

Good Ways and Bad Ways to Use Timeouts

Timeouts can solve some problems with children - but they can make some other problems worse. Appropriate use of timeouts is one important tool to help parents help their children. Don't use timeouts to punish children. When a timeout is used to make children suffer for their mistakes, it just makes them mad. Especially when we make them do things that are humiliating (such as standing in a corner or putting their nose in the corner), they are likely to feel hurt and confused. It doesn't teach them anything and it doesn't prepare them to be taught. In fact when we use timeouts to punish children, they may use the time to plan revenge. That is not the objective of timeouts.

Timeouts are for soothing, calming and comforting. When children are upset, they are not ready to be taught. The ideal use of timeouts is to help everyone get calm and start feeling safe so that the parent and child can have a productive discussion. For that reason, effective timeouts may include lovingly holding a child, rocking together in a rocking chair, or taking a walk. They may also include having both parent and child go to their separate rooms while they settle down.

When parents get mad at their children and choose to take timeouts for themselves, they have two choices. They can think about what the child did wrong, how much it bothers them, and all the things the child has done wrong in the past. However, this does not prepare parents to be helpful teachers and guides for their children. It only makes them madder. Their second choice is to calm themselves by thinking about how much they love their children, how hard their children try, and how much they as parents want to help their children learn and grow.

The best use for timeout may be to help the parents calm down so they can be helpful to their children. When parents feel mad with their children, they may choose to say something like: "Right now I feel so frustrated I don't know what to do. I need some time to think. Let's both go to our separate rooms until we feel like we can talk about this." This allows both child and parent time to calm down.

Learning can happen after soothing. Children have limited experience and knowledge so it is important for parents to teach them. But there are also important things that the parent can learn. As the parent listens to the child, the parent can learn about the child's fears, confusion, needs, and difficulties. When a parent takes time to listen to a child, that parent is better able to be helpful to the child.

When a parent and child are both feeling peaceful, one of the most helpful things the parent can do is help the child understand how his or her behavior affects other people. There is a unit in this series that addresses that issue. It is titled "Helping Children Learn to Respect Other People."

Timeout can be a very useful tool when it is used to help the parent and child calm down and work together to solve problems.

Applications:

What are some situations where timeouts may be helpful for your children?

For example, when a normally sensible child is upset. Or when a child is tired and hungry and needs some peace and loving.

What are some situations where timeouts may be helpful for you?

For example, when you have had a bad day and a child does something that makes you angry. You may choose to go to a quiet place while you relax.

What are some ways you might make timeouts more effective in your family?

For example, showing affection to help a child calm down.

What are some situations where timeouts would not be helpful for your children?

For example, when a child is very young, afraid, or lonely, it would be cruel to isolate him or her.