

Take a Time Out From Time Out: Connecting with Your Adopted Son or Daughter

By Arleta James, PCC

Time out seems to be one of the most popular forms of discipline today. However, as a tool to change the behavior of an adopted child with a history of trauma, we must re-think the use of time out. This is because time out disconnects the child from the family. Most adopted children already know how to be distant or alone. The child who resided in an orphanage is used to being by himself. The child who was left without parental supervision in a dysfunctional birth home knows all about being distant. In essence, time out replicates the child's early experiences. ***What your adopted son or daughter doesn't know is how to connect and be with the family.***



Time out frequently becomes a lengthy consequence full of negative interactions. The "timer" doesn't start until the child is quiet and seated as the parent prefers:

"You're supposed to be sitting quietly!"

"Quit touching the wall!" "

"Why are you laying on the floor? I'm adding another 10 minutes."

Soon, the time out is 60, 90, or more minutes in length and the timer hasn't even been started! The frustration level has increased! The child and parent have now been involved in negative exchanges for quite some time. We must keep in mind that children who have experienced abuse, abandonment, institutionalization, and so on, feel more comfortable when separated from those that love them. Intimacy is scary for the child who has suffered so many losses. Bickering and arguing make the child feel distant from the relationships within the family. So, falsely, the child thinks that he can keep his heart safe from further pain when he pushes away his parents, brothers and sisters.

The circumstances leading to time out are often those in which the child is in a state of emotional dysregulation. That is, the child is angry or simply not able to calm down. Thus, the purpose of time out is for the child to gain composure. Actually, children learn basic emotional regulation in year one of life. The infant has a need. He cries. Mom comes. She provides a bottle or a diaper change. The baby is soothed and he smiles. This cycle—the attachment cycle—is repeated 1000's of times. So, first in life the baby is calmed by the parent. As she matures, she then moves on to calm herself. Where was your child the first months or years of her life? Did she have the opportunity to receive the care needed to learn this vital skill? If not, sending her away to calm herself is unproductive. She needs you to help calm

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her—1000 times! Then, she will possess the skill to calm herself in day-to-day interactions. We explained this concept of emotional dysregulation more fully in our post *The Brain on Trauma*.

Adopted children need time-ins—they need to be with their parents (Keck & Kupecky, 2002). So, before opting to send the child away from you, stop and ask, “How can I bring him in closer to me right now?” What can I do to help her calm down?”

One great mom of several adopted children says, “apron strings” (even the older kids!) to an agitated child. This means, “Come here and let me give you a hug. Let me help you calm yourself. Then we can talk about what has happened and how the problem can be solved.”

This Mom’s approach is quite effective. She replicates the attachment cycle that should have occurred in the child’s first year of life. Eventually, her children will be able to maintain their composure in all types of situations. Once the son or daughter is calm, she assists the child in generating solutions. Traumatized children have a very hard time problem-solving. They need help to create a repertoire of solutions they can access and utilize in subsequent interactions. Overall, nurture and connecting can often change a child’s mood. More so, the benefits far exceed a behavioral change. The child will attach and learn that relationships are desirable. Isn’t this what we really want? Certainly, parents are welcome to take a time out themselves when their anger is boiling like an engine overheating. Before steaming with threats or hurtful words, take a few minutes to cool down. Then, go connect with your child! You’ll be glad you did!