Think and Return: The Time-Out Controversy Meets Social Humility

Everyone needs a moment to think sometimes.

Next Project: A continued discussion and a collection of Social Stories on the topic.

Carol's Club CAROL GRAY SOCIAL STORIES

Custom Social Stories™ Resources Created by Carol Gray for Members   -   February 23, 2019

The Project

I received a project request from Dr. T.A.D., a psychologist and Carol's Club member. Dr. T.A.D. is excited about the possibilities of the last project posted on April 9th of this year ("Abandon All Assumptions Except One," #socialhumility) and asked me to weigh in on the Time Out controversy from a Social Humility perspective. Time Out is controversial? I didn't know! (I also didn't know that there is a "time in" strategy.) I am more than happy to update my understanding of Time Out and share my thoughts about it from a Socially Humble point of view.

The History of Time Out and the Controversy Surrounding Its Use

The recorded history of Time Out begins in 1971, though the first roots can be traced to a decade or so earlier, and extend to today. What follows is a brief summary of Time Out, its definition, official origins, and the opposing opinions surrounding it.

The first thing that I noticed about the professional and parental discussion of Time Out today is that there is little agreement as to the spelling and punctuation of the term. It is sometimes "time out," but also appears as "time-out," "Time-Out," "Time-out" and "timeout."   Never as "time-Out." For our purposes, I'm using capitalization of both terms (thinking it's the title of a defined instructional strategy, like "Social Stories") minus any hyphen: "Time Out."

The definition of Time Out varies a bit from author to author as well, from formal to informal to assumed-and-not-stated. Three elements are frequently mentioned: 1) a positive and reinforcing environment, where 2) a child demonstrates a harmful or unsafe behavior, and is 3) removed for a period of time to regain control and consider the error and alternate responses. According to an article on WebMD, Time Out is "removing a child from the environment where misbehavior has occurred to a 'neutral,' unstimulating space" (Shaw, Web M.D. archives), or to put it in more practical terms a non-punitive "'break' from fun" (Ortiz, 2019). Regardless of how we define it, Time-Out "…certainly sounds like a brilliant fix: A child spends a few minutes sitting alone, and emerges calm and cooperative" (Gragg, 2019). Of course, it doesn't always work that way.

Piecing together a very brief history of Time Out, Arthur W. Staats, an American psychology professor, developed the approach with his own children and was the first to use the term (Staats, 1971, as cited in Quetsch, Wallace, Hershell, and McNeil, 2015). The popularity of Time Out increased early in this century as the result of the television series "Supernanny," where the "naughty chair" or "naughty step" was often used to correct a child's behavior (Gillespie, 2018).

The Time Out controversy has been debated for years (Quetsch, Wallace, Herschell, and McNeil, 2015). There are parents and professionals who maintain that Time Out is effective when used correctly (with varying ideas as to what is "correct"), citing that there is plenty of evidence to support their claim. Those who are opposed to the use of Time Out cite the risk that children may not address their mistakes and learn more effective responses as their caregivers may hope, instead experiencing anxiety and feelings of isolation, abandonment, and rejection.

We've got a Time Out disagreement about that is approaching its 30th anniversary. The discussion continues to this writing as to whether Time Outs are a sound and effective strategy that "get a bad rap…" (Ortiz, 2018, p.1) or need to be discarded as a "…dated and ineffective parenting strategy" (Gillespie, 2018, p.1). Looking only at 2019

publications, a study at the University of Sydney recently concluded that Time Outs "have important implication for clinical practice and policy…" and that their results suggest that any "…adoption of policies that prohibit time-out with children may be ill-considered and deny children in need access to an effective evidence-based procedure" (University of Sydney, 2019). In contrast, Aha Parenting (2019) reminds us that "…any child can explain to you that timeouts are punishment…" and that "any time you punish a child, you make him feel worse about himself and you erode the parent-child relationship" (p.1).

Earlier, I mentioned an alternative to Time Out, called "time-in" (Gillespie, p. 1). Time-in shares many elements with its better-known predecessor, except the caregiver stays with the child to support emotional recovery and problem-solving. Similar to Time Out, the caregiver remains calm, speaking quietly and with a comfortable tone, assuming a coach-like role to help the child understand the reason for removal and how to return.
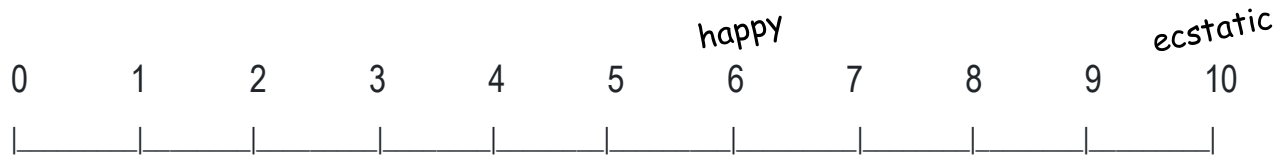
Reviewing a slice of the literature has provided valuable background information for this project. As we go forward, I'll be referring to ideas from both "camps."

