



Time-outs for Good Kids

The Time-outs for Teens program, whether applied to teenagers or to children, is one of the most routinely effective and reliably gratifying things I do with people. The booklet, however, is not entirely sufficient as an explanation for making the case for why one might want to adopt the plan with children who rarely get defiant or oppositional. For one thing, it is written as an “industrial strength” approach to child discipline, sufficient to handle grossly oppositional and defiant teenagers with one foot in juvenile court. So, perhaps a few comments are in order for clarifying why I think essentially the same system, or variants thereof, would be appropriate for dealing with “normal” kid problems and further, addressing any character foibles that may be evident.

First off, I always tell people when I give them the booklet, “This is the ‘off the shelf’ plan. Please give this a critical read. I’ll be very interested in what about it you don’t think will work with your child or you wouldn’t be comfortable doing. Based on that discussion, we’ll come up with a customized version for your situation with which you can feel perfectly comfortable.” That caveat certainly applies in situations where the children are already reasonably well-behaved. Still, I think there are some principles embedded in the plan that warrant careful consideration and broad applicability.

A great deal of the process of socializing children involves instilling self-discipline, i.e., the ability to do things they don’t feel like doing and, conversely, the ability to refrain from doing things they might feel like doing, despite the fact that good sense or common courtesy suggests they hadn’t ought to be doing such things. Self-discipline is an essential ingredient for academic achievement, vocational attainment and success in personal relationships. If you consider an inventory of typical child or adolescent problems (see page 19 in the booklet) as a measure of self-discipline deficiencies then you can quite readily design a discipline intervention plan around correcting any identified deficiencies. The same is true for any character flaws or personality liabilities that you might recognize in your children. Consequently, issues that are not normally considered disciplinary infractions can be targeted very specifically from very early on in childhood. You don’t have to wait until personality problems have been in place for twenty-five years and then suggest to your child that counseling might be of assistance.

A friend of mine once commented that he could not remember ever whining, when he and I were kids, the way his kids whine so much of the time. I told him simply that if he wanted his kids to stop whining he needed to punish them when they whine and stop whining at them about their whining. Of course, children will be children and consequently will demonstrate lots of examples of immaturity. For some of that you simply have to savor the amusing parts and be patient about much of the rest. I would suggest, however, that the primary mechanism of children developing improved self-discipline, acquiring social skills and overcoming personality-based liabilities is that parents impose age-appropriate disciplinary sanctions.

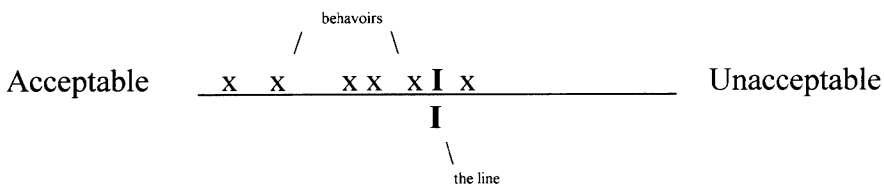
I think every psychologically aware adult should be able to be articulate about his own character flaws, describe what he has been doing to overcome them and be able to track the progress he has made on them over a period of a few months. Parents, I think, have the opportunity and the obligation to do the same for their children. It is far less than ideal to simply leave it to the child’s friends and peers to provide feedback about those aspects of his behavior which are not conducive to “winning friends and influencing people.”

If you send a child to time-out, or use any other form of disciplinary sanction, it is with the intention to have an identified therapeutic impact. That is, you want the child to learn to do this or to refrain from doing that. In addition to the intended therapeutic impact, you will inevitably get a certain amount of negative emotional side effect. For example, the child is quite likely to resent the punishment. The child resents the punishment because the child is not wise enough to appreciate the reasons which have moved you to intervene and the child does not recognize that you are acting in his best interest. For that matter, another component of the negative emotional side effect might be that you harbor some resentment over having to take disciplinary action. This is, after all, not the fun part of being a parent. This resentment can result in disciplinary actions becoming routinely contaminated with anger. That, in turn, is most likely to be the case where your habitual approaches to discipline have not been particularly effective, for a particular problem, for a particular child. Hence, you find yourself frustrated over having to address the same problem over and over again. Other common negative emotional side effects include guilt, shame or intropunitive anger on the part of the child, none of which you intend or need to evoke. Learning can occur quite well without any of that.

