

A Week of No Time-Outs

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My oldest daughter is the kind of kid that is interested in color theory, other people's emotions and the point of our existence. She'll sit in front of a sheet of math problems while happily tapping her toes through each formulation. She is so much fun and so much depth. She is also still so much 5 year old; her imaginary games are rich and usually feature time travel, assumed scientific theories and inventions along with some sort of princess and cackling witch. She is a real, true joy.

My oldest daughter is also the kind of kid that falls apart in the face of the unexpected. She reacts with quick and loud anger to real and perceived injustice, her righteous indignation ringing against the walls of our house and my tired heart. I'm not without perspective here. I've been around other kids, she is neither as extreme as some or as measured as others. She is squarely in the middle, not easy, not difficult, just herself. Unfortunately, comparisons and the knowledge that "this is normal!" rarely help mediate our reactions.

When she would begin to lose it, when her eyes got wild and her fists clenched, I would start to lose it, too. *Oh, no. Here we go. How long will this last? Will it become hysteria or settle before its peak?* If we were in public, I dreaded the side eye of other moms. If we were at home, I looked quickly at our windows to see if they were open -- imagining the shrillness of her discontent bouncing against my neighbors houses. And then, my panic would begin to match her own. I said mean things like, "You are being ridiculous," and, "It doesn't matter," and "You are being so embarrassing." I reasoned unreasonably, angry whispered and, on occasion, yelled.

I started putting her in time-out. It seemed the only way to protect one another from spitting words. I thought it would give us both time to calm down, reflect on what we'd done (or not done) and start again. It was the perfect solution... except that it made our lives so much worse. She cried out and slammed her hands into the door of her room. She yelled and begged and then would quiet down just long enough to say things like,

"I wish you liked to be with me when I am sad."

Ugh. Damn kids. Am I right?

In between the ever-increasing time-outs, we were wary of one another. We escalated to frustration more quickly and Zuzu didn't come and talk to me in the quiet moments of the day like she used to. We were spending more time apart, physically and emotionally, and not just when we needed to cool off. My plan wasn't working.

It was a particularly desperate day; I'd carried her lengthening body to time-out three times and cried twice myself. I turned on my computer and tuned out her tears. Somewhere between Facebook and my fifth BuzzFeed quiz, I found [an article in Time](#) that claimed time-outs were hurting our children. I laughed a little... there's a new parenting guru every minute. Who has the energy for every new theory?

But then, after I put away my smugness, I realized that while I couldn't prove the time outs were hurting Zuzu long-term, I did have circumstantial evidence that they were harming our relationship now. And if there was a way I could shape her and remain close to her -- well, it was worth a try. I was so converted to the effort I even bought the book the article was based on, *No Drama Discipline*. It took me a few hours to read it and a few more to settle on attempting a little experiment. For seven days, I would follow their recommendations to the best of my ability and see if it made a difference. If it didn't, I would always have the option of a shot of whiskey at the end of every day... naptime.... snack break. (Kidding! Totally! I would never. Probably.)

The Experiment

The rules were pretty simple.

1. Taking time to connect before taking time to react.

When she was freaking out because she didn't want to clean her room, hated the way dinner tasted, had her feelings hurt by the kid next door or just generally lost her bleep for no apparent reason, my first move had to be to go over and hug her. Let her know that I was there and would be there no matter what crazy antics ensued. Create a place of safety. Establishing connection would help establish more productive communication, even when the communication had to mean consequences.

2. Work to discipline, rather than punish.

As the book pointed out, "discipline" comes from the Latin "disciplina," which means instruction, knowledge. Another word that comes from that Latin form is, "disciple," one who is instructed, who follows. When Zuzu stepped out of line, I needed to put my focus on instruction and change of direction rather than carte blanche punishment. After connecting, move forward with instruction. Sometimes this meant consequences, cleaning up after intentional destruction, repairing relations with her sister, saying sorry, taking away TV after she lied about cleaning her room so she could watch one more show. Sometimes it just meant a really long hug and words of understanding, because don't we all just have bleep days and bleep ideas sometimes?

3. Switch Time-Outs for Time-Ins.

This was the hardest and, perhaps most important, change. The theory goes that isolating

your kids when they are at their worst teaches them that people will only want them when they are at their best. I can see both sides of this coin and understand that for many kids, this would not be the psychological effect of time-outs. I can also say this was EXACTLY how they were affecting Zuzu. I suppose her girlhood makes me especially sensitive to this topic -- girls tend to be so predisposed to issues of self-worth and an unwillingness to make their voices heard. I wanted her to know I want her always and respect her voice enough to train it rather than silence it. So, when she acted out I would pull her closer. A bout of hysteria would mean a long walk together, reading a few stories or an invitation to help me with dinner. I guess it is the loving version of "keeping your enemies closer". (Oh, your kids have never felt like your enemies? Interesting. Tell me more about your amazing life.)

I set the rules into place, breathed in some courage and got down to work.

The Results

I've always said I could never be a scientist, because I have no sense of consistency. That was a true statement in the carrying out of this experiment. I was the parent I wanted to be some of the time, better than I had been most of the time and just really backslid a little of the time. I will say that the days I clung to my rules we had more peace, more understanding and less chaos. It wasn't until four days into the seven that I realized she hadn't pounded on one wall yet and I hadn't yelled once. She was more thoughtful in her apologies and more thoughtful in her actions. When I sat down, she started sitting next to me again and the questions that have always so entertained and instructed me started bubbling out of her mouth once more. She wasn't defensive anymore and I found myself saying the things I wished I said rather than the things I wished I hadn't said. Slowly, she began to seek alone time as an act of calming and meditation, a thing I had robbed her of by imbuing it with the colors of punishment.

By the tenth day, our social experiment had turned attempted lifestyle. It was then that I finally took the time to acknowledge I needed the change as desperately as she did. I need her to leave this time in our lives certain she can talk to me even when I don't like what she has to say. I need her to know that their feelings have value even when they are imbued with rage or irrationality or misunderstanding. And so importantly, I need her to understand her value isn't determined by her action. So that one day, when the bleep really hits the fan, she knows she can come to me and I will be waiting with open arms.

I'm not going to sit here and pretend this has solved all our problems. I still find myself yelling at times. She still deals with anxiety and bouts of hysterical and regular 5-year-old fits of anger. We are a month past my little experiment and she has been put in time-out several times since then, despite my best intentions. Hell, I put her in time-out this morning. I would still argue that once in awhile, those time-outs are absolutely needed and the only thing that saves us from each other. But, when we are at our best, when I am at MY best, I can feel us approaching the relationship I know she and I deserve. The kind of relationship I hope she emulates when looking to friends, a life partner and her own

children. One filled with respect, love, a willingness to listen and, even at the end of the really hard days, a readiness to tackle this bonkers adventure called LIFE hand in hand.

Amen.