

WHO SHOULD TAKE THE TIME OUT II

BY CHIP DELORENZO, M.ED.

In the previous article we discussed that we, as adults, often are the ones who need the time out when we are angry with our children. We also discussed some ways to cool down when we have “flipped our lid” so that we can naturally reengage our prefrontal cortex (or rational brain) which regulates emotional responses and interpersonal responses. Now let's talk about how we can help our children develop their EQ by using a “positive time out.”

To begin with, let's discuss some of the ways that time-out is used with children today. Many parents use some sort of punitive time-out as a method to discipline their children. This practice became very popular in the 1970's as parents sought out alternatives to corporal punishment. Today it is used everywhere you find parents and children. Often, it is the primary tool for discipline. Children are often asked, when misbehaving, to go to a predestinated area for a specified period of time, or until the adult retrieves them. The guiding ideas behind this discipline tool are usually the parent wants the child to think about what they have done, or experience the negative consequence of being isolated with the hopes that this will prevent future misbehavior. Sounds logical, right? However, consider your own experience (many who read this article will have experienced time-out as a child): if you were sent to time-out as a child, did you ever take the time to truly think about what you had done to get sent there? Did you consider the consequences of your actions, and develop contrition and a sincere desire to set things right? I can't know what you thought about, but I can tell you what I thought about: how to get even, how to not get caught the next time, and how to make my parents feel guilty for the obvious injustice!

One of the major tenants of positive discipline, is that children do better when they feel better. “Feel better” does not mean pacified or happy at all times. When children are pacified they develop dependency and manipulation skills. By “feeling better” I refer to the experience that children have when children take responsibility for their actions, are brought into the problem solving process, and learn that mistakes are an opportunity to learn. When this happens they develop a sense of capability and responsibility for themselves and to their family. And in turn experience a sense of connection and they feel better about themselves and who they are.

One of the ways that we can help children gain this sense of connection through personal responsibility is to teach them how to respond to stress, anger or sadness. A “positive time-out” is an incredible way to teach children self-regulation and successful problem solving.

Here's how it works:

1. Begin by teaching the children about the concept of a “flipped lid”, and explain matter-of-factly how the brain works to reengage the pre-frontal cortex and the importance of time in allowing this to happen.
2. Explain how important it is to feel better in order to do better, and that it is really impossible to solve problems when your lid is flipped. (See Daniel Siegel video link in previous article).
3. Have a family meeting to design the positive time-out area and define the ground rules:
 - a. Choose an area with the children that would work to provide some privacy and comfort.
 - b. Have the children help design the area – what it will look like and what things that they want to have in the area (things that will help them feel better, but not things that will allow them to disassociate like video games, computers, etc.).
4. Develop ground rules together. Here are some suggested ground rules:
 - a. Parents agree that no one gets sent to the positive time-out area. Parents can suggest, but not force a child to go there (focus on self-regulation vs. parent regulation). This helps the children

see the area as a special place where they can go to feel better vs. feel worse.

b. If there is a problem to be solved, then it is agreed, up front, at the planning meeting that when the child feels better he/she will come to resolve the problem.

c. Children can take the time that they need to cool down.

d. Use a name other than "positive time-out". Often children have a negative association with the term "time-out", especially if adult directed time-outs have been used.

5. Adults should avoid using punitive time-outs.
6. Children come out when they're ready, and when they feel better.
7. Name the area together: cool down place, feel better area, Oz, etc.
8. When children get angry or very upset, ask them if they'd like to go to the "positive time-out" area. Consider using a hand signal that has been pre-established to suggest taking a time-out to cool down.
9. Use the positive time-out area yourself when you need it. Modeling is your most potent parenting tool.

We began using a positive time-out area with our second son, Nicholas. He was and is very quick to get sad and angry, especially if he perceives an injustice. We created the area with him, full of pillows, stuffed animals and a sleeping bag, and made it his special place. Whenever he was sad or angry we would ask him if he'd like to go to his "Feel Better Place", and most times he would go. Sometimes we would go with him. It was a great tool for him, and he would almost always emerge in a better place, emotionally and would be able to solve whatever problem caused him to be upset. The defining moment, however, for the "Feel Better" place came one morning while I was making my coffee. Nicholas came down stairs, after waking up, and asked what was for breakfast. I told him that we would be having cereal that day. He fell to the floor in tears because he had been hoping for some steaming hot pancakes! Without being prompted, he picked himself up from the floor and went to his "Feel Better Place," without being prompted. Ten minutes later he emerged, and said to me, "Dad, I feel better now. What kind of cereal do we have?" He was 4. I laughed, thinking that he had developed some EQ skills that many adults would be envious to have, and that could have saved many a career!