

THE TROUBLE WITH TIME OUT

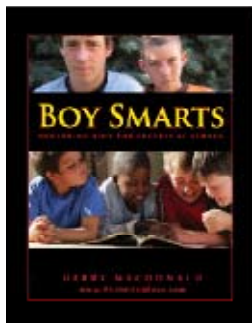


Dear Barry,

My 8 year old son becomes angry and distant with me when I force him into time-out. My parents tell me this is a positive sign and that the strategy is really making him think, but I'm less confident. Recently, I read a popular child expert advising parents to give time-outs to teach children to think for themselves, and that parents should completely ignore their child during the time-out period. The expert said, and I quote: "Any interaction with your child will only reinforce whatever misbehavior he is displaying." Mamma bear wisdom cautions me to not isolate my son in moments of intense stress, but to stay close so that I can guide him.

At the *Boy Smarts* workshop I attended, I noticed that you did not address this issue, so I asked you where you stood. You said that time-out should be used, if at all, only as a last resort. You urged us to think more about how to anticipate, prevent, and solve problems with behaviour, while maintaining a loving connection regardless of what the child has done. Quite frankly, your suggested alternatives were a relief. As a single mom, I'd be grateful for a summary of what you said so that I can pass it along to my children's father, my parents, and a friend who is also struggling with giving time-out. Thank you.

Leanne





Dear Leanne,

When I was growing up in the 1960's, parents were encouraged to use *a good smack* to correct misbehaviour. Today, evidence tells us that spanking teaches children to behave aggressively, even violently, and that it does not foster appropriate behaviour or social skills. In its place, time-out has emerged as a popular disciplinary tool. Misbehaving children are told to go to their rooms to sit down, to calm down, and to think about what they did. After a short period of time, they are invited to re-join the group, provided they learned their lesson.


Like you, however, many concerned parents tell me that they have questions about banishing their child during intense moments of agitation. They tell me that their upset son does not want to stay isolated, and that attempts to control him physically or to send him in a separate room only increases his stress and escalates his anger. When the practice of time-out appears to work, parents wonder if it is because their son, alarmed by the threat of physical and emotional isolation, stops misbehaving temporarily in order to stop the emotional alarm bells and to recover connection.


When Time-out is Harmful

Alice Miller, the famous Swiss psychotherapist and author of *From Rage to Courage*, identifies that one of the most destructive things we can do for children is deny them the freedom to express anger. She argues that trying to manage meltdowns through isolation tactics sends children into a panicked state where they feel alone and abandoned.

In a list of harmful disciplinary measures such as physical punishment, criticizing, blaming, and shaming, *The National Association for the Education of Young Children* also includes the use of time-out. They believe that time-outs encourage children to suppress their feelings, potentially leading to harmful consequences later in life.

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For younger children who hit or bite, they recommend holding rather than isolating a child. Firm but loving holding creates a container of safety and warmth while protecting other children from getting hurt. It also invites the expression of genuine feelings—through crying and raging—while reassuring the child of the unbreakable parent-child bond.

The emergent field of *Interpersonal Neurobiology* explains the importance of the parent-child bond in neurobiological terms. As our brains develop in relation to others, a healthy bond with a caregiver in early childhood supports development of the prefrontal cortex in the left hemisphere of the brain. Healthy formation in this area of the brain helps our ability to manage emotions, recall and process thought, make decisions, and interact with others. When a caregiver is not able to provide a secure attachment and seems distant or rejecting, the child may develop hypersensitivity and self-fulfilling expectations of rejection. According to Daniel Siegel and other neurobiologists, stress from chronic attachment problems teaches children to use aggression as a means of coping, leading to a cycle of conflict: rejection, negative self-messages, and renewed stress.

Research additionally tells us that infant boys are more likely than girls to be left by their parents to settle themselves entirely on their own, despite evidence that boys tend to be more easily agitated than girls and have a harder time self-soothing. According to one study, even when 6-month-old boys appeared as calm as the girls in the face of frustration, measures of heart rate and breathing suggested that they were actually experiencing greater distress.

Consider how at the precise moment when your son's emotions appear most out of control to him, and he is most at risk to misbehave, that this is also the moment that he most needs your calming influence. During emotional storms, upset children need adults to help them come back to equilibrium.



Even when parents are careful to provide reassurances of their love by saying something like, “I love you, but you need to go to your room for 5 minutes because what you did is not acceptable,” their actions send a louder message than their words. Rather than conveying the message that the only way to solve conflicts is to cut off communication, wouldn't it be better to help a child ride out the waves of his churning emotions by listening, and teach him useful communication skills from the start? Imagine if your spouse threatened separation every time something went wrong in your relationship. Initially, a person might be motivated to shape up but with repeated use of this form of emotional blackmail, they would become resentful and stop trying.

