

When time-out fails, try Plan B

By Eric B Zurbrugg, MD

Yell-and-spank isn't the only alternative for parents who need a disciplinary technique beyond time-out. This innovative approach may help them regain control of an oppositional and defiant preschooler. But be careful. It's not for everyone.

The office encounter complicated by a preschool youngster out of control and a parent who seems unable or unwilling to take effective action is a universal experience for pediatricians. Some 10% to 20% of preschoolers present major behavioral challenges for their adult caregivers. Pediatricians do not agree on methods to set limits on children's behavior, and the findings of studies also conflict. Frustrated parents often give up control to their children or, worse, lose control of their own behavior. The Gallup organization reports 49 "abusive" incidents (beating with a belt, punching, choking) per 1,000 children in 1995. Clearly, another tool in the behavioral armamentarium would be welcome.

A win-win approach

The "big hug," as I call it, is a technique to help overwhelmed parents regain physical and emotional control of oppositional and defiant children 18 months of age and older. It has evolved during my 20 years of practice in pediatrics and pediatric neurology in response to obvious need and has proved very helpful with selected families, although it has not been subjected to formal study. Traditional methods of dealing with behaviors such as temper tantrums, defiance, hitting and biting include a spectrum of physical and verbal chastisements, ignoring the behavior, or using some form of time-out. Although time-out is the best alternative for recurring misbehavior, it does not work in some families.^{7,8} The big hug provides another way to empower parents. It is based on the premise that a win-win outcome is desirable when an interaction centers on conflicting needs for control. Verbal and physical punishment is a win-lose situation, while ignoring misbehavior is a plea of no-contest by the adult and thus a win for the child. Time-out is a win-win technique, but it leaves the child alone to deal with his or her anger and frustration and it does not always work. A bright child can circumvent it easily. When a child refuses to cooperate with time-out, the big hug makes it clear that the adult is in charge and will remain in control until an agreement is negotiated. Before attempting this technique, parents should agree that kids need to learn that:

- The parent has a right to be in charge
- You don't always get everything you want
- Things go much better when you calm down
- You talk over issues and give a little to get what you want.

How to do it

This is how I explain the big hug to parents (I have the parent put the child in the position as I describe it):

"The big hug is not complicated, but it does require a determined physical and emotional effort. Place your child on your lap facing away from you with his bottom on your thigh and his legs secure between your legs. Hold his arms crossed in front of his body, making sure you hold his left wrist with your right hand and vice versa. This gives you a mechanical advantage.

"Always pick a comfortable chair, and be prepared to invest some time—up to an hour—the first time or two you use the procedure. The investment will pay off handsomely down the line in the time you save by not arguing with your child about what is going to happen next in your lives.

"Watch your child's response as you hold him, and prepare yourself mentally for a challenge. After the initial shock and surprise have worn off, he will start struggling to regain control of the situation. His anger will likely progress to screaming, arching his back, and eventually tears as he realizes that you, not he, are in control. He may try to butt you with his head, pinch, scratch, bite, or scream that he hates you. (If you wear glasses, take them off before you sit down.) Protect yourself, and don't become angry. He is not supposed to like giving up control, but he does have an option—he could simply sit quietly in your lap.

"When you get the feeling that your child is wearing down a bit, he may be ready to negotiate. Your goal is to help him recognize that you are in charge, and that he has choices to make. You want to get a 'yes' to three questions. The first question is, 'Do you want to get down?' or 'Do you want me to let you go?' Accept only a verbal yes. An 'Uh huh' or a nod of the head is not sincere. If he says 'no' or nothing at all, continue to hold him because he is not ready to negotiate.

You will probably want to quit before he does—this is how kids get their own way, by wearing down mom and dad until they give in—but remember that this is a power struggle. You are the good guy, and you have to get this kid to make a deal. Tears (mourning the loss of power) often indicate readiness to negotiate.

"After you get the first 'yes,' ask the second question: 'Are you all done crying (or fighting with me)?' Don't hurry this process. Wait until your child calms down completely. Tolerating even minor residual whining sends a signal of weak resolve.

