

Parenting 101: The Art of the Time-Out

by Rocky Spino

Recently, as I was sorting through stacks of old client files, I found myself recalling those children who left behind a little more of themselves than what was in their folders. One such youngster, whom I'll call Larry, knew just how to combine four-year-old innocence with advanced skills in butting heads with teachers and actually bringing them to tears. When the school team consulted me about Larry, their exhaustion was evident as they confessed there was nothing they could do with him. After all, they were all quite worn out from just trying to contain Larry as he constantly ran from them to escape his time-outs. They concluded with a posttraumatic sigh that their discipline system simply would not work with him.

Well, not to appear unsympathetic to the preschool patrol, but part of me couldn't help thinking, "Hats off to Larry!" I mean, he had pulled off his own mini-version of those old cops and robbers movies where the hunted-down and handcuffed bad guy vows, "No jail cell will ever hold me!" Now, imagine if that bandit would be set free based solely on his boast! "Besides," the warden might say, "we got a look at his preschool records." But Larry's exploits also

raised some real concerns since he was having the same effects on his single mother at home. I knew that when children like Larry remove themselves from following parental law, they can also remove themselves from feeling parental love. It's a package deal, where a child can feel more uncared for as behavior gets further out of control.

It turns out that Larry and I didn't have to meet much in order to turn things around. One thing I asked very soon in our sessions was what would help him to stop running from his preschool teachers. Larry pondered the question carefully. "Well," he replied, "if they would stop chasing me." His answer was both honest and helpful. And it was an instant reminder that what makes discipline either get off the ground right or go right downhill can be much more about mindset than methods.

What Larry's teachers were learning was that before he could follow their instructions, he had to first believe that they were capable of leading and getting him to listen. Clearly, getting into "catch me if you can" games or other such showdowns with children can weaken that leadership image and leave everyone wondering what to do. Likewise, appearing constantly fatigued, frustrated, or with hurt feelings when disciplining may make misbehavior seem way too personal and invite even four-year-olds to inflict more pain. Helping Team Larry eliminate such habits also helped restore their faith in both him and themselves. As the staff backed-up their rules with clear beliefs about their roles, Larry's misbehaviors faded and his doubts about who was in charge disappeared.

Just like the preschool professionals in Larry Land, many parents find themselves believing that time-outs are ineffective or impossible to enforce. I believe that getting this basic discipline tool to work for parents, however, can be incredibly worthwhile. Remember, time-outs are not about clicking off three minutes of meaningless sitting on a chair. Instead, they create therapeutic space in times of stress and become tiny rituals of cooperation and trust between caregiver



and child.

If time-outs remain difficult and draining in your own situation, it may be time to consult a professional. There may be individual circumstances that make alternatives more appropriate for you and your child. Otherwise, when that kitchen timer goes off, the art of the time-out really boils down to one main thing: attitude. Like any discipline system, time-outs work best when approached with calm, capable, and can-do authority. Using this approach, and a little Larry logic, may help stop you from running around in circles and, instead, start running the show.

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