Time Out and Social Humility

Though the definition of Social Humility remains "at large" for the time being (we're working on it!), I know that it is based on an acute passion for *what is really happening* over *what appears to be.* In the previous project, I mentioned Stephen R. Covey's reference to the space that exists between every stimulus and response, a split-second where we decide what to say or do in response to another human being (Covey, 2004). In that space between stimulus and response are a million or more possible response options that are available to us; though we tend routinely rely on a relative few.

Presented with an unanticipated or puzzling response of a son, daughter, student, or client with autism, Social Humility acknowledges that what *appears* to be may be very different from what *is,* and *how it looks to us* is irrelevant - often of no value at all - in determining our best response. It also renders the term "inappropriate" as contextually uninformative, a description of how it the situation looks to the caregiver, but not relevant or helpful in understanding the reasons behind a child's response. Social Humility requires us to abandon how we usually think and respond to others so that we may access a response in line with the experience of the person in our care.

I have a case example from my own experience. I was employed as a consultant for students with autism at Jenison Public Schools. I ran several social understanding groups with students on my caseload. On one occasion, I had

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            happy                                    ecstatic
0     1     2     3     4     5     6     7     8     9     10
|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|
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several educators from Ohio follow me for a day to observe what I do. It was late in the morning. I was working with six boys with autism, ages nine to twelve. We were discussing feelings, the words that help us to express the varied intensity of each emotion. We began by creating a list words that we associate with happiness, like "calm," "ecstatic," "thrilled," "comfortable," "joyful," and so forth.   The next step was to give each one a numerical rating to indicate its intensity and placement on a simple scale from 1 (low) to 10 (high). We considered one word at a time, using a majority vote to determine the placement of each. For example, a unanimous vote determined that "ecstatic" was a 10 on our Happy Scale.

The word, "happy" was considered next. I continued, "Raise your hand if you think 'happy' is 1…, 2…, 3…., 4…., 5." Harold voted for "happy" as a five. The vote went on, "Raise your hand if you think "happy" is a 6….". The rest of the group - everyone except Harold - raised their hands to select "happy" as a "6." As I wrote "happy" on the scale, Harold placed both of his arms straight above his head, stiffened like a board and slid under the table. It was as if he had descended into a self- imposed Time Out. His chair was noticeably empty. I had lost Harold. I had the full attention of the Ohio observers.

I asked the remaining group members if they would sit quietly for a short time. They nodded. I went under the table. I wanted to affirm Harold's feelings, but… how to know what he's feeling? Considering Harold's distress, I knew that, "Harold, how are you feeling?" would not be an effective conversation-starter.   What should I say? Or do? Maybe say nothing and just be here?

It was the first time I used what would become my favorite first sentence in subsequent similar situations. As I joined Harold under the table, I told him, "Harold, I need some time to think." And I really did. I looked up at the underside of the table and discovered an accurate and honest opener, "Harold, I can only guess what you are feeling - and I need you to tell me if I am wrong - but my guess is that I you are feeling a little bit 'under the table.'" Harold leaned toward me with an emphatic and kind of loud, "YES!" He was still upset but talking, and explained in fast repetition that "happy" *has* to be a "FIVE not a SIX!" because it needs to be "…RIGHT IN THE CENTER of the Happy Scale!" I nodded and indicated that five would have been my vote, too…adding that this is a math sort of activity, and we're

just counting opinions. There's no "right" or "wrong." A short siilence. Then Harold returned to his chair, and I continued the activity. Harold stayed with us, participating fully to the close of the session.

At lunch, my Ohio visitors asked me why I had decided to "…reinforce Harold's negative behavior by joining him under the table." I had just completed my two-year study of the relationship between autism and bullying. A bullying interaction is defined, in part, by an imbalance of power (which we have with a teacher-student relationship) and also by a marked difference in affect between the two parties (which we had under the table). I had to proceed with caution. Bullying is often accompanied by an uncomfortable request or demand. "Well," I said, "I was concerned that if I insisted that he rejoin the group, and it didn't make sense or feel comfortable to him, by definition, it would be very close to requiring Harold to comply with a bullying request." There was a moment of silence, and then one of the visitors smiled, nodded and said, "That's what we thought, too!"

