

The Case Against Time-out

by Peter Haiman, Ph.D.

For generations, parents have sought a reliable and dependable way to handle childhood misbehavior. The most recent and popular discipline technique is time-out. Although time-out is better than spanking, it is **not an appropriate way** for parents to cope with the misbehavior of their children. Moreover, the use of time-out can create subsequent childhood behavior problems. These problems can affect the well-being of the child and severely strain the parent-child relationship.



Child Behavior - A Symptom

The behavior of children has a legitimate cause. Childhood behavior is determined, for the most part, by how children feel about the current state of their physical and psychosocial needs. Needs are strong in every child, and children are, by nature, sensitive to their own needs. If one or more of their needs are not met, children will soon feel uncomfortable.

Children will cry out when they feel uncomfortable. An infant or toddler's cry announces feelings of frustration. These cries have evolved as a survival mechanism. They attract parental attention. The purpose of a cry is to obtain the kind and quality of parental love and care that will properly attend to unmet needs and, therefore, establish feelings of security in the child. The misbehavior of older children and adolescents is a cry for help announcing that their needs are frustrated.

Cries and misbehavior from children and adolescents are, in a way, very much like a sore throat, stuffed up nose, aching muscles, or a fever. All are symptoms. All have causes. A medical practitioner knows that when the virus or bacteria that is causing physical symptoms is eliminated, the noxious feelings will be quelled. Similarly, when parents correctly diagnose and provide remedies that address the needs of children and adolescents, the symptoms of crying or misbehavior will also disappear.

The frustration of important needs does not feel good at any age. However, children can become quite upset and demanding when their needs are not met. Their often intense outbursts stem, in part, from their dependent nature. Unlike most adults, young children lack the ability to meet their own needs. They are physically unable to do most self-care tasks. By nature, they also have strong emotional needs and vulnerabilities. Moreover, unlike most adults, young children are unable to tolerate frustration well. In addition, infants, toddlers, and many preschool-aged children are unable to identify the frustrated needs that are making them upset. This makes it impossible for most young children to tell their parents what is bothering them and why they are often unable independently to get their needs fulfilled.

Time-out

When time-out is used, parents first firmly demand that their child stop misbehaving and be quiet. The child is then usually required to go and sit alone in a room, away from parents, and admonished not to come out of the room until they are sure that they can control their behavior. Being placed in time-out prolongs the time that a child must endure the frustrated need that caused their misbehavior. Thus, unmet normal needs become increasingly uncomfortable as the time-out continues. Young children depend upon, want to be with, love, and need their parents.

What exacerbates this increasingly uncomfortable state of being frustrated is the fact that the child must be alone, away from the parents who they must rely upon to meet their needs. This enforced separation from their basic source of comfort, security, and well-being adds considerably to the woe of a child. Moreover, being alone in time-out can create additional disturbing feelings that the child must endure. Painful emotions like fear and worry often develop. A frustrated child who must sit quietly and alone in time-out frequently becomes angry. Although the youngster dare not express this anger when in time-out, the child often expresses it by becoming angry and defiant sometime after being released from time-out. The practice of

separating a child in time-out from parents can in itself become the cause of future misbehavior, because being alone and in time-out increases the frustrations felt by a child who is already frustrated.

Interpersonal dilemmas and conflicts are best resolved when each individual has sufficient opportunity to talk to and be heard by the other person. Modeling, initiating, and practicing the process of open dialogue is essential if a youngster is to learn healthy problem solving. Does time-out lend itself to this process? Helping children talk about how they feel, combined with parental patience, is required if children are to develop the ability to verbalize their feelings and needs rather than act them out.

Lifelong Effects of Frequent Time-out

For the frustrated and uncomfortable child, time-out offers enforced silence and the feeling of being rejected by one's parents. A youngster who misbehaves and then is given time-out feels hurt. This hurt, combined with the frustration that caused the youngster to misbehave, gives birth to anger. And discipline practices like time-out, which create hurt and anger, can harm a child.

A serious cost of being given time-out in childhood is the lesson that one should bottle up uncomfortable emotions. Upset in time-out and unable to express distressing feelings, youngsters desperately need to stop the painful feelings going on inside them. To cope, children learn to ignore and/or distract themselves from the energy of their hurt and angry feelings. Thus, children learn to repress their painful feelings. In the process, nervous habits emerge such as thumb sticking, fingernail biting, hair pulling, skin scratching, tugging at clothes, self-pinching, and many other similar behaviors. The purpose of these behaviors is to ward off uncomfortable feelings and, in identification with their parents' criticism of them, to punish themselves. These defense strategies serve to release anger and ignore uncomfortable feelings.

As a result, being unaware of true feelings can often become a characteristic feature of a person's life. This reduces a person's self-awareness and can affect the quality of life throughout an entire lifetime.

Developing the Well-behaved Child

Parents can develop a well-behaved, self-disciplined child best by responsively and continuously meeting their child's developmentally normal needs and drives; by demonstrating and articulating humane values in day-to-day interactions with their youngster; and by exposing their child to life experiences that strengthen and reinforce these values. Troubled and spoiled children are created when parents do not meet their child's normal needs and drives consistently and appropriately.

What are the basic, normal childhood needs? If a child is physically healthy, well nourished, satisfactorily exercised, and not tired, the youngster's physical needs are being met. A youngster who has received sufficient and continuous satisfying attention, affection, and recognition from parents and other adults and children to whom the child is emotionally attached, the child's social and emotional needs are fulfilled. If a child's normal curiosity, exploratory nature, and intrinsic interests are regularly allowed opportunities to unfold and develop, the intellectual needs of that child will be satisfied. When young children are given opportunities, within a securely supportive and trustworthy environment, to become increasingly more independent, make choices, and meaningfully participate in decision making, their normal need to exercise some control over their life and to express their own will are being appropriately addressed.

It is very important for parents and parents-to-be to learn the developmentally normal characteristics' of each stage of early human development. It is also important to recognize a virulent myth that still exists in our society: that fully meeting a child's needs will spoil the child. The research literature clearly says that the opposite is true. The well-disciplined child is created when parents appropriately fulfill the needs of childhood and adolescence.

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