

Let them remember their behavior, not yours!

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Frustrated parents of young children often yell and spank as a means of managing children's behaviour, particularly when angry. However this leaves children thinking about the parent's behaviour, rather than their own!

The key to managing children's behaviour, especially when angry, often rests on the parent taking a brief time out – to gain composure; a moment in another room, counting to ten, a few deep breathes, a pause to refresh. It generally doesn't take much, but a moment is quite necessary before dealing with the child and the behaviour in question. Then, by all means, deal with the child's behaviour. However, do so in a way that leaves them thinking about their behaviour, not yours! Think in terms of consequences, not punishment...

Common forms of consequences are those that involve the loss of pleasurable things: a favourite food, a special play toy, a preferred activity, the loss of personal freedom by sitting in the corner or being sent to one's room and the withholding of social connection by ignoring.

Many parents feel however, that they cannot let certain behaviours go without comment. But consider this story: Imagine there are two dogs inside of you, inside of everyone. They are of equal age and equal strength. They are fighting and fighting constantly. Which one will win the struggle? Which one will win the fight? ...The one you feed! Attention strengthens behaviour so that it will occur more often while ignoring weakens behaviour so it will occur less often.

Another consequence is the loss of favourite activities or things. This is generally regarded as a *response cost*. In other words, "If you are going to dance, you are going to pay the piper". If I get caught speeding, I lose some money. Rather than sitting a child in the corner, consider placing the toy in time out! Another common response cost is the loss of dessert at dinnertime.

Loss of personal freedom is generally regarded as "time out". Time out requires the loss of anything that might be pleasurable, for a determined length of time. Time out can be served anywhere such as sitting in the corner, sitting on the stairs or sitting quietly in your seat with your hands folded, even if riding in the car. Time out simply requires withholding anything pleasurable from the child. A child should be separated from activities and other people for up to as many minutes as years old. A two year old would get up to two minutes and a five year old would get up to five minutes, etc. Long time outs (greater than 5 - 10 minutes) lose their effect. After a few minutes the child is likely daydreaming to idle the time away so there is no longer any benefit to the time out. In fact time outs that are very brief, a matter of seconds, are sometimes even more effective, particularly when there is a misbehaviour that continues repeatedly. Some parents when sending a child to his room forget that he may be playing with a bunch of toys in there. This is not time out and can have the exact opposite effect of what was intended. Remember, time out is not a picnic. For some, sitting on the stairs or on a spot on the floor is better than the bedroom.

Many children whine and complain when consequence. This is called protesting. Protesting is the behaviour that occurs when the child feels the consequence is unjust or the child simply doesn't want it to happen. "No! You can't make me!", or other forms of screaming, yelling, stomping and flopping are common childhood forms of protesting.

Protesting doesn't necessarily mean that the consequence is wrong. It just means that the child doesn't like it. Protesting is usually expected, particularly in younger children or with children who have not experienced consistent consequences in the past. As children experience appropriate consequences on a fair basis, they will stop or reduce the behaviour that leads to this outcome and they will also stop or reduce their protesting.

Many parents feel that if a particular consequence doesn't work, they have to increase its severity, intensity, or duration. This is a process known as *escalation*. Escalation leads to anger again and should be avoided otherwise this can lead to overly harsh or even abusive behaviour. More important than increasing the intensity, severity and duration of a consequence is applying it consistently. With children who are out of control, you may have to sit them in the corner many times when you start. Very problematic behaviour takes more time, patience and consistency, not harsher consequences.

Nadja complains. Her six year old always leaves the bedroom light on when he goes downstairs. She shouts down, "Terry, you forgot to turn off the light," but then turns it off for him.

This child has never turned off his own bedroom light. Nadja says she turns it off for him because he's already downstairs. Nadja agrees to try an experiment. She is to remind Terry to turn off the light before he leaves his room. She tries it, but finds it doesn't work. Terry had learned that his mother always turns the light off for him, no matter what.

Time for a consequence - one that makes sense.

Nadja is to call her son upstairs the next time he doesn't turn off the light and watch what happens. Sure enough the son protests, saying he will miss part of the T.V. cartoons. Nadja is prepared and explains that if he turned off the light in the first place, he wouldn't be inconvenienced by having to come up, turn the light off and miss T.V. She insists that he turn off the light and adds that if he doesn't, she will come down and turn off the T.V. Terry is called back upstairs, everyday, for 5 days.

On the sixth day, Terry starts off downstairs. About halfway down, he stops - he turns around and comes back up to turn off his light. Nadja comments that it is nice that he can watch T.V. without interruption. He has turned off his light ever since. (The experiment took a lot of faith.)

Consequences are relative. A consequence, such as withdrawing attention, is more effective in a home where hugs and praise are common, than in a home where there is little display of affection. Therefore if the love, attention and feedback occurs regularly and frequently, their withdrawal will be experienced more significantly. If you want to increase the effect of a consequence, don't escalate the consequence. Increase the displays of love, attention and feedback shown at other times. Both you and your child will enjoy it!

Feeling angry? Ok, that's normal. But remember, take a deep breath, go to another room, count to ten. When parents consequence their children in a calm rational manner, children tend to be better adjusted, play more co-operatively and respond to their parents' words. Remember, you want to leave them remembering their behaviour, not yours!

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Buy the book:

To order Direnfeld's book, *Raising Kids Without Raising Cane*, send a cheque or money order in the amount of \$12.00 to:

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