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Two-year-old Daniel in the throes of an argument with his four-year-old brother, Gabriel



time-in

A mother trades time-outs
for child-centered discipline solutions
based on trust.

BY DEBRA CARLSON

MY BOYS BUILD CASTLES.

They use blocks, sofa pillows, Tinkertoys, and Legos. Gabriel, my four-year-old, loves to share his complex worlds. "Mommy, look! I've got two floors—here's where I sleep, and downstairs is the kitchen." He wiggles through a crack between two pillows, and his head pops up from under a blanket roof. He beams. Daniel, two-and-a-half, grins from across the room. He gets a running start and slams into the pillows, collapsing the foundation. Gabriel screams in anguish, Danny squeals with delight.

"Time-out!" I declare, punching in the two minutes on the microwave timer that correspond to Danny's two years of age, as some child-discipline experts recommend.

This sort of interaction occurs regularly throughout the day. Depending on the time, and how many other crises have already occurred, I respond calmly—or not. But always, my head swims with all the decisions I need to make. Who is to blame? Who needs comfort? What punishment is appropriate? For how long? How best to orchestrate a reconciliation between the boys? How to make sure it doesn't

happen again in ten minutes? *He knows he shouldn't destroy his brother's castles, I think. Why does he keep doing that?*

Before we had children, my husband and I agreed that we would never spank our kids. I've teetered at the edge a few times, but so far I've stuck to my no-spank vow. And in those moments when I've stared into the abyss, I've relied on time-outs. They allow me to exert control without resorting to violence.

But I've always felt a rub. While I told myself that there are times and situations when it is perfectly reasonable to send a child away to the corner,

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the naughty step, the naughty chair, it just didn't feel right to me. Moreover, time-outs didn't seem to be teaching my boys anything about managing their impulses, emotions, or relationships. I imagined that, consistently used over time, they might modify some behaviors—but what was I *really* teaching them?

I was teaching my sons that, when strong emotions erupted into hurtful behavior, there was one “good” boy and one “bad” boy.

I was teaching them that, just at the moment they felt least in control—because they had suddenly become

“victim” and “aggressor”—I would coddle one boy and desert the other.

I was teaching them that, in moments of high stress, the family split apart.

I was teaching them to make mandatory apologies and to fake forgiveness. We all sensed the sour aftertaste that lingered in their body language, their behavior, and their faces after the “aggressor” had apologized.

What did I *really* want my boys to learn about emotions and relationships? What did I want them to know about handling emotional explosions? Finally, I realized two important things.

First, I didn't like time-outs, in part because of my own experience. I recall that when, as a child, I felt angry or sad, my father would get up at the first sign of my tears, say “I can't talk with you if you're going to get all emotional!” and walk out of the room. Essentially, he gave himself a time-out. Not knowing how to handle his own emotions or mine, he left. This wasn't surprising: When he was a child, expressing anger to his parents earned him a session with a birch switch or the wooden back of a hairbrush. He learned that expressing anger led to physical punishment. From him, I learned that expressing “bad” feelings led to abandonment. I wanted to send my boys a different message.

Second, I realized that I resented being the one who, as a “good” mother and primary caretaker, was supposed to be brimming over with helpful suggestions for coping with everything from anger to anxiety, from boredom to biting. When there was an altercation, I felt I was the responsible adult who had to find the magical distraction, word, or solution. I wanted my

kids to feel good—to play well—but I couldn't always figure out how to do that for them, let alone get them to embrace the program I envisioned.

I read books, I talked with friends, I jotted down notes and ideas. And one day, it came to me in a flash.

Rewind to the beginning: Gabriel's castle walls had tumbled down.

Instead of pointing a finger at Daniel and exclaiming “Time-out!,” I grabbed a red Koosh ball and called “Time-in!”

They had no idea what I was talking about.

“Time-in means there's a problem, and we all need to come sit in a circle together and solve the problem,” I said, sitting down and crossing my legs. Gabriel crawled over, gulping and sobbing, and I gave him a gentle hug. Then I told him it was time to sit down together to talk with Daniel.

“This is a talking stick,” I said, holding up the ball. “Whoever is holding the talking stick gets to talk, and everyone else has to listen. When you've said everything you want to say, you put the talking stick back in the center of the circle, and someone else can take it and say what they want to say.”

I held the ball, looked at them both for a moment, and began. “I feel sad and concerned. I see Gabriel's tears and I hear him crying, and I want to know what happened.” I set the ball in the center of the circle.

To my surprise, Gabriel snatched it up immediately. Through sobs he said, “I feel sad. I didn't want Daniel to ruin my castle.”

I nodded and gave him an empathetic look. “Is that all?”

“No! I'm angry, too. Daniel shouldn't ruin my castle.”

I nodded again and waited. He stopped crying and used his arm to brush away tears. Then he set the ball in the center of the circle and slumped





into an unhappy position.

Daniel quickly picked up the ball. "I feel sad too, Mommy."

