

TIME IN | Connection through Discipline

Why your discipline may be harming your child...and what to do instead

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"The relationship between children and their big people is a primary determinant of health and well-being, both in childhood and beyond."

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Parents are often held up as either "good" or "bad" based on whether the behaviour of their child is "good" or "bad." The focus on children's behaviour is thus central in the minds of most *big people* – parents, teachers, caregivers, and other adults responsible for the raising of children.

With this in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that the pursuit of good behaviour is typically the ultimate bottom line. What might be surprising, however, is that many of the tactics used to secure good behaviour can actually be harmful to a child's development. Here is why.

The contemporary science of child development has proven irrefutably that a child's most essential need is a nurturing relationship with his or her key caregivers – *the big people*. Psychologist Harry

Harlow's famous experiments in the 1950's showed that primates will choose affection and nurturance over food, even if it means they starve to death. A whole field of study has continued to reveal with extraordinary consistency that the relationship between children and their big people is a primary determinant of health and well-being, both in childhood and beyond.

In fact, so key is this relationship, that from the earliest moments of life when a newborn baby first opens her eyes, she begins looking for the eyes of her big person. When she finds them, she will be held by them, and the big person will look lovingly back at the baby. In this very moment our brains are awash with oxytocin: a neurotransmitter known as the "bonding hormone" for the powerful role it plays in relationship formation.

Development and the need for big people affection

As the baby grows he begins to smile at us. What do we do? We smile back. And so it goes. They smile. We smile. They cry. We comfort. They are hungry. We feed them. They are overwhelmed. We nurture them.

Then they turn two, and develop beautiful, determined minds of their own, throw themselves down on the floor in the most epic of tantrums and ... we walk away from them. It is here that the big person's pursuit of good behaviour intersects with the science of child development. Usually it begins with a child engaged in some kind of a challenging behaviour, and as "good" parents, it becomes our goal to make that behaviour stop, rather than thinking through the developmental process of the child. Problematically, when the goal is to stop the behaviour, the big person is lead down the path of having to punish the child to hurry up this process. David Loyst, M.Sc. (SLP) in his workshop on growing a child's socioemotional brain, suggests that we think of growing the child like nurturing a growing plant. He said further, "I've never seen a plant grow faster by pulling on the top of it."

Disconnection as a means of punishment

Efforts to extinguish behaviour using punishment typically involve traditional forms of discipline (time outs, consequences, removal of privileges, or the use of a reward system like a star chart). The problem with these approaches is that each one of them uses the child's most essential need – that of human connection – against her in order to secure good behaviour.

Consider the time out as an example. When a child is put in time out, he is removed physically from his big person and often also emotionally, since time outs typically include the big person ignoring the child. Usually the child's first reaction is to become upset at this. But soon enough the tears subside and the behaviour stops, leading the adult to conclude that the time out has been effective.

From the outside, the time out indeed appears effective because the behaviour has stopped. But here is the ultimate question: at what cost? And the answer is very concerning.

Remember that a child's most essential need is connection to the big person and so the child will be very frightened when faced with disconnection. This is why the initial response to time out will be one of tears and upset. Eventually, the child will surrender the challenging behaviour in order to restore the connection. So yes, the behaviour has stopped. But making that happen has been a huge sacrificial play.

The trick of putting the child in time out has made the child's need for connection contingent on good behaviour. This has deleterious outcomes both emotionally in terms of the development of self, and neurologically in terms of the development of capacity for self-regulation – an ability that buffers against stress and mental health issues over time.

Regarding self-concept, the child takes from the relational disconnect in discipline some awful life lessons. Good behaviour wins you affection, relational security, and acclamation. As it goes, good behaviour thus ultimately defines your sense of self. It doesn't take much to cast forward to this same child's adolescence and see the shocking connection between acquiescing to the will of another (i.e. succumbing to peer pressure) in order to secure a sense of

belonging. Or to imagine how measuring one's self-worth according to ability leads to pursuit of success that doesn't have the child focused on honouring passions and interest, but rather on securing the approval of others.

The neurological effects of disconnection

Neurologically, research has shown that children being subjected to relational disconnections as a form of discipline experience the same stress-based neuroactivation as children being subjected to physical punishment. The brain is not a static organism; it is constantly flexing and reshaping through neuroplasticity, according to the experiences of the child. Thus, the stress activation of the brain when repeated consistently actually leads to neurological wiring that makes the child very susceptible to stress.

Not only is the time out going to create all of this fallout emotionally and neurologically, but it is likely to become ineffective over time! Ask any adult who has tried to use time outs as a discipline tactic and they will tell you that it appeared to work for the first while but then lost steam. This is because the relational disconnection becomes intolerable for the child. The child intuitively knows that this is contrary to what is safe for her growing brain and self. Rather than continue to leave herself vulnerable to the stress and upset of the disconnection, she subconsciously wises up and numbs out. She turns off her feelings of alarm in the face of the disconnection to preserve herself. So now she doesn't stop the behaviour as quickly or as often when threatened with a time out. And she may even throw it back in the face of her big person: "Oh yeah, well then put me in time out! See if I care!"

I recall a 4-year-old client who was spending up to two hours a day in time out, and contrary to leading to improved behaviour, he was having even more challenges that started to spill out of the home and into his preschool environment, playdates, and while spending time with his grandparents. He was too numb to be able to feel or care anymore. Underneath this crusty façade was a child desperate for his essential need of connection to be unconditionally met rather than frantically earned.

It isn't just time outs that have this seedy underbelly of such significant negative impact on child development. Any discipline tactic that has relational disconnection (emotional and/or physical) at its core, will set into play the same problematic cascading fallout. Consider how it is that you choose just the right zinger of a consequence that will have your child immediately falling into line.



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