

Probing Question: Is time-out a good form of discipline for children?

April 30 2010, By Angela Spivey

Television's Jo Frost, also known as the "Supernanny," calls it "sitting on the naughty step." Others prefer calling it "time-in." Some have dubbed it a bad idea altogether. Most parents have heard of -- and tried -- the time-out technique for correcting children's behavior. But is it a good technique to use?

It can be, said Linda Duerr. At Penn State's Child Development Laboratory, children take a breather from tense situations by snuggling in the sofas or loveseats found in every room, and Duerr, laboratory director, prefers to say the child is "going to the soft place." "When a child is out of control, it's hard for him to sit in a hard chair in a corner. Maybe he needs to punch the pillow or put his head on the soft arm of a sofa," she said.

This form of time-out can help children 5 and younger get calmed down so they can talk about their behavior.

"When a child is not able to participate in activities and can't negotiate some conflict and gets really upset, then I think it's appropriate to say, let's take some time," Duerr said. Some people prefer to use the term "time with" rather than "time out" and Duerr thinks that's a good way to think about it -- especially for children 5 and under. Duerr said caregivers should stay with the child, or at least nearby, to offer comfort or even a hug, and to talk about what the child did wrong. "Sometimes a child needs to be held. Even if they have hit someone, they still need love, too," Duerr said.

She warns that time-out shouldn't be used as a source of ridicule. If a child has a [reputation](#) of always being in time-out, then it's not working, Duerr said.

"We're not going for [embarrassment](#) here. We're trying to help the child to be able to negotiate this problem, to regain some self-control. If time-out is used effectively, it shouldn't have to be used for the same [children](#) over and over again."

Also, make sure that a time-out doesn't last too long, said Duerr. Some people use a timer; Frost suggests one minute of time-out for every year of the child's age. Duerr doesn't think the minute count matters much, as long as you give the child just long enough to calm down.

Then it's time for the most important part, Duerr said -- a conversation about what happened, and what the child can do differently next time.

"We had this happen just this morning. I had to move a child a bit away from the dramatic play area and say, 'Come on, do you think if you had asked her nicely for the magic wand, maybe she would have given it to you? Did you listen? Did you hear that she was trying to tell you that when she was done, she would give it to you?' Don't just do a time-out, then say, 'Alright, you're done.' If you do it that way, there's no learning there."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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