box. Two minutes on a bench for hitting at the playground, five minutes on a stool in the corner for talking back, and so on. Because the timeout seems so simple, most people feel comfortable using it intuitively, guided by assumptions that the punishment should fit the crime, that a timeout gives the child an opportunity to reflect and repent, and that it teaches the child who's in control.

These assumptions lead many parents to use more and longer timeouts to match the frequency and severity of a child's offenses. If a child gets five minutes for, say, hitting a sibling, then a more serious offense, such as biting, should rate 15 or 30 minutes, right? Not necessarily. Using more and longer timeouts might seem proportional, and it might even conceivably teach a lesson about justice, but it won't help change the behavior that's causing you to give timeouts in the first place. And if you don't change the behavior, you're going to be enforcing a lot more timeouts.

Excessive timeouts do more harm than good, making a child irritable and more volatile in his reactions, and more inclined to escape and avoid the adults who punish him. Just as important, parents who punish excessively tend to escalate punishment, increasing the side effects and losing track of the original intent of giving a timeout, which is to improve a child's behavior. The opposite happens, in fact.

A reliable body of scientific research accruing over decades has given us a clear idea of how to use timeout most effectively. The technique's full name, "timeout from reinforcement," provides the key. Timeout has nothing to do with justice, repentance, or authority. Rather, it follows a simple logic: Attention feeds a behavior, and a timeout is nothing more than a brief break from attention in any form—demands, threats, explanations, rewards, hugs ... everything.

So, what does this tell us about the right way to use timeouts? They should be:

- **used sparingly**, because the side effects of excessive punishment are more significant than any benefits the timeouts might have. If you're giving more than one or two per day for the same offense, that's too much.
- **brief**, because the timeout's positive effect on behavior is almost all concentrated in its first minute or two. Some parents feel obliged to add more time to satisfy their sense of justice, but the extra time has no value in terms of changing behavior. If you feel that you must go beyond one or two minutes, treat 10 minutes as the extreme upper limit.
- **immediate**, following as closely as possible upon the behavior that made it necessary. If you can, do it on the spot, not when you get home from the store or playground. Delayed timeouts are ineffective.
- **done in isolation** from others, with the child in a separate room or sitting alone in a chair off to one side. Complete isolation is not needed if you feel it would be good to keep an eye on the child.
- **administered calmly**, not in anger or as an act of vengeance, and **without repeated warnings**, which lose their effect if they are not regularly followed with consequences. Make clear to the child which behaviors lead to timeout, and then be consistent about declaring one when such behavior occurs. One warning is plenty.

If you're calm, you will also be in the right frame of mind to do something important that's nearly impossible to do when you're angry: Praise compliance with the timeout, such as going to the isolated spot when asked, sitting quietly, and completing the whole timeout. A lot of parents balk at this. "WHAT?! *Praise* the child when I'm punishing him for misbehaving?" Absolutely. We want to build compliance whenever it occurs, and especially under difficult situations. We want the child to go to timeout when we tell him to, so we reward that behavior with praise. It does not have to be effusive, but, like all effective praise, it should still specify what the child did—*It's good that you went straight to timeout when I asked you to, and you sat quietly for the whole time, like a big boy*—and combine verbal encouragement with a gentle pat or other contact.

If you have to touch, drag, or restrain the child to make the timeout happen, you're doing it wrong, and the timeout won't work. During punishment, a child will be more oppositional than usual and is likelier to physically resist going into timeout, which may inspire stronger physical control by the parent. Things escalate from there into dragging, pushing, pulling, and perhaps hitting. What's happening is more like a fight in a bar than timeout from reinforcement, and you're reinforcing all the wrong behaviors. The same goes for locking a child in a room to enforce a timeout. Besides being unsafe, locking a child in, like dragging him, is what psychologists call a "setting event" for opposition—an event that makes a behavior more likely. You're saying, in effect, *Resist me! I expect it from you*, and your child will get the message.

Let's say you declare the timeout and your child says, "No, I'm not going." Instead of using force, give her an extra minute penalty. You can do this twice: Up the timeout from two minutes to three, then to four. Then, if that doesn't work, take away a privilege—something significant but brief, like no TV today. (It helps to decide on this penalty in advance rather than winging it on the spot when everybody's excited and upset. You can also use it if the child comes out of timeout too early; one warning, if you wish, and then invoke the penalty.) Then pivot and walk away. Don't give in if she then says, "OK, OK, OK, I'll do it," because that reinforces an unwanted sequence. Let the consequence do the work, and resist the temptation to add a little zinger like, "You never listen, and now you're paying the price!" Saying such things may release steam, causing your child-induced aneurisms not to burst, but it will increase the side effects of punishment.

Finally, and this is the greater key to success, research shows that the effectiveness of timeout depends on the effectiveness of time in. You must devote your energies to identifying the problem behavior (hitting, for instance), identifying a desirable behavior to replace it (keeping your hands to yourself), and reinforcing that desirable behavior with lots of praise and other rewards. Timeout won't get rid of an unwanted behavior, not on its own. It's a consequence you can use to control that behavior while you work on replacing it with something better.

And consider giving yourself an informal timeout now and again. Everyone will benefit. When your child is singing the "I Hate Mommy" song for the 17th time in a row and you feel yourself about to lose control and run wild up the parental misbehavior scale—nagging, shouting, threatening, overpunishing, all the way up to laying hands on the little miscreant—try turning around and walking out of the room. Go sit somewhere quiet for a couple of minutes and cool off. Sometimes a little timeout from reinforcement is just what you need.

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