As an aside, you might have noticed my failure to promote the mechanism of positive reinforcement, i.e., praise. I'm certainly not opposed to praise and for some children that works quite well. Generally, however, it tends to be a far weaker motivator than negative reinforcement or punishment. Children for whom praise works very well are not generally brought to my attention for behavior problems and they don't persist in presenting the same behavior problems over and over to their parents.

All that is necessary to take the sting out of the punishment option is to get it uncontaminated with anger, impatience, or frustration. I had a clear experience of that one time in an interaction with a police officer. I was driving around I-465 with my cruise control set at 55 mph. Imagine my surprise when a State Trooper pulled me over. I explained that I was puzzled. I thought I had the cruise set right on the mark. He was studiously filling out the ticket but patiently pointed out that the road construction signs all along the highway said that the speed limit was 45, not 55. Now, the good part is that he didn't yell at me. He didn't call me names. He didn't insult my intelligence by lecturing me about arithmetic. He was so business-like about it that I couldn't work up any resentment. I was just thinking, "Oh boy, was I stupid." He handed me the ticket and wished me a nice day. Lesson learned with a minimum of negative emotional side effects.

Drawing the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior is almost entirely a matter of cultural relativism. There is very little of child discipline that actually demarcates the border between good and evil. Since where you draw the line is pretty much a matter of personal taste, it isn't surprising that children can have difficulty learning where the line is, especially when the line isn't altogether stationary even for a given parent depending, perhaps, on the parent's mood or time constraints. One certainty, however, is that wherever you draw the line, the child will cross the line.



In the booklet, and the supplementary handout "Overview of the Time-outs for Teens Program" I've emphasized the necessity of punishing rather than reminding the child about what is expected with the understanding that this only applies to issues that warrant punishment in the first place. However, if you want the problem to be resolved you may well have to be prepared to consistently punish the child when the problem occurs. As a response to a violation, reminding tends to keep the parent in the reminding

business and prevents the child from getting into the remembering business. Particularly with intelligent well-educated parents, there is a strong inclination to respond to every disciplinary issue as if it were the result of a difficulty with comprehension or memory. In reality, most of the common infractions are simply motivational problems. There has not been a sufficient disincentive to keep the child from lapsing into doing what he knows he shouldn't be doing.

If you rely on reminding or warning the child about what is expected, instead of consistently providing the motivation of effective discipline, the behavior will likely continue to drift into the unacceptable direction. This is the process wherein a parent can erode his own credibility with the child. Under the common circumstances where reminders or warnings are routinely used as the first course of action (e.g., the Magic 1,2,3 program) the effective punishment is whatever you finally resort to after having become frustrated that the reminders are not working. Typically this is where the speaking harshly or yelling begins and that is how punishment gets contaminated with hostility. The result is a higher level of negative emotional consequences and a lower overall level of therapeutic impact.

Even if time-outs are implemented, the warnings that preceded the actual punishment effectively lower the hit rate for punishment for that behavior. For example,

“Billy, come here.” No response.

“Billy, I said, ‘come here.’” (reminder) No response.

“Billy, do you want a time-out?” (warning) No response.

“That’s it. You’re in time-out.” (punishment)

The hit rate on “coming when called” in this example is three offenses and only one punishment or $33\frac{1}{3}\%$. To instill self-discipline effectively the hit rate for punishments needs to be 85% or higher.

I’m skipping the details about how to give time-outs. For one thing, with little kids who have already been accustomed to the protocol, there isn’t much to go wrong. There are a number of pointers in the booklet that might warrant attention. One aspect of the problem which I didn’t address adequately is the necessity of getting the kids to take time-outs *appropriately*. By that I mean without any arguing or displays of displeasure like stomping, huffing or puffing or overt crying. Whimpering is allowed but not whining and certainly not shrieking.

