

Time In Not Time Out

Discipline can be one of the most challenging aspects of parenting children who have previous experience of disrupted attachment, institutionalised care, trauma, neglect or abuse. Children with these experiences have unique needs which require adapted disciplinary strategies to assist them to learn new ways of behaving and getting their needs met. This applies equally in the home and at school.

What does not work and why

As a parent, you may have already discovered that many of the mainstream parenting theories and techniques do not have the desired effect with your child. There are a number of possible reasons for this:

- Safety and security are foundational issues for all children; the ability to accept love and build attachment stems from this base. Poor behaviours such as angry outbursts and ‘controlling’ come from this need for security. Without a sense of security a child will have difficulty complying with your attempts to set limits or to learn new ways of behaving.
- ‘Old school’ methods of discipline such as anger and harsh punishment, lectures, bribery, threats, debates, yelling, or shaming can serve to reinforce negative beliefs for children that they are ‘bad’ or unlovable, and that adults are untrustworthy and unsafe. For some children, these disciplinary methods can resemble the abusive behaviours or traumatising events experienced in their earlier lives. Where this is the case, children can reexperience the terror, panic or shame of the initial trauma or abuse.

On their own, children lack the ability to reshape behaviour; they need assistance to help regulate emotions and learn the skills to socialise and get their needs met in healthy ways.

Time-in, not time-out

The disciplinary technique of ‘time-out’ is not helpful for children with attachment difficulties because of previous negative experiences of separation or disconnection from birth parents. Time-outs can have adverse reactions because they isolate the child from the parent, creating anxiety and reminders of past abandonment or alone-ness, resulting in stress levels escalating and their ability to self-regulate diminishing.

What the child needs is ‘time-in’: to stay close to the parent, to feel safe and supported; to have help to regulate their emotions; and to offer guidance on how to change.

Some suggested strategies include:

- Have your child sit on your lap/close by, while they calm down and think over their actions
- Give consequences which engage your child in joint tasks, such as domestic chores, “you must help me to clean...”
- ‘Close quarter time-outs’ (Moore, in McLeod & Macrae) - putting your child on a chair away from you, but always in visual range, and not responding to them for a set time; always remembering to reconnect with your child when time is up.



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Tips and discipline strategies that work

- Change your definition of discipline to mean “socialisation and behaviour regulation” rather than punishment (Landry quoted in MacLeod & Macrae, p150).
- A disciplinary approach outlined in *The Connected Child* (Purvis et al, 2007 p93) is:
 1. Respond quickly
 2. • Clarify expectations
 3. • Offer simple choices
 4. • Present consequences
 5. • Give immediate retraining and the opportunity to ‘re-do’
 6. • Practise, practise, practise
 7. • Keep your child near you
 8. • Offer praise for success.
- An empathic response to your child’s anger, with an attitude of compassion, can have the effect of serving to make your child feel that you understand their needs, confusion and hurt. It also conveys to your child that you are strong enough to withstand their rage.
- Avoid control-battles: give your child constructive ways out of the situation, whilst letting them know that you are in charge; such as chance to self-correct, or giving two alternatives from which to choose.
- Offering ‘escape clauses’: having a pre-arranged sign or signal which gives your child permission to leave the situation when either they, or you, have concerns that their anxiety levels are rising and they need an opportunity to exit the situation and self-regulate their emotions and behaviour.
- Develop ‘your voice of authority’ which is used only for serious situations where you need to get your child’s attention and enforce boundaries. This voice says “I mean business” and “I am the boss”. It needs to be firmer and more assertive than normal voice but not strong enough to trigger your child’s fight/flight response (Purvis et al, p 100).
- Say what you mean, mean what you say, but don’t say it mean. • The fewer words used, the better.
- Remember to ‘re-attune’ with your child after disciplining them to ensure they feel emotionally reconnected.

References and links

Purvis, KB & Cross, DR, & Lyons Sunshine, W, 2007, *The connected child: for parents who have welcomed children*, McGraw Hill, NY.

MacLeod, J & Macrae, S, 2006, *Adoption parenting: creating a toolbox, building connections*, EMK Press, NJ