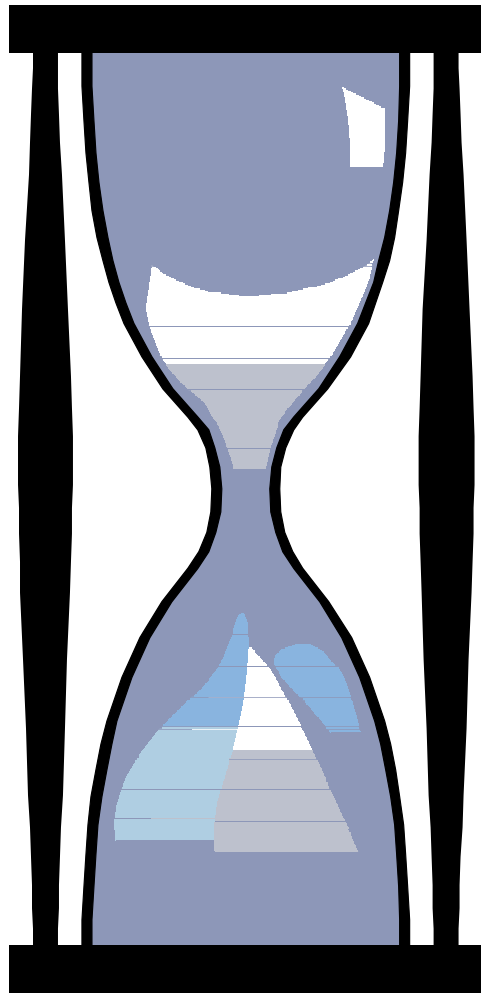


When it is necessary to impose control on children, it is much better to avoid an attitude of punishment, choosing instead to work with the transgressor using consequences that are related, respectful and reasonable.



At a recent workshop on working with difficult children, a participant, who had just picked up a copy of *Time Out: Abuses and Effective Uses* that I co-authored with Dr. Jane Nelsen, asked me, “What was your motivation to write this book?” My immediate response was, “Because it was time for some time out on this issue!” As I thought about it further, it occurred to me that the context in which the book was born is a metaphor of the confusion around discipline for children.

The week that the book was published began with a news item in various news media about a mother dressing her son up like a pig. She painted “pig” on his forehead and chained him on her front lawn, reportedly to encourage improvement in his behavior. Then, at mid-week I got a call from an educator in a western state that wanted my opinion of the new practice in his state’s schools of placing three-foot-square Formica-lined boxes with timers in elementary classrooms. Teachers could lock troublesome students in these boxes for periods of “time-out.” His concern was that in the first week of usage of the boxes, one of the students turned out to be extremely claustrophobic and suffered major trauma, including nightmares and anxiety.

The next day, my brother called to say that his son had been sentenced to a total of 43 thirty-minute “time-outs,” standing in the corner of the classroom because he was “slow doing his schoolwork.” We both agreed that the 21-1/2 hours might have been better spent doing the schoolwork he was struggling with.

TIME OUT

by H. Stephen Glenn, Ph.D.

Later the same week, a mother wanted my advice on how to avoid putting a lock on her four-year-old daughter’s room while still getting the child to remain in the room for the full length of her sentence. When the mother said the child was unable to tell time, I asked what the purpose of the time-out was. The mother reported that the time-out was her effort to make the child stop being willful, uncooperative or in a bad mood.

At that point I remembered a question that Dr. Jane Nelsen asks, “Where did we ever get the idea that children of any age will do better if we make them feel worse?” In discussing the matter further with Jane, it became apparent that issues and confusion around the use of time-out were constant elements in our work with parents, teachers and counselors. It was also clear that time-out was used as a strategy to manipulate and control children rather than to empower them.

I believe that it is a mistake to use time-out as a “punishment” or “consequence.” When it is necessary to impose control on children, it is much better to avoid an attitude of punishment, choosing instead to work with the transgressor using consequences that are related, respectful and reasonable. Furthermore, whenever possible, the consequences should be revealed in advance so that children can allow for them in their decision-making process.

Thank goodness, I finished up the week in question by visiting my daughter Kristi who teaches special needs children and is recognized for her special gifts of encouragement and respect. At her place, teachers have a time-out area with some books, pictures, coloring books and an easy chair. Her son was obviously too upset to help out on a chore, so she said, “It looks like this is a bad time for you to do this. Take some time out to think things over, and when you are ready, come back and help us.” When

he came out of the time-out area after a few minutes, she said, "Does this mean that you are ready to help now?" He smilingly said, "I think so!" Then they picked up their project where they left off.