"Why do you feel sad?"

His lower lip stuck out, and his eyes rounded as he said, "I want to play, too."

Something in me clicked. I'd thought he was just being destructive. "Do you feel excited when your brother is playing, and you want to play with him?" I asked.

He nodded. "I want to play with Brah-ber." (Daniel had struggled with his brother's name from the moment he began to talk. Finally, he gave up and decided to call him "brother"—or "Brah-ber.")

"Do you understand that when you jump on his castle and it falls down, Gabriel feels sad and angry because his work is ruined?"

Daniel nodded. He held the ball in his lap and said in a low voice, "I'm sorry, Brah-ber."

"Do you have anything else you want to say?"

He shook his head and set the ball in the center of our circle. Gabriel took the ball, looked at him, and declared, "I don't want him to play with my castle. He always ruins it."

Daniel's lip quivered and his eyes filled with tears.

I took the ball. "It sounds like we have a challenge. Two boys want to play castle with the sofa cushions. When we are in time-in and we have a problem, we stay in the circle talking about it until we come up with an idea that works for everyone. So—who has a creative solution? How can two boys play castle with the cushions?" I plopped the ball in the center of the circle.

We sat quietly for what felt like a long time. Then Gabriel's face brightened. He sat upright and took the ball. "I have a good idea! How about I make a castle and Daniel *watches* me!" He looked eagerly back and forth between Daniel and me. "Is that a good idea?"

"Thank you for that idea," I said. "What does Daniel think?"

Daniel didn't need to say anything—his frown said it all—but he took the ball and said, "But I want to build castle too." His eyebrows rose dramatically. "I know, I know! I have good ideee-yah—Brah-ber build castle and I build castle, and how about we *share* castle!"

Most important—and this continues to be the hardest part for me—I wait for them to finish speaking, and to solve their problems.

Opposite: Daniel and Gabriel take turns with a talking stick, aka a Koosh ball, during a time-in.

Above: The brothers make peace.

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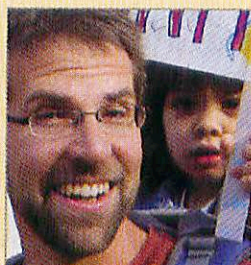
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Above: MDC Moderators at the Mod Retreat in Santa Fe 2007. Left to right: Shantimama, Irishmommy, heartmama, Dar, Jacque Savageau, Bad Mama Jama. In front: Georgia.



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Gabriel, not to be outdone, announced, "How about Daniel helps me build my castle and then he can play in it with me?"

Daniel nodded vigorously. "Yeah, yeah, that's a good ideeee-yah."

"So your solution is that both of you will build a castle together and then share it?" They nodded. "Let's try it and see what happens."

They scrambled to their feet. But before they could dash away, I called them over. "High-five, both of you, for sharing how you felt and coming up with a creative solution to your problem." They grinned as they hit my hand hard, then ran to the couch.

Later that night, I told my husband about our time-in. "Is it worth the time?" he asked.

Yes. No doubt it took longer to resolve the disagreement in a time-in circle than it would have to send someone to a naughty corner or stair. But I see my boys leave our time-ins clear, their bodies energized, their faces bright in anticipation of implementing their ideas. They share a common goal and feel empowered, heard, and responsible. There is no victim, no aggressor. They have been truthful, and the family circle has held all of who they are. I've learned to trust my boys' own problem-solving abilities, and I love the relief from the tyranny of the Mommy-should-always-know-best mentality I'd been carrying with me.

This doesn't mean that I've become an "anything goes" parent. Instead, I think of myself as a guide. I phrase my sentences so that the boys hear that I am not blaming them. This is particularly important at the beginning of a time-in—when it is also hardest to control my temper—because the first words out of my mouth often set the tone for the entire encounter. I try to state, without judgment, how I feel and

what I observed: "I saw Gabriel grab the car away from Daniel, then I saw Daniel hit Gabriel. Now I see both of you crying. I feel sad and frustrated."

Most important—and this continues to be the hardest part for me—I wait for them to finish speaking, and to solve their problems. They usually come up with solutions I would never have considered—and, nine times out of ten, those solutions work fine.

My inspirations for starting our time-in circles were Dr. John Gottman's research on emotion coaching, Christina Baldwin's work on calling circles, and Marshall Rosenberg's concepts of nonviolent communication. And although the idea of a time-in was a blinding revelation to me, as I share it with others I'm discovering a number of variations on this theme among parents who participate in positive-discipline and conscious-parenting groups. All I can say is, the time-in circle works for me.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Baldwin, Christina. *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture*. Swan Raven and Company, 1994. www.peerspirit.com

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Debra Carlson is a writer, teacher, and global nomad. She is the busy mom of Gabriel (6) and Daniel (4), and writer David

Blatner's partner in life. Although she currently resides in the Pacific Northwest, she has lived in Japan, England, Germany, and Scotland.

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