

Center for Integrative Psychology

Positive Discipline-Helping Children Learn From Their Misbehavior

Overview

The word discipline comes from the Greek root which means "to teach."

The following is a teaching technique based on the time out procedure. This technique is designed to help the child learn from his mistakes. When used over a period of time, this procedure will help the child learn to control himself, instead of requiring the parent to be present in order for him to behave.

Formal behavior analysis of the disruptive behavior of children has shown that attention is, by far, the most frequently occurring reinforcer of misbehavior. Even the most well adjusted children will sometimes misbehave in order to engage their parents' passionate attention, even if this attention is negative. The principles of operant conditioning teach us that whatever happens within three or four seconds of any behavior determines whether or not that behavior will occur again. If our child is bothering his sister, and we intervene by yelling and being emotionally upset, we may be inadvertently reinforcing the boy bothering his sister with our passionate attention, causing him to annoy his sister more often.

The theory behind time out is to create a temporal distance between misbehavior and adult attention so the child does not get his parents' attention when he misbehaves. This sets up an opportunity for the adult to give attention when the child is calm, compliant and in control of himself. In this way, the adult reinforces the child for developing internal controls.

The technique

Time out is not designed to make the child afraid or to inflict punishment on the child. Instead, it requires a boring place where there is nothing to do but sit and think. Some families use: the second bathroom, the laundry room, the dining-room table, the stairs to the basement etc. based on the physical layout of their home. The location selected also depends on whether the child will stay when

they are put in time out, or whether they will need a space with a door to contain them. When the time out spot is boring, the length of the time out can be shortened. Some psychologists recommend taking the child's age and using this as the number of minutes the child should sit in time out. I have found that five minutes of quiet compliance is an effective length of time for most children if the time out location is boring. The child's bedroom is not a good time out place because there is too much to do there.

Minor annoying or not listening: The parent should clearly state the requirement, "stop bothering your sister." If the child does not immediately comply, instead of restating the demand the parent should simply say, "That's one." This is a verbal reminder to the child that he must pay attention to what he's doing and change it. If the child does not know what behavior the parent is talking about, then it is the child's responsibility to either ask the parent or figure it out. If the child persists in the misbehavior the parent should say in a calm voice, "that's two." If the child persists, then the parent should calmly say, "That's three," and point to the time out area. There should be absolutely no other verbal interaction with the child at this point.

Blatant misbehavior: If the child blatantly misbehaves (e.g. he goes outside after the parent says that he cannot) no counting is done. The parent should calmly point to the designated time out location indicating the child should go there and sit. If the child goes calmly and quietly to the spot then sits down compliantly, the parent should set the kitchen timer for five minutes. If the child goes to his spot but verbally objects and makes noise, the parent should not respond. This is an attempt to engage the parent in negative attention. The parent should simply say one time in a calm voice, "Your time starts when you're quiet." The timer should be set for five minutes once the child is calm and accepting of the time out.

Disruptive behavior: If the child jumps up and down, refuses to go to the time out place, or is loud or resistant the parent should calmly say one time only, "if I have to help you, I will shut the door and your time will be longer." If the child requires the parent to touch them in order to comply with the request to go to sit in the time out place, then the door should be closed. The purpose of the closed door is to limit the child's ability to get negative attention from the adult for noncompliance and disruptive behavior. If the child comes out of the closed door area, then the child should be put in time out and the door should be locked from the outside so that the adult is not forced to stand there and hold the door. This gives the child attention for noncompliance and disruptive behavior causing it to occur more frequently.

The parent should not let the child engage them in any discussion at this point. The parent can go on to do other things, but should listen through the closed door and as soon as the child is quiet, the kitchen timer should be set for seven minutes. When the child has been quiet and compliant for seven minutes the adult should begin the reentry process through the closed door. Some children

have temper tantrums and the length of their time out is increased significantly because they are unable to calm themselves and submit to adult authority. However, once the child sees that the sooner they can calm themselves and comply the shorter the time out, they frequently learn to gain emotional self-control very quickly. The adult should not stand and threaten them with a longer time out, but should say nothing. For children who are just learning this technique the adult is allowed to give one gentle reminder, "you're time starts when your quiet."

When the timer goes off: The child does not automatically come out of the time out location when the kitchen timer goes off. The timer is merely a reminder to the adult that they have a child in time out.

Reentry process: Now that the child is settled, the adult can give him attention and in doing so will be reinforcing calm, compliant behavior. The parent should ask three questions designed to help the child internalize the learning from this experience. This is the part of the technique that makes it different from traditional methods, because it requires the answers to come from the child to the adult, rather than from the adult to the child. The child must demonstrate that he has learned from the situation in order for the time out procedure to be completed. If the child is really trying to answer the questions and is working with you, the adult may ask questions that may help the child come to the right answer. If the child is being flippant, the parent should simply walk away and say, "Take more time to think," and give the child another opportunity to answer the question in five minutes. The door should only be opened after the child has successfully answered all three questions.

Question 1

"What did you do to get yourself in time out?"

The purpose of this question is to have the child admit responsibility for what they did, because a person can't change a problem unless he admits he has one. The child must clearly accept responsibility for the situation that led to the time out. If the child's answer begins with, "because my sister....." or "because you're in a bad mood...." Then the parent should say, "Take more time to think" and simply walk away, setting the timer for five minutes once the child has settled. After the child has been quiet for five minutes, the parent can give him another opportunity to enter question 1. It is critical that the child clearly describe his own role in the situation, because this requires the child to develop his ability to be self aware. Admitting his own mistake puts him in the position to change their own behavior in the future.

Question 2

"What's wrong with that?"

The purpose of this question is to teach empathy. The child must describe how his behavior impacts the feelings of others. For example, "when I went outside when you told me not to, I disobeyed you, and you wouldn't know where I was because you thought I was in the house. You are older and need to keep track of everyone in this house. It makes you worried when you can't find us. It makes you frustrated when your kids don't listen to you." (Note-"because I'll get in trouble." Is not an acceptable answer for our training purpose).

Question 3

"What will you do the next time you are in that same situation?"

The purpose of this question is to create new brain pathways for compliance, and develop problem solving skills in the child. The child should, in great detail, describe what he will do the next time he's in a similar situation. For example, "the next time I ask you if I can go outside and you say no, I will ask you if there's another time I can go outside, or I will look for something else to do." If the child gives an appropriate answer, then the door can be opened and he can come out of time out. If the opportunity permits, the original situation should be role played with the child demonstrating the appropriate behavior.

Maintaining emotional connection: This technique should be implemented in a loving way. There is no need for anger from the parent or for a message of rejection or criticism to be given to the child. In fact, the technique should be given with the attitude that the parent is confident that the child can control himself, and that the parent is there to help him do that.

Once all of the steps for reentry have been completed, the situation is over. There is no emotional residue and no punishments to be implemented later. The slate is wiped clean.