"When your child has answered 'yes' to the second question and is sitting quietly in your lap, ask the

third question: “If I let you down, will you sit in that chair and take your time-out?” Release him only after he says, ‘I’ll sit in that chair.’ Saying it out loud means he owns the statement and will more likely follow through. (You’ll have to make allowances if you have a younger child who is not quite verbal.)

“As he climbs into the chair, act pleased and excited that you were able to do the deal together. Tell him how happy you are with his choice, and give him a gentle pat of endearment. After a brief period of sitting, tell him that he may get down and ask for a face-to-face hug. You can tell that the experience has been successful if he gives an enthusiastic hug. The hug means that he respects you for having enough courage to set limits on his behavior.”

I advise parents to use this technique every time the child refuses to cooperate or throws a tantrum. I warn them that the child may decide to test them by increasing his or her problem behaviors. Once the child understands that the parent will offer time-out only once and that the full big hug process invariably follows if he doesn’t cooperate, behavior should rapidly improve. Five or six applications usually will do the job in as little time as over a weekend if the parent makes a commitment and is consistent. The goal is get the child to the point where the parent can replace the big hug procedure with a simple time-out.

I tell parents, “Don’t merely threaten to use the big hug. If you even think it needs to be done, do it. It is important that you be predictable.” I also tell them that the more they use the big hug, the more face-to-face hugs they should be offering. When I’ve described the technique, I ask whether they have any questions and tell them please to call me in the next day or two to report how the process is going.

Not a method for everyone

The big hug is not for everybody. It is a powerful technique involving domination of the child—albeit short-term and benign. As such, it has potential to be misunderstood and misapplied. It is not for parents who have significant physical limitations or emotional problems. Nor is it for parents who might be inclined to use it inappropriately, such as to force a child to eat or become potty trained.

The technique is for parents who are clearly motivated to control their child, but simply lack the tools, and ask for help beyond time-out. They must have a perceived problem and be actively seeking a solution. Any attempt to suggest this technique to, or impose it on, parents who seem blithely unaware that their child is out of control will most likely be resented. Parents who are devoted to the futile concept of reasoning with preschoolers are likewise poor candidates.

Before teaching parents the technique, I describe it, emphasizing the time and effort it requires, and ask them if they want to try it. If they agree, I coach them on the proper procedure in the office by having them do it until they are successful. (It’s best to do this by scheduling a subsequent consultation appointment for

45-60 minutes.) This approach allows me to assess whether the parents have adequate physical and emotional resources to avoid, for example, granting the child concessions or losing their tempers. If they have, I encourage them to choose a weekend and give it all they’ve got.

Many parents are astonished at the duration and severity of the initial resistance by their child to giving up some control. Physical fatigue may be a problem. It can be overcome by a tag-team approach in which a fresh adult takes over when the first adult starts to tire. Failure of time-out and major behavior problems along with unwillingness or inability to use the big hug call for a comprehensive evaluation of the child and family.

Can the technique be used away from home?

I can teach parents that the first place to convince children that out-of-control and noncompliant behavior will not be tolerated is at home. Once the youngster believes this, misbehavior in public places usually decreases dramatically. I do encourage parents to remove the child to the car for a big hug if necessary while out in public. This should only have to happen once or twice to convince most children that site does not influence consequences.

The question of whether to use the technique at day care or preschool involves some important issues. Often a youngster who is a major challenge at home will not risk such behavior at day care or preschool. If problems at school are minor or infrequent, the standard time-out (“growing up chair”) is usually sufficient. The big hug can be used at day care or preschool—but only after all the adults involved in the child’s care at the facility have been thoroughly instructed in the use of the technique, agree that it is reasonable, and indicate willingness to try it.

A civil way to teach civilized behavior

Although the big hug has not been formally researched, it has worked well for many families in my practice, including some with (carefully selected) developmentally delayed and autistic children in whom manipulative behavior was clearly present. The advantage of this method is that it empowers parents to teach a child the rules of civilized behavior without having to raise the voice, demonstrate anger, or strike the child—a worthy goal for a civilized society.