

WHO SHOULD TAKE THE TIME OUT?

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A number of years ago I taught a class of twelve 6-9 year olds (grades 1-3) in a school room that was converted from an old farm house. I was only one of two teachers in the school, and I was also the sole administrator for the school. This meant that sometimes during the school day I had to leave the classroom for a few minutes to do things like answer an important phone call, go to the restroom or answer the front door. Because of the many hats that I wore in the school the kids in my class learned to become independent, and to help one another, as there was only one of me. However, they were also normal kids who misbehaved from time to time, so in that way it was a regular classroom.

One day, I had to leave the classroom for a few minutes to use the restroom on the second floor of the farmhouse, where my office was. I was only gone for about 5 minutes when I heard a great disruption downstairs. I heard loud voices, furniture moving, and in general a lot of noise! My first thoughts were, "Why the @\$@\$\$ can't I leave the classroom for 5 minutes to use the bathroom and they can't keep it together!" Ever had one of those moments?

I was furious! I stomped down the stairs, with full intention of giving the third degree to whoever was causing this commotion. I still can't tell you what it was that caused me to pause and take a deep breath before I entered the room where the noise was coming from. But I did. Then, as I entered the room what I saw amazed me, humbled me and made my eyes well up with tears. What had happened was that when I washed my hands in the sink one of the old pipes in the floor had broken, and water was pouring down through the ceiling into one of the rooms in the first floor classroom. The kids had reacted quickly, and had moved tables and shelves out of the way of the incoming water, and had also emptied trash cans to catch the water. I couldn't have done a more effective job myself. They saved about \$500 worth of educational materials, as well as the rug beneath the leak.

Had I reacted to my emotional state as I stomped down the stairs I would be recalling that moment 10 years later as one of my biggest regrets as a teacher. Now, with greater understanding of myself and how the brain works, I understand what happened that day with the pause and breath, although it was unintentional in the moment.

Here's a great video by Daniel Segal that describes how the brain works in a moment of frustration:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DD-lfP1FBfk>

When we "flip our lid" our pre-frontal cortex shuts down or is no longer the guiding force of our actions. We are then operating from the mid-brain which governs our memories, fears, and "fight or flight" response. When the pre-frontal cortex is not engaged and we react, we make our biggest mistakes, relationally: yelling, blaming, hitting, scaring, threatening, saying things we wish we could take back, etc. However, when we take the time, intentionally, to reengage the pre-frontal cortex, relational mistakes diminish, and real problem solving begins.

Some of the documented functions of the pre-frontal cortex are:

- Regulation of body through autonomic nervous system
- Emotional regulation

- Regulation of interpersonal relationships
- Response flexibility
- Intuition
- “Mindsight”
- Self Awareness – auto-noesis
- Letting go of fears (only in lab animals so far)
- Morality

What happened in my experience above, with the broken pipe, was that I paused and took a deep breath, literally giving myself a momentary time-out to reconnect or reengage my pre-frontal cortex. This then allowed me to regulate my emotions, take in the information that I saw and respond flexibly and with understanding. This was not an intentional response, but one which showed me the power of the brain and my potential reactions.

It would be nice to say, “Just keep your energy in the front of your brain and everything will be OK.” However, while there are ways to prevent a “flipped lid” we are human, and especially when we are under stress we “flip our lids” from time to time. Often, this is when an adult might yell or demand that a child “take a time out!” But, who is it that needs the time out?

One of the tools that we have taught our children is that when any of us are angry that we can take a “time out” and cool down. In order for this to really work, however, we have to model the behavior for them. Here are some suggestions for teaching and modeling taking a positive time-out, and helping to build and develop our EQ!

- **Discuss “Flipping Your Lid”** – Explain to your children what happens in the brain when we “flip our lid”. Also explain how giving the brain time to cool down allows the pre-frontal cortex to re-engage so that our rational brains can begin to work.
- **Choose a spot** – Choose a spot in the house that is your “safe space”. Let your children know that sometimes that you might need to take time to cool down, and that if you go to your spot, that you need them to allow you the time to cool down, and that you promise that you will come back and work things out with them when you are ready.
- **Create a non-verbal signal** – In our family we use the “t” sign formed by holding our hands perpendicular to each other. The sign indicates that I need some time, I love you, and because I love you and care about our relationship I need to take a time-out to cool down so that I can work out our problem with dignity and respect for you and our relationship.
- **Use it!** – Enough said.
- **Make amends when you don’t use it** – Everyone makes mistakes. If we are able, as adults, to make mistakes and take responsibility for them our children will learn from us that it’s OK to make mistakes, and it’s safe to take responsibility and make amends. Making amends also offers your children the opportunity to make the decision to forgive! What an incredible life skill to learn when you are young. See Fred Luskin’s recent article on forgiveness: <http://www.maximizeyourtalent.com/lead-article/forgive-for-good/>

Next month I will discuss how to help children use this tool directly, for themselves, and how to encourage them to develop their own EQ.