



December Counsellor's Corner

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December's Topic: "Time Outs" vs "Time Ins"

Imagine a common occurrence with children: Your child has trouble with a difficult math concept. She comes home from school frustrated with the pressures of math class and the expectations that are set on her. She often makes careless mistakes on assignments and rarely passes math quizzes. Everyone else around her seems to get the math concept and, as the year progresses, she gets more and more frustrated, realizing that she is just not understanding math. Evenings are spent fighting over math and the entire family is on edge, worried about what stresses the math homework will bring for the day. You sit your child down at the kitchen table to teach her math the way you learned it, only to see her frustration mount further. A yelling match ensues; you find yourself saying things like, "Just figure it out! It's not that difficult – why can't you just do the assignment?". You send her to her room and tell her to not come out until she can finish her homework, apologize for not understanding math and do it better the next time.

Sounds ludicrous? Allow me to change the underlined wording a bit:

Imagine a common occurrence with children: Your child has trouble with managing her anger. She comes home from school frustrated with the pressures of staying calm at school and the expectations that are set on her. She often yells at her siblings and talks back to you at home. Everyone else around her seems to be happy and calm and, as the year progresses, she gets more and more frustrated, realizing that she is just not able to control her temper. Evenings are spent fighting over behaviour and the entire family is on edge, worried about what stresses the mood of your child will bring for the day. You sit your child down at the kitchen table to teach her how to control her anger, only to see her frustration mount further. A yelling match ensues; you find yourself saying things like, "Just figure it out! It's not that difficult – why can't you just respect your family and cool your temper?". You send her to her room and tell her to not come out until she can calm down, apologize for being disrespectful and change her behaviour.

The bottom line to this message: Learning to control behaviour is just like learning a difficult math concept. Children are not born knowing how to do long division or figure out the complex world of calculus; nor do they come into this world knowing how to control the impulses that come with frustration. We wouldn't use punishment and isolation to get a child to figure out their math, yet we often give our children time-outs and punishment to learn how to regulate their behaviour.

This involves a shift in thinking from, "We need to discipline behaviour out of kids," to, "We need to teach children the skills required to manage frustration and anger." Once we recognize that controlling temper and behaviour is a skill to be acquired, we can shift how we deal with behaviours. For our youngsters, this involves validating frustrations and then teaching them skills to deal with those frustrations.

In a practical situation, this might look like: You have a 7 year old and a 4 year old. Your 4 year old really wants to play with your 7 year old and can't wait for him to get home from school. When he arrives home, the 4 year old jumps all over him and grabs the science project out of his brother's hands, wanting to "see" it. Unfortunately, a tug-of-war ensues, resulting in the science project breaking in two. Your 7 year old hits his brother and starts screaming. You send your 7 year old to his room for a time-out to calm down as you try to console the 4 year old. Once the 4 year old is calm, you go to the 7 year old's room to lecture him about not hitting his brother and tell him he needs to

stay in his room until he can come out to apologize. This kind of story is a frequent occurrence in homes. A decade ago, the recommendation from many parenting experts was to use time-outs as a method of teaching our kids to calm down and comply. Unfortunately, in many cases, this tended to escalate frustration and behaviour and didn't actually teach children skills required to calm down.

The alternative I would like to offer is to consider "time-ins" instead of "time-outs". In the situation outlined above, I recommend sending your child to a quiet place (using a calm voice) and joining him for a time together; not as a reward for hitting his brother; rather, as an opportunity to teach your child strategies for calming down.

Consider that when the human brain is angered or afraid, the frontal lobe where "executive functioning" (rational thought, planning, considering alternatives) shuts down and the amygdala ("primitive brain") kicks in, which is where the "fight, flight and freeze" part of the brain is. When your child is escalated, they simply cannot learn or understand; nor can they engage in rational thinking. In the same way that punishing a child into understanding math will never work; neither will punishing a child into managing their anger. Both concepts need to be taught.

A "time-in" can look like pre-arranging a quiet space that is not about discipline or lectures. (The lectures/lessons can still happen, but they are only effective once the child is calm and back in the executive functioning part of the brain.) The parent and child meet in the pre-arranged space to learn deep breathing (proven as an effective measure to bring the brain out of fight-flight and back to executive functioning). Progressive muscle relaxation and mindfulness strategies are also effective in calming the brain. Using gentle music, rocking in a rocking chair, swinging, and having a favourite calm-down item (book, stuffy, blanket) can also be helpful. Our teenagers will often say the calming tool they need is their electronic device. On the contrary, this ends up having them rely on technology for emotional regulation rather than developing self-soothing tools.

For more questions or support in dealing with your child's anger, contact your school or community counsellor.

Some websites and tools to help with these strategies include:

"Calm" app

<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/calm/id571800810?mt=8>
<https://www.calm.com>

Calming music

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aB0Gms_GrtQ

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

<https://www.anxietycanada.com/sites/default/files/MuscleRelaxation.pdf>

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Guidance for young children

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDKyRpW-Yuc>

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Guidance for teens and adults

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86HucX8ZtAk>

Calming breathing techniques for teens

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnXrXX0m-NE>

Happy parenting and happy holidays!