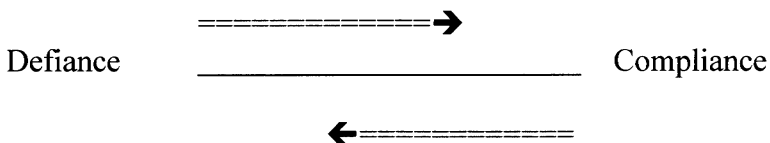
I’m aware that this may sound rather authoritarian. There are two different areas in which these recommendations can be expected to improve on what most parents do routinely. The first is that I expect it could be more effective in terms of the intended therapeutic impact. I assume, if you are interested in looking into another approach, there must be some persistent developments in your children’s behavior that you’d like to handle more effectively. This approach will certainly represent a shift in the authoritarian direction. The second possible area of improvement is that this approach could be more palatable than what you are doing in terms of the amount of negative emotional side effects involved. If you find that disciplining your children frequently involves you feeling frustrated or impatient or that you frequently have to resort to speaking harshly or using intimidation, or that your children often respond to discipline by crying or becoming angry, then you’ll appreciate that this program will allow you to virtually eliminate the negative emotional side effects while maintaining a very satisfactory level of effectiveness. Next I will make the case for setting a high standard for what counts as taking a time-out “appropriately.”

When you give a child a time-out and the child takes the time-out, you’ve given the child an exercise in self-discipline. This is so because the child, in taking the time-out, is doing something he would rather not do. Every time he musters the self-control necessary to accept a time-out, he is increasing his

capacity for doing other things he would rather not do such as homework and chores. That is, he is building his capacity for compliance; for subjugating, his personal will to an external directive.

In this case, the external directive is parental authority. This is a crucial step in character formation or the development of self-control. In future years self-control will be evident in your child's capacity to subjugate his personal will to internalized values such as honesty, integrity, kindness etc. It is the development of character that allows individuals to make decisions about their lives on the basis of something other than what they happen to be in the mood for at any particular moment in time. The ability to set and work towards long-term goals is entirely dependent on the capacity to inhibit immediate impulses and to forego immediate gratification in favor of the potential rewards of delayed gratification. While some individuals suffer from being too preoccupied with long-term goals and standing on principle, that is rarely the case with young children.

When a child takes the time-out as directed he practices compliance to some degree. However, if the child habitually acts out in the process of taking the time-out, by crying or indulging in expressing his displeasure, this amounts to practicing defiance. The less subtle the form of protest, the more he is practicing defiance. The time-out will not be as effective as they could be until you train the child to take time-outs appropriately, that is, without any overt expression of defiance. Once the Time-out Plan has been up and running for a while, even eye-rolling or audible sighing should be addressed as an inappropriate time-out.



It turns out to be quite easy to train children to take time-outs appropriately. It simply requires declaring that taking a time-out inappropriately will be a punishable offence. Here is the drill.

Child gets a time-out for harassing his brother but he stomps off or gets mildly hysterical in the process. The child completes his time-out with no discussion of his lapse.

At the conclusion of the time-out the child is released without discussion.

Ten minutes later the child is called back.

Parent: "Billy, do you remember I gave you a time out and you got mad and started crying?"

Child: "Yeah."

Parent: "Let's see if you can take a time-out without getting mad this time."

The child is put back in time-out. If he can't take the second time-out appropriately then the whole process is repeated

Since I wrote the booklet I have taken to developing Time-out scorecards for parents to use in tracking the implementation and results of the program. Each time a parent gives a child a time-out the event is noted by recording the parent's initial on the scorecard. Consequently, we maintain a record of which parent gave which child time-outs on which days for what infractions. There may be some benefit to the child seeing this information posted on the refrigerator. I think the principle benefit is that it helps the parent get into the habit of actually giving the time-outs rather than continuing in any bad habits they may have had about relying on reminding, warning, hollering, lecturing, etc. The Time-out program will begin working quite effectively once the parents get at least 85% reliable about giving time-outs when the identified offenses occur. Getting the parents up to that target is usually the main focus of treatment.