

Is it time to give “time out” a time out?

by *Michael H. Popkin, Ph.D.*

Everybody wants a silver bullet: the one-size-fits-all cure for the common anything. For years the silver bullet in parenting was a good old-fashioned spanking, the mere threat of which was supposed to make children stop their misbehavior and obediently fall into line. As parents began to realize that spankings and other forms of autocratic discipline often made power struggles between parents and spirited children worse, not better, they began looking for less bombastic methods of influence. Enter the panacea of time out.

Never mind that parents have been employing the command, “Go to your room,” for almost as long as they’ve been doling out spankings and trips to the woodshed. With time outs, enlightened parents felt that they had stumbled on a new and gentler silver bullet. In fact, one very popular book devoted to the sole use of time outs for discipline likens it to “magic” in its effectiveness. And to be sure, time outs often work, just as the threat of a spanking often works.

The problem with spankings, time outs, and other silver bullet solutions is that children, especially spirited children (who are prone to power struggles, among other challenging behaviors) soon build up an immunity. A modern flu virus --adaptive genius that it is— could take lessons from a power-seeking five-year-old who wants what he wants when he wants it. “Go ahead and put me on time out; I don’t care!” he yells at the beleaguered parent. The more we push him into time out, the more he digs in his heels in protest of our authority. At times the push becomes literal as a frustrated parent drags a defiant child, thrashing and screaming, off to time out. The kicker is when the parent has to stand in the hallway holding the door shut while an unrepentant offspring engages in a tug-of-war from the other side. Far from being the vision of quiet reflection that the term “time out” evokes for hopeful parents, the scene has degenerated into a cartoon strip mocking parental authority!

Effectively handling power struggles with spirited children requires more strategy than any single silver bullet can provide. The following six tips will give you an idea where to start:

1. Neither fight nor give in. When you fight with a power-driven child by trying to put her on time out or by using any other discipline skill that proclaims your authority over her, you set yourself up as the enemy to be resisted. This makes such children want to fight you all the harder. And since spirited children are often blessed with the gift of *persistence*, you may be in for long afternoon. On the other hand, when you give in to a child’s unreasonable demands or ignore his misbehavior, you send the message that he can do whatever he likes. This also fuels his over-the-top desire for power. After all, what works gets repeated.

- 2. Give choices, not orders.** Contrary to popular belief, kids do not necessarily want what you don't want them to have. Often they just want the power to decide for themselves. Many a power struggle has been avoided or ended by simply giving the child a choice instead of an order. Instead of demanding your child to put on his blue shirt, a simple choice between wearing the blue or the red shirt can give him just enough power for him to feel in control of the situation. The key is to give choices that you — the parent and leader of the family — can live with. This concept of “freedom within limits” is the cornerstone of effective parenting and of life in our democratic society.
- 3. Motivate your child with when-then scenarios.** When your child refuses or is likely to refuse to do what you've asked of her, find something that she likes doing on a regular basis and connect the two activities. For example: “When you've had your bath, then I'll read you that story.” By choosing an activity that your child enjoys doing on a regular basis, by the way, you can avoid turning this into a bribe or reward, which is a slippery slope best left alone.
- 4. Choose a consequence that fits the misbehavior.** Successful people learn that what happens in life usually results from choices they make. Parents can teach this concept of “responsibility” by using discipline that logically connects a child's choice to misbehave with the consequence that follows. With that in mind, “time out” is a perfectly good consequence for anti-social behavior, such as hitting: “Either play without hitting or go play in your room by yourself.” That makes sense, even for kids who haven't learned about prisons and solitary confinement. However, most misbehaviors require consequences other than a time out if they are to be logically connected. Wise parents develop a repertoire of such consequences to use when called for. For example, “If you break the window, you help pay for it;” “either put away your toys or I'll put them away for a day.”
- 5. Stay firm and friendly.** The easiest thing for a parent to do when confronted with a resistant child is to get angry. As one mother put it, “I didn't even know that I **could** get angry until I had Alex!” However, the moment you do, you have lost that round in the power struggle. Maintain a firm tone of voice that says “I'm in charge here,” yet one that also says, “I'm not your enemy; I'm your friend.” Look for a solution together that might make both you and your child happy, but one that lies within the limits of the situation. Again, why not the red shirt instead of the blue one?
- 6. Strengthen the overall relationship.** When power struggles persist between parent and child, the overall relationship deteriorates. This makes it increasingly hard to discipline your child when necessary. To counteract this negative cycle, it is imperative that you spend time building the relationship by doing such things as: having fun together, teaching your child skills, reading together, encouraging your child, helping him solve problems, showing concern for his feelings, treating her respectfully, and other relationship-building activities.

There is much more that I could share with you about discipline that will help, but I'm getting tired and need a time out. Actually, that's my seventh tip for you: make sure that you take care of the caregiver. Exercise, eat well, get enough sleep, and take a break from time to time. And when you feel like you are about to lose it with your child, take your sail out of his wind. In other words, instead of trying to deflate him by showing what a tough-love parent you are, excuse yourself and take a break (as long as your child is old enough to be left alone). The bathroom works fine—it's the one place in the house where privacy is expected. Once you've calmed down, you'll be better able to think of a strategy for engaging your child without fighting or giving in. So, I guess timeouts are a good option after all...for the parent. ■

About Michael Popkin

Dr. Popkin is best known as the pioneer of video-based parent education with the introduction of *The Active Parenting Discussion Program* in 1983. Since then, millions of parents have completed his parenting courses, including the best-selling *Active Parenting Now* and *Active Parenting of Teens*. A frequent keynote speaker and media guest, Dr. Popkin has appeared on hundreds of shows including "The Oprah Winfrey Show" and Montel Williams, and as a regular parenting expert on CNN. Look for his newest book, *Taming the Spirited Child: Strategies for Parenting Challenging Children without Breaking Their Spirits* (March 2007, from Fireside/Simon and Schuster). You can visit his website at www.ActiveParenting.com.

© Active Parenting Publishers

Permission to copy

The author grants permission to reprint or publish this article for free, on a non-exclusive basis, provided that you include "About the Author" information wherever the article appears and heed the following restrictions:

- The article may not be changed without the express permission of the author. If you wish to edit the article, e.g. for length, please send a request to cservice@activeparenting.com.
- Do not post/reprint this article in any site or publication that contains hate, violence, porn, or supports illegal activity.
- Do not use this article in violation of the US CAN-SPAM Act. If sent by email, this article must be delivered to opt-in subscribers only.
- If you publish this article in a format that supports linking, please ensure that all URLs and email addresses are active links.
- Please send a copy of the publication, or an email indicating the URL to cservice@activeparenting.com