If Harold's self-removal from our social understanding group was his own way of going to Time Out, it became a time-in as I joined him. On that day, in that situation, time-in worked and worked well. Time-In creates an opportunity different from that in Time Out. It creates a few moments to think, a 'time out" for the adult to gather information in search of a respectful, meaningful, and effective response in that space between stimulus and response. Without it, I never would have known that Harold was feeling "under the table."

Social Humility Often Needs a Moment to Think

Working in the schools, my students would occasionally refer to the "effortless" way that people without autism go through each day; using words like "smooth," or phrases like "without any mistakes," or "always knowing what to say and do," to describe those who are "socially typical" (for lack of a better term). The fact is, people without autism do make mistakes, including those of a social nature. Perhaps one difference in the mistakes that people with autism make, in contrast to those without autism, is that people with autism are often made immediately and painfully aware of their social or communication "errors," whereas people without autism may never know they made them.

Social Humility recognizes the high risk of "getting it wrong" with children, adolescents, and adults with autism and reserves a critical moment - a millisecond to a half a minute or so or more - to think. Doing so models that it's okay to pause the action before doing or saying anything, and provides caregivers with an opportunity to replace a rote response with one thoughtfully tailored to the person in their care and the current situation.

Think and Return

I was consulting for a school district for a day, followed by dinner with several staff members. At dinner, one of the staff mentioned that Oliver, a six-year-old boy with autism, had difficulty with Time Out. "Upon hearing 'Time Out', he becomes so immediately and intensely upset!" she explained. Everyone nodded in agreement. "We're calm, supportive, but he is so determined to not sit anywhere near the Time Out chair. It can take two people to get him to Time Out." The team began to describe case examples of the trials surrounding Time Out with Oliver. There was a consensus that Oliver needed time away from the original situation, but also the feeling that his extreme resistance in getting to Time Out was socially and emotionally counter-productive. His speech therapist commented, "It's as if he feels he is being sent off of this planet with no hope of return."

That comment was a tipping point. Interpreted literally, at face value, there's little information in "Time Out." You're out. There's no future, no way back. Writing on dinner napkins, we developed a plan describing "Think and Return." We had fast work to do. By morning the basic elements were in place, including a Social Story describing it (similar to the Story in Appendix A).

The following morning, the Time Out chair was removed before school started. The classroom furniture was rearranged to create an all-new Think and Return area in a different part of the room. It was comfortable - a child-sized overstuffed chair on a small braided rug. There was a small box with a few calming fidgets nearby. At the beginning of the school day, the teacher read the Story describing Think and Return to the class.

About a week later, Oliver went to Think and Return for the first time. I received an excited call from his teacher - it worked, and worked well. They had made another revision to our dinner napkin plan - an instructional assistant sat nearby. We had discussed the use of a visual Time-Timer, but they decided not to use a specific required time-in-the-chair with Oliver. Instead, Oliver returned when his assistant determined he was ready, calm, and equipped with a new idea or plan.

Think and Return (Continued)

I began this project surprised that there is a Time Out Controversy! Surprise leads to discovery, in my case a review of Time Out and its history and related case examples from my experience, like Think and Return.   Also, the discovery that Time Out and Social Humility is a vast topic!

There's more to do here! This is one of those Carol's Club projects that will go to press, and *then* I will have ideas that I will wish I had included. For that reason, I am ending here. This discussion is to be continued in the next project, and will be accompanied by a collection of Social Stories on the topic.

As always, I welcome your feedback and ideas at TakeThisToCarol@gmail.com.

Appendix A: Starter Text for a Think and Return Social Story

Note: The text for "Think and Return" below is more than may be advisable or needed for the person in your care. It's over-written, including as many ideas and "angles" as possible to get you started, recognizing that you will likely make edits, revisions, add additional text or other ideas, and illustrations.

Think and Return

Think and Return is for intelligent children when they make a big mistake.   Making mistakes is a part of growing up, and a part of being a grown-up, too. Sometimes children make big mistakes. When they do, they have a place to think before they return to what they were doing.

Adults make mistakes, too. When adults make mistakes, they think about how to fix them. If it's a big mistake, they may sit down and think for a while. Other times, they might think while they wash the dishes or do yard work, or call a friend and talk about their mistake. Adults are older, they've made more mistakes than children. That's why adults teach children what to do when they make a mistake.

In our class, we have Think and Return. If we make a big mistake, an adult will tell us to go to Think and Return. In our Think and Return chair we try to think, fix the problem, and then we return. Using our best and smartest thinking helps us to return with new and better ideas.

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