

## **Time Out – Discipline or Punishment?**

The other day I was sitting at my computer. I had been there for hours and I needed a break.

I needed to get up and stretch, to breathe a little fresh air to slow down. I needed a time-out. I took a short walk outside and returned refreshed and ready to take up where I had left off.

Time-out has become a popular way to handle child misbehavior. Sometimes it involves a particular chair in an arid environment that is imposed by setting one minute per year of the child's age. Gee, by that reckoning I could have had a nice long break but would not have been able to get the fresh air.

Before we look at time-out let's define some terms.

There's a world of difference between punishment and discipline. Some of you will have read this before, it's a message I often deliver. But it's such an important part of understanding how we deal with our children when they misbehave, it deserves another mention.

Punishment is about causing pain or discomfort in an effort to change behavior. If we hurt the child he will think twice about misbehaving. And it often works, in the short term. It works as long as we hurt them enough to dissuade them from repeating the misbehavior. And it works only as long as they are afraid of us.

All the motivation is external. Children learn that parents will hurt them if they don't follow the rules, but they don't learn why those rules exist. They learn to be sneaky so they won't get caught, and that they can misbehave when nobody's watching. We've all heard about teens who throw parties as soon as their parents are away.

Discipline, on the other hand, is not about pain or punishment, nor about revenge or retribution. Discipline is about teaching, guiding and training. When we discipline children we are teaching them the difference between right and wrong. We're helping them to learn about the consequences of their actions.

They learn why rules exist and how breaking the rules impacts on others as well. They slowly internalize the information so they can learn to behave appropriately in future. They learn self-discipline.

And a time-out is a break. It's a chance to get away and calm down, to take time to think or to get a rest. It's a coffee break, a break in the action at a hockey game, a walk around the block or counting to ten.

When we say to our child; “You settle down young man or you’re going to have a time-out,” that’s punishment. We will impose this and the threat of it is seen as a way to make him behave.

When we say; “It looks like you need to take a break. How about you come with me for a few minutes so you can settle down.” That’s a time-out.

We should stay with our kids when they’re little. Otherwise they will see what’s happening as banishment and never connect it with the misbehavior. When we stay with them and help them to calm down they learn about the need to take a break when a situation is getting out of hand.

We can also model time-out. When you’re nose-to-nose with your eight-year-old and tempers are flaring look at him and say: “I need a time-out. We can continue this when I calm down. I’m going for a walk around the block.”

My friend Nicole is mother of a large and noisy family. They all thrive in the hustle-bustle created when they get together. Recently her son invited his friend Jeremy to come on a weekend camping trip. When they returned home Nicole told me that she noticed that from time to time, when the stimulation of her rowdy family became too much for Jeremy he’d quietly wander off on his own for fifteen or twenty minutes and return full of energy.

Jeremy had learned from his parents about taking a break. When he was a toddler his parents would remove him when he lost it with his friends and would help him calm down. By the time he started school his mom could simply say, “Jeremy, you need to take a break.” And he’d leave the room until he calmed down. And now, at age 12 he knows how to self-calm. And that’s what time-out is about.

Time-out is the coffee break of life. Let’s treat it like that. Taking a time-out shouldn’t be a punishment; it should be a wonderful chance to settle down.