

Sometimes ‘take a break’ works better than ‘time out’

BY GERRY MORGAN

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What do you do when your child is engaged in conflict with another child, even to the point that a challenging behavior occurs? Does every challenging behavior require a consequence?

“You hit — you sit” is an easy phrase. It forms a simple visual image, and it can give a parent a quick response to a challenging behavior. But in practice, does this truly support a child’s social and emotional needs, and does it result in behavioral change?

It’s understandable that parents may be looking for a quick response or a short-term solution. And in responding to challenging behavior, many parents feel the need to punish or give their children a consequence as a way to modify or change their behavior. While “time out” can be an effective way to respond to challenging behavior, it may be difficult to have a successful time out. Indeed, many children will resist time out, which leads to power struggles.

A different approach, similar to time out, is to teach your child how to take a break. The toddler and preschool years are periods when young children are developing many skills, including their social skills. Challenging behavior results from missing or undeveloped social skills. Would you punish a child who gets the color wrong when describing an object? Should a child be punished for not having the skills to navigate a conflict?

Learning to self-manage is a lifelong skill that can be used across settings, activities and situations. It’s common practice to think misbehavior must be punished, but punishment requires someone else (i.e., a parent, teacher or, later in life, police officer) to impact behavior. This is one of the reasons that punishment doesn’t generalize to a variety of situations. However, social skills and self-management help children learn the skills needed to interact with others and engage in problem solving. They can do this with support and independently.

When a child engages in a challenging behavior, even including hitting, it is more effective in the long-term to give that child a practice opportunity in the moment, a chance to use a replacement skill such as making a verbal request, offering a trade, describing a need or a feeling, etc., to achieve the same goal as the hitting behavior. Although this may seem counterintuitive, it is consistent with one of the basic tenets of learning: Repeated practice will result in the increased use of a skill. Decreasing challenging behavior requires learning new skills. This is done through practice and teaching.

What is your goal? A child who is removed from a situation or activity doesn't have an opportunity to learn or practice a replacement skill. A child who has learned how to take a break and self-manage is able to problem-solve and engage in appropriate behavior. You may decide that time out serves a purpose, but keep in mind that the rest of your child's day is filled with opportunities to play, practice social skills, learn new skills and interact with you. And that's time in.

Gerry Morgan is a behavior specialist with Early Childhood CARES, which provides early intervention and early childhood special education services to Lane County children age birth to 5. Free English or Spanish developmental screenings are available at 541-346-2578 or 800-925-8694. The opinions are those of the writer. Birth To Three is a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening families through parent support and education. For more information, visit www.birthto3.org or call 541-484-5316.

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