

Just Say “No” to the Naughty Chair

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The use of time-outs as a form of discipline must have become popular in the late 60s. I make this assumption because it was right around then that time-outs were rather suddenly introduced into our household. My memory is vivid – my brother on a stool facing one corner of our family room, myself in a similar position in the opposite corner. What thoughts were going through my mind as the tick-tick-tick of the kitchen timer metered out our punishment? Was I feeling bad about fighting with my brother? Had I realized the error of my ways and decided never to do it again? Nope. Rather, I was: a) annoyed with my mother, b) plotting revenge against my brother, and c) vowing to be much more clever next time so as to not get caught! When the time-out was over, did I feel more calm and inspired to be a better sister/daughter? No, I felt angry, isolated and thwarted.

Time-out, while promoted as a gentle alternative to harsher forms of discipline, can actually do more long-term emotional damage than a spanking. For many children, the withholding of love and attention can feel considerably more devastating than physical punishment.

The truth is: time-outs don't work. If they did, parents wouldn't have to repeat them over and over again. The “Naughty Chair” technique, popularized by the TV reality program *Supernanny*, takes the time-out strategy to an even higher level of parent-inflicted emotional trauma. Although the nannies on this show appear to extract amazing results from the approach, the long-term effectiveness of this practice is questionable. When you assert power or dominance of any kind over a child, they feel disempowered. A disempowered child will eventually become either overly rebellious or overly compliant.

What does a child learn from the experience of being made to repeatedly sit in the Naughty Chair (besides a distinct loathing for middle-aged British women who wear their hair in a bun)? Eventually, he will learn to identify with the “naughty” label and may forever carry a fundamental belief system that he is inherently bad. Not a good set-up for an inspired and successful life.

So, what can be done to elicit acceptable behavior from our children while supporting them to maintain a strong sense of self-esteem and confidence? First, let's get clear on the goal: rather than focusing on “obedience”, perhaps a better objective would be to raise “cooperative” children. What's the difference? An *obedient* child is well-behaved because she *must* be, because she doesn't feel she has a choice. A *cooperative* child behaves well because she *wants to*, because she trusts and respects her caretakers and is naturally compelled to contribute to a mutually satisfying experience.

Make your relationship with your child the most important thing and you will elicit cooperation. Put in the time and effort to build a trusting and respectful relationship with your child. Believe in him. Be committed to trusting him. Children need to know you will

be there to guide, teach and support them and, most importantly, that you are on their side. If your child feels empowered, he won't need to try so hard to assert his power.

In order to really make this work, you've got to be willing to stop what you are doing, abandon your own agenda, and take the time to help your child understand *why* what she is doing is a problem. Most often, when a young child "misbehaves", it's not from a place of meanness or aggression. It's because she doesn't fully understand the consequences of her actions or how her behavior affects other people. By taking the time to talk about it and enlist your child's help in coming up with solutions, you help her develop a sense of empathy and consideration for others.

Another important component for success is to remember to check in with yourself, to look for a possible hidden agenda behind your desire to "control" your child. When you feel the need to put your child in a time-out, in reality, it may be YOU that needs a time-out. Chances are, either your child's behavior has triggered a deep-seated emotional button for you, or you were already feeling stressed out about something unrelated and are, therefore, not in the appropriate state of mind to be patient with your child. Be honest with yourself, take a breath, and get centered, before you take action.

Admittedly, the methods I am suggesting do not constitute an "easy fix". Developing a relationship with your child that is based on trust and respect takes a LOT of time and effort up front (particularly if you've previously employed more coercive parenting techniques.) However, if you stick with it consistently, so you don't lose your child's trust, it will pay-off a thousand fold as your child grows older and enters adolescence and adulthood. With time, as your relationship with your child deepens and trust is built, a solid foundation is formed, from which everything is possible.

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