



Time Out or Time In?

At a recent seminar a mom asked the speaker, “What am I supposed to do when my child misbehaves? There are dozens of options for influencing children’s behavior and they all hinge on the relationship the parent has with the child, the family rules and the child’s personality, age and capabilities. In this space I will describe what I believe are effective Time Outs and Time Ins. For many parents Time Outs have become a “Go to your room!” or a “Get out of my face!” banishment or rejection. Ideally Time Outs provide a breather between two parties who are in tension. Time Outs can be used by parents, children, spouses or countries at war. Often it is the parent who really needs a Time Out. And, it’s OK to do just that. It provides great modeling of self-responsibility and self-soothing. You could say something like, “I’m feeling really frustrated. I want to handle this problem calmly. I’m going to take a 10 minute Time Out and then we can talk some more.”

Isn’t this what we would like our children to be able to do for themselves? Don’t we want to teach our children how to be responsible individuals and to have the skills to better manage their emotions, thoughts, words and behaviors? If so, then we will want to give a healthy meaning to Time Out.

In addition to modeling the usefulness of a Time Out there are times when we can say to a child, “Do you need a Time Out so you can come back and start fresh?” Have children decide when they are ready to come back and TRY AGAIN with new and different behavior. Some time and distance from a situation is often what many of us need. For many children Time Outs have become either an experience of being rejected to their bedroom when the going gets tough or freedom to play in their Disney World-like paradise. The first bedroom scenario can create a hated room where children have trouble sleeping at night while the second scenario provides a “so what?” attitude of escape from relationship and responsibility.

Otto Weininger, professor emeritus in the Early Childhood Education Department at OISE, describes Time In. His belief is that when children are not managing themselves well they need more attention. He encourages parents to say something like, “I see what you are doing and saying. It seems like you need more help. I am here for you. Let me know when you can manage on your own.” A Time In may involve taking children out of challenging situations such as fighting with playmates or siblings. Once separated from the scene parents can discuss the unacceptable behavior and encourage children to choose appropriate conduct. Some parents may worry that children will misbehave to seek attention and Time In sounds like giving into that demand. Seldom do children misbehave to receive attention where parents hold them accountable for their behaviors and require them to choose responsible alternatives.

Whether it’s a Time Out or a Time In, ask yourself what you want to accomplish and what you want your child to learn. In the between times get some Time Out and Time In for yourself.