



PARENTS NEED TO TAKE TIME OUT FROM INEFFECTIVE PUNISHMENT



by Mimi Hudson

Probably the most overused and misunderstood parenting strategy employed today is “time-out.” If parents don’t like what their children are doing or saying, the children are removed from their present social situation and placed in isolation for a period of time – usually a minute per year of the child’s age.

Thanks to the Supernanny, time-out can be implemented in a myriad of ways – sitting on the naughty mat, the naughty stair/chair or the old favourite, “go to your room!” But no matter what you call it or how you dress it up, it is punishment, withdrawal of love and attention (conditional love) and abandonment.

Some parents think that by banishing children to their rooms, the naughty mat, etc., the child will sit and think about what they have done and vow to do better next time. Most children sent to time-out are plotting revenge! Were you ever sent to your room as a kid? What were you thinking?

There are no quick fixes or short cuts in parenting. Parenting is a process that can last more than 19 years! Time-out is a quick fix with long-term negative consequences. It may stop the immediate misbehaviour but it doesn’t teach the children acceptable behaviour over time and how to become a reasonable, responsible and respectful human being.

If parents knew how time-out originated, they might also think twice about using it. According to researcher and author Alfie Kohn, time-out is short for Time-out from Positive Reinforcement and was used by B. F. Skinner

and his fellow behaviorists to train lab animals, particularly pigeons and rats! Before long, an article appeared in scholarly journals called *Timeout Duration and the Suppression of Deviant Behavior in Children*. It was widely distributed, finding its way to the popular parenting literature, and time-out as a strategy to discipline (punish?) all children was born. (It must have been a behaviorist who coined the term “rug-rats.”)

Dr. Thomas Phelan, another behaviorist, has taken time-out to an all new level with his neatly packaged, colourful video-and-book parenting program, *1-2-3 Magic*. Dr. Phelan says that children are “wild animals that need to be tamed.” The basic idea of his program is that if a child is doing something the parent doesn’t want him or her to do and the behaviour doesn’t stop by the count of three, the child is put in time-out.

It’s hard to imagine that if a child hasn’t complied with any of the other requests that escalated the situation to a “three” in the first place, that they are magically going to go willingly into time-out. Many parents adhere to this three-strikes-and-you’re-out approach and counting can be heard all over the North Shore, in playgrounds and malls, in coffee shops and grocery stores. Finding a time-out spot away from home must be challenging unless, of course, the child’s misbehaviour stops before the parent reaches the count of three. Some say we are creating a generation of children afraid of the number three and in classrooms all over North America children are counting to 10 and leaving out the number three! Dr. Phelan does admit that *1-2-3 Magic* only works with children aged two to 12. Then what? Therein lies the problem.

A misbehaving child is a discouraged child. Children’s misbehaviour is communication – they are trying to tell us they have needs that are not being met and do not have the skills to express what they need in an appropriate way. It is up to us as parents to teach them those skills. The last thing a child needs when having a meltdown is to be pushed away, abandoned and banished to a prison of their parents’ choosing at a time when they need love and understanding the most.

Granted, it is often at these moments that parents have had just about all they can take, too, and their compassion level is low. That is why time-out is recommended for parents rather than children. The parent can say, “I need a time-out... would you like to join me?” or “I need to cool down and will be back in a minute.” This is also discipline.

Parents teach their children coping skills by modelling the behaviour they expect. Since the goal of discipline is ultimately self-discipline, children eventually learn for themselves what they need and when. It also demonstrates to children that their parents love and support them all the time even though they might not be thrilled with their present behaviour.

Effective parenting begins during infancy and teaches children the rules for daily living. It builds on and through the various ages and stages of childhood development. Effective, positive parenting is based on mutual respect and discipline – to teach, not to punish. Unless it is self-imposed, time-out is punishment.

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