

Time outs (or the whens and hows)

Breaks are great but should not involve shaming

BY SUSAN SMITH

When parents check out a preschool, it's important to ask what method the school uses to discipline children.

Around Prague, there are horror stories of young children being told they are bad; being made to sit on a bench or in a corner or in the director's office; or getting red or yellow marks next to their name to distinguish the level of disturbance they created.

What are current views on the best way to discipline children under the age of 6?

Current child development theory suggests adults use discipline to teach young children what inappropriate behavior is and how to cope with new situations. What we are trying to do is show children how to have control of their body, how to use language to express what they need, and how to feel confident. Children will grow up feeling respected if school is a warm, welcoming place with adults who care for them and give guidance. Children also want to develop friendships and get along with peers, but they are challenged when other children act aggressively toward them.

When troubling behavior erupts between two children, the best way the teacher can begin to deal with the situation is to observe the behavior and see which circumstances are surrounding it. For example, a young preschool child might hit an older child because that's the only defense a younger child may have. In this case, an adult would want to work with both the younger and older child to develop more respectful behavior toward each other.

The teacher can also ask children what happened. As children develop language skills, adults need to show them how to use language with their peers. Encourage the child to express what he wants and needs by giving the child the language he may not know. Sometimes the young child can say a loud and definite "No" to a parent but doesn't know to use it with a friend.

Some adults use "time out" when necessary. How time out works is that a child is removed from the situation and asked to sit on a chair for

the same number of minutes as the years of his age.

Newer research discourages the use of time outs with children younger than 4 1/2. The very young should never be isolated or left alone without anything to do. In addition, the idea of time out is based on removing the child from the situation and getting the child to reflect upon what just happened. Scientific research indicates that young children have not yet developed the part of the brain that reflects upon past deeds, so it is pointless for a very young child to sit away from peers for more than a moment or two.

Instead, redirection is the suggested form of discipline. How redirection works is this: A child is playing with blocks and starts to throw them a meter away. An experienced teacher might walk over to the child and say something like, "I see you are throwing the blocks. If you want to throw something, why don't you put the blocks away and play with the ball toss?" In this way, the child's need to throw an object is acknowledged, yet he or she is redirected to use an activity in the classroom that utilizes the motion that the body wants to take.

Other tips from the Web site of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in the United States, include making sure of the following before giving a time out:

Adults need to have realistic goals; otherwise they cannot discern when children are experimenting with boundaries or misbehaving.

Consequences immediately follow the behavior. Children want to understand what they did to harm others. Adults can offer the child alternatives for what they did, so the child understands what else he or she could have done.

Time out is not humiliating, frightening or shaming. There should not be a specific chair or place for time out. It could be a comfortable place where a child could sit to think things over for a brief time and then rejoin friends.

Young children should not be left alone unless they want to be. They need adults' help to sort out what happened and how to deal with the situation. Children fear isolation most of all, so a time out should not be a threatening situation.

Time out should last only as long as it takes for the child to relax and calm down.

When the adult connects and understands the child's feelings, the child will feel respected and this will most likely prevent repetition of the episode.

Let the child know you care for him or her and want the best and happiest solution to the situation. If you feel irritated or annoyed, consider taking a moment away from the situation.

Keep in mind that all children are incredibly unique individuals. If you need to establish limits, remember that children respond to love and kindness so strongly that time outs may be unnecessary.

Teach a child to solve his or her own problems as much as possible. Let the child know that an adult supports this struggle and will help when necessary.

In conclusion, use time out primarily as a last resort: First try to redirect the child's energy to more positive purposes.

— Susan Smith is a staff teacher at the International Montessori School of Prague

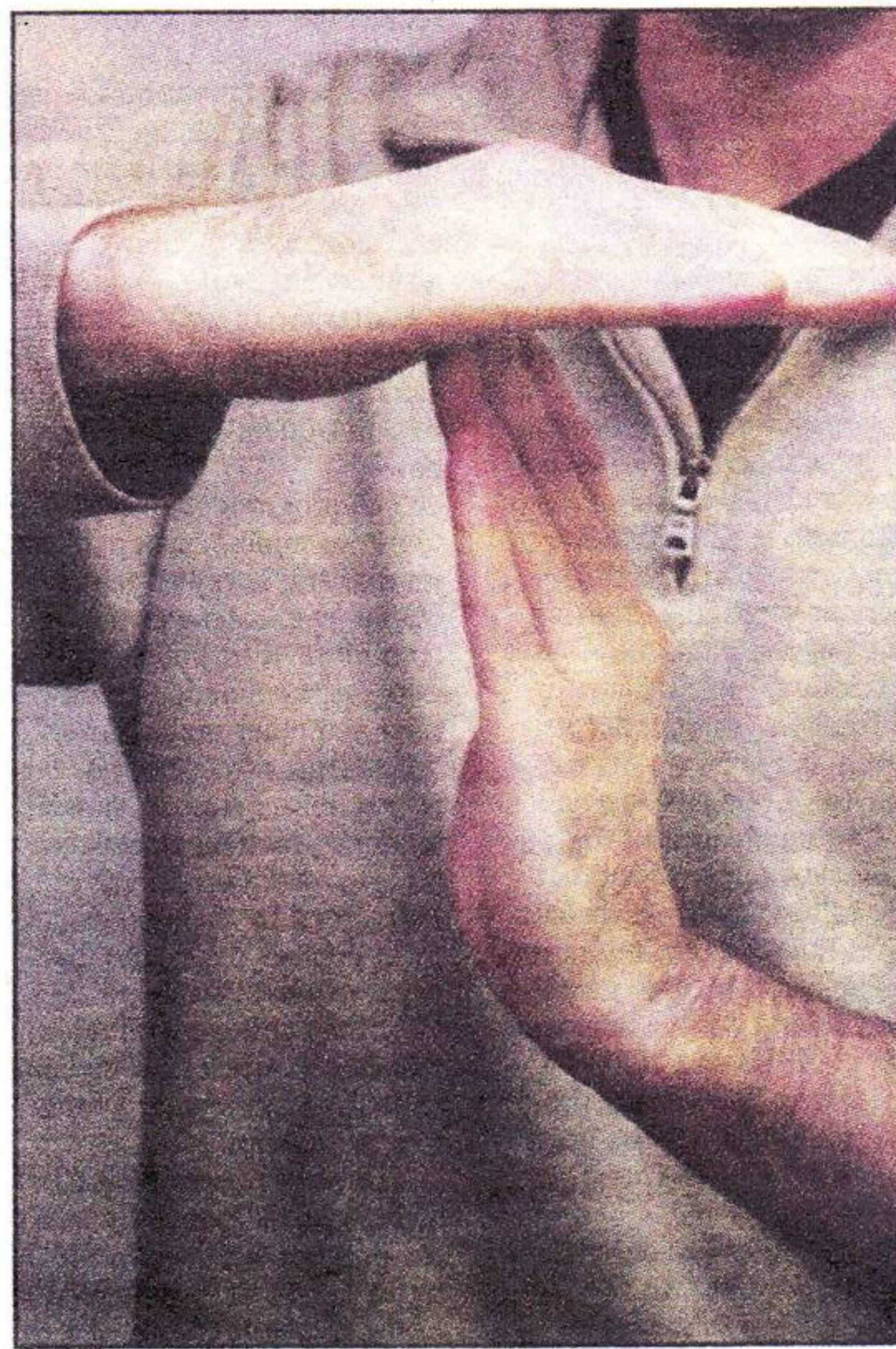


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