When sibling conflict erupts, consider that if they are repeatedly separated and sent to their rooms, they might eventually learn to stop fighting in front of their parents. Their unresolved feelings of jealousy, anger, even hatred might simply go underground, and come to be expressed in more devious ways. They might also carry these unresolved feelings into adulthood. Curtailing the symptoms of a problem does not solve the problem.

Sometimes parents who seem to have had reasonable success with using the occasional time-out to discipline ask whether they should stop. I suggest that at some point it will simply stop working on its own. Imagine telling your adolescent son, who may well be much bigger than you, to sit in a chair while you ignore him? Rather than sending him to his room, there is more chance that you will be urging him to come out and talk with you.

Here are some points to consider as you take time to reflect on what the practice of time-out, especially if it is used frequently, might actually be teaching:

1—Nothing is more frightening for a child than the withdrawal of love. Time-out can teach children not to trust their attachment to us, as it can be yanked away by the person who seems more powerful. If time-out is excessive, children might even harden their emotions and detach from us so they do not have to experience the pain of disconnection. As children are great observers but poor interpreters of life, they can mistakenly conclude, “I am only loved and secure in the world when I do what you want me to do. It is not safe for me to experiment with my own ideas.”

2—When we enforce a time-out for a child who is crying or raging, he may conclude that we do not want to be around him when he is upset. As children learn that their strong emotions are unacceptable—even punishable—they learn to distrust them. Time-out can teach children to separate from their genuine feelings in order to be accepted. Children can also learn to stop bringing their problems to us.

3—Emotional disturbance during time-out can distract children from important learning experiences. It can teach them to fight to regain control rather than to relate their upset to the event that caused it. From this vantage point children learn, “It doesn’t matter what I think about what happened and what I might do differently next time.



Beyond Time-Out

Children who act out aggressively are trying to tell us that something is wrong. They might not even know what it is, but their behaviour tells us. In these moments they need us to respond with empathy. Explore with your son the problem that is causing the emotional storm and collaborate to find a mutually satisfactory solution. Recognizing that misbehaviour is really just a symptom of an unmet need or a not yet solved problem, we begin to appreciate that children need something more than time-out. Instead of isolation, they need loving guidance and redirecting. Perhaps, if your son is receptive, short role-plays can help your son imagine different scenarios and give you both an opportunity to discuss feelings. The most important thing is that you support your child’s ability to get back on an even keel while maintaining connection. I offer the following suggestions to help you strengthen your relationship with your son and respond to his misbehaviour:

Anticipate Needs

We should expect that from time to time children will be cranky, irritable, or running on empty, but as we take the time to observe patterns of upset, we will be able to anticipate a child’s needs before they get acted out.

Take time to anticipate what your son's needs might be during difficult transition times throughout the day—such as in the morning, after school, and after dinner,—or during big life changes, such as a move, a divorce, or the death of a loved one. Provide connection through regular brief daily activities that allow you to tune into signs that he might need further support. Consider a lighthearted check-in activity like “You wouldn't believe what happened to me today!” where you each tell tall tales about what happened and then settle into reporting high and low points of your day. Each of you might even rate your stress level between 0 to 10, keeping in mind that optimal stress is somewhere between 4 and 5—not 0. For most of us, a certain amount of stress is motivating, but when it tips over into the red zone, we need to learn self-regulatory strategies to bring it down.

Interrupt Problems

If you see a child getting so frustrated with a problem that you can see a volcano building, sometimes interrupting a child can help him gain distance on the problem and feel calmer. Explore brief diversions to shift or lighten the mood. Laughter can discharge tension and shift mood. Even forcing yourself to smile sends a message to your nervous system that there's no emergency, and can help you begin to calm down. Movement also helps kids to discharge their frustration physically. Call for a music break, and dance about in a silly way.

Take Time-In

We should expect kids to occasionally become anxious when they feel threatened, rejected, hurt, or powerless. At these times rather than going into exile, children can benefit from the presence of an attentive and caring listener who can encourage the expression of honest feelings. The healthy release provided by talking, crying, or raging may even prevent the recurrence of unwanted behaviour. In moments of heightened agitation, take time with your son to help him release and channel his stress, find a

calmer emotional state, and eventually to understand that brains function poorly when frantic. When you see the warning signs that your son is on the edge of a meltdown, draw near and consider ways to bring him closer to you. Taking time-in **WITH** him will let him know that you understand he's got some big emotions going on and you're right there with him. Taking a time-in is a powerful way to say your relationship is much more important than the current problem.