Later I saw Kristi model a healthy approach to time-out for herself by saying, "I'm too stressed out to deal with this now, so I am going to walk around a bit until I can handle the matter in a reasonable way!" And she did.

Time-out, as Kristi demonstrates, is most appropriate for working on issues that involve stress, emotions and relationships. It is important to model and encourage such behavior as a positive intervention with as much power as possible resting with the individual who needs a quiet time and place to gain control of his or her behavior. For these reasons, arbitrary time periods, revenge and sanctions including the use of bedrooms and other spaces are usually counter-productive. A person should be allowed to seek out an appropriate space and time for reflection, reconsideration or cooling off.

I find the use of time-out to be a vital resource for effectively managing my own pressures of life. Whenever I feel highly stressed or emotionally overwhelmed, I try to acquire time out to get myself back together. I have also learned the importance of giving others this opportunity with dignity. You know you are making progress when a child says, "I need some time out right now!" Moreover, you are really getting it together when a child can say, "It seems like some time out might help both of us!" Give yourself a star if you can take this comment as a serious suggestion rather than a challenge.

Working with children and clients who are struggling with emotions and attitudes, I prefer a problem-solving approach based on these guidelines:

- Avoid power struggles and trying to control another's feelings.
- Avoid trying to teach when anyone is emotionally charged.
- Avoid using history as an indictment of emotional inadequacy.
- Problem solve with (rather than for) the person.
- Have a patient, optimistic attitude, and look for what is to be gained.
- Look for solutions rather than blame.

To illustrate these principles, let me share a recent experience. A young person that I am involved with was having a temper tantrum over a relatively insignificant issue. In this case I chose "strategic withdrawal" by saying, "This is obviously not a good time to deal with this. When you are ready to work on it, let me know!" Then I walked away. In a few minutes, I checked on him, and I was careful not to convey a judgmental or pessimistic attitude. "If you are ready to deal with it now, let's talk!"

Because he was ready, I said, "Since I saw what happened, I'd like to ask how you were feeling."

He said, "Really frustrated!"

I replied, "Whatever it was that was frustrating you, what did you do in response to that frustration?"

He admitted, "I started yelling and shoving things around!"

"What were the results of handling your frustration that way?"

"It really freaked some people out, and I embarrassed myself!"

I asked, "What do you think the results of continuing to express frustration by yelling and shoving things about will be?"

Sheepishly, he remarked, "I will continue to upset people and embarrass myself!"

"Knowing that this will happen when you start to feel frustrated, what do you think would happen if you acknowledged your frustration as soon as you start to feel it and declare some time out for yourself to work on it in some other way?"

"Things might go better!"

"Is that something you would like to work on?"

"Yes!"

We then discussed some ways to work out the frustration in ways that were more effective, rehearsing so that he had a plan. We also took just a moment to acknowledge that change is not always a one-shot deal and talked about allowing for small steps, so as not to add additional frustration.

This simplified example illustrates problem solving with the person to focus on what was learned and making a better plan for the future. Time-out became a personal strategy for doing better instead of a punishment for misbehaving.

While statistical data suggest that the vast majority of abusive parents were themselves abused as children, it also indicates that the majority of abused children find ways to avoid repeating the abuse to their own children. In fact, a significant factor in breaking the chain for many appears to be the effective use of time-out and related alternatives. In general, the abusive parent makes the victim responsible for the parent's emotions and then blames the emotion for abusive behavior. It now seems that many abused children internalize the parent's messages as, "When I have children and get angry, what can I do so that I don't hurt them like this?" If the abused child does have this reaction to his abuse, as a parent, he or she will probably seek alternative responses to anger.

Learning to use time-out for reflection and collection is an important part of what Daniel Goleman refers to as emotional intelligence, which is a strong predictor of success in life and relationships. It is therefore important to help young people to see time-out as an asset rather than a sanction.

Judy and I were recently reading a book by a pop-psychologist that talked about men retreating to their caves. I started using this metaphor for some of my time-out behavior. One day Judy asked, "What do you do in there?" I answered, "When we first began this relationship, I used to go in there and sharpen up arrows to shoot at you. However, now I go in there and shoot them at the wall so that they don't hurt you and me!" I've learned to take time out for time-out!▼

H. Stephen Glenn is an internationally acclaimed family psychologist who speaks to over 100,000 people each year. He was honored at the White House as one of the nation's outstanding family life and prevention professionals. His works include many books and articles, programs for television and film, and a training series entitled *Developing Capable People*. Dr. Glenn is a published author and has served on many national boards.

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