



NORTH AMERICAN SOCIETY OF ADLERIAN PSYCHOLOGY

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Resource Page

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

“...we don’t know what to do with our children, because the traditional methods of child-raising no longer work and we have not learned new methods which can take their place.” Dreikurs

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.

And to be sure, time outs often work, just as the threat of a spanking often works. 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.

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.

7. 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, 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 the author:

Dr. Michael 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). Go to www.ActiveParenting.com for more information.

This Resource Page is based on Adlerian Psychology theory, principles, and methods. NASAP, the North American Society of Adlerian Psychology, was founded in 1952 by a small group of Adlerians under the leadership of Rudolf Dreikurs. The purpose of NASAP is to promote the growth and understanding of Adlerian Psychology and effective approaches to living based on Adler's philosophy. As early as 1900, Adler began addressing such crucial issues as equality, democracy, mutual respect, the influence of birth order, and the holism of individuals. Today Adlerian concepts are being used creatively in education, parenting, business and the arts, research, as well as in counseling and therapy. NASAP membership includes educators, psychologists, psychiatrists, physicians, counselors, parents, business people, interested individuals, and community organizations. If you are interested in learning more about NASAP or Adlerian psychology, or would like to connect with Adlerians in your area, please call or write – we would love to hear from you!

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