Identify a special child-directed downtime haven in your home for rejuvenation, reflection, and the dialing down of emotional intensity. Join him, saying, “We're okay. We can get through this. Let's just take a moment to relax and be gentle with these strong feelings.” Perhaps your son would prefer the diversion of a walk with you to refocus. At some point during the walk, you might say, “I really love you. I can see that it was difficult for you a few moments ago. I'm guessing that you're frustrated about something. Are you willing to talk about it? If you help me to understand, I'm thinking we can come up with some ideas that could help.” Once he is able to name his problem, you can shift to helping him move toward a collaborative



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solution, and to help him identify the initial steps he might take to move toward the solution. Remember to limit your talking, and focus on listening, providing just enough input to challenge him in a loving way and nudge him toward success.



After you take time-in with your son, reflect on the following questions:

- Is there a pattern to my son's misbehaviour? If so, what might the pattern reveal?
- What might my son be saying through his behaviour that I have not understood?
- How might I look beyond his misbehaviour to better understand what he needs?
- How might I work collaboratively with my son toward a positive outcome that he can take ownership of?



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Discuss How to Manage Anger

When emotions have settled, explore with your son the idea that while anger is a normal response to frustration, if we can't see our anger and learn to manage it, it can push us around. How can we notice our anger before it gets in the driver's seat and makes us do things that we later regret? Talk about ways that you keep your own anger in check: Stop, breathe; remind yourself that you are going to be okay, that this moment is not an emergency. Shake the tension out of your hands. Take ten more deep breaths. As you breathe deeply, observe the anger that seemed so big and solid and real can actually dissipate, giving way to other feelings—often fear, sadness, or disappointment. Help him to become aware that all these feelings are part of being human.

Child Chosen Time-out is Okay

It's all right to suggest that your son take time away from a problem to settle his feelings, but ensure that time-out is presented as an option, not handed down as a sentence. If all the particulars are within your son's control—when to leave, where to go, what to do, who to be with, and when to return—time-out can be a helpful strategy for him to experiment with managing his emotions.

Take Adult Time-Out

At times we can expect that unruly behaviour may send us to the edge of a cliff. Our responsibility is to pause here, not to jump. When we as adults are feeling pushed around by angry reactivity, recognize that your son isn't causing your hormones and neurotransmitters to flood your body, but that your own fight-or-flight response has been triggered. Take responsibility for your reactivity, knowing that as you relax, your perceptions will change. If we feel flooded with anger, taking time-out as adults can help us keep our own emotions in check, stop us from saying or doing something that could damage the relationship, and, not incidentally, model constructive emotional regulation.

Being honest about your own feelings can impress the seriousness of the situation on your children while you keep the connection going. If your own frustration about your 8 year old son's acting out is sending you into the red zone, say as calmly as you can, "I am too angry with this behaviour right now to talk about it. I need a few moments now to calm myself. I'll be right here in the kitchen washing the dishes. I'd prefer you to stay close. If you want, you can watch me. Then we can both decide if I seem calm enough for us to talk."



Emotions Guide Us

Sometimes the anger we feel about our child's misbehaviour can be alleviated by changing something we are doing, or not doing, as parents. Does the child need a protein-based snack before he settles in to do his homework? Does he need an earlier bedtime? Do we need to do some repair work on our relationship with our twelve year old so that he stops treating us rudely? Sometimes we may feel anger that we associate with our child's misbehaviour, but its real cause may lie somewhere else, especially if it is full of a kind of electric charge. Our anger might actually be directed at our spouse who is not acting as a full partner in parenting, or even at a work colleague or our boss. And sometimes we can realize that we are carrying around anger that we don't understand that spills out onto our kids. In these times we often need to talk our own emotions through with someone we trust.

Whether or not you have used time-out frequently, rarely, or not at all, remember to have compassion for yourself as a parent. Virginia Mae Axline, a pioneer in the use of *Play Therapy* and a woman who greatly influenced my work as a family therapist years ago, wisely said: "All people will proceed with a caution that will protect the integrity of their personality."

You are doing the best you can at any given moment, and the fact that you are reading this newsletter demonstrates not only your willingness to question, but also your deep caring for your child—the message of love that your child will internalize. • • •

Barry MacDonald
MentoringBoys.com



The challenges associated with being male vary in each community. I welcome the opportunity to offer a *Boy Smarts Action Talk* workshop in your community this fall or in 2015. For details contact info@mentoringboys.com.



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