

# Special Time: A Necessary But Underrated Strategy

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The purpose of this paper is twofold: First, to outline specific procedures for parents, teachers, and counselors in implementing “special time”; and, second, to identify and accentuate the pragmatic and theoretical goals that are accomplished by the consistent and systematic use of special time.

“Special time” is a concept Adlerian counselors and teachers use; yet a succinct, well-documented reference source for special time does not appear in the literature. A recent on-line search of the literature (which included a 15-year search of (Eric) materials; a 20-year review of psychological abstracts, including the *Journal of Individual Psychology* and the *Individual Psychologist*; and a 6-year review of social science abstracts and indexes) failed to reveal a single reference to special time, as we know it. Professionals who consult with parents and teachers recommend its use, but are hard-pressed to remember where they read or learned about the concept. Those of us who have been involved in the Adlerian movement for a relatively short period of time (the last decade) may recall its use by Lowe, Sonstegard, Christensen, Dinkmeyer, O’Connell, and others. Undoubtedly, Adlerians with greater tenure in the movement can recall the use of the technique by Dreikurs, Redwin, and perhaps Adler himself. Nevertheless, a review of both Adlerian journals and most Adlerian works on child rearing failed to reveal a specific reference and only an occasional inference. One is led to the conclusion that special time may be folklore. Undoubtedly, millions of words have been uttered about it, but little has been written. Without written presentation and investigation, its maximum potential may not be realized.

## What Is Special Time?

Parents frequently comment on the special time they have with their children, yet typically there are subtle but substantive differences between what parents believe to be special time and what special time actually is. Special time consists of a block of prearranged time designated as the child’s time with the parent. It is, in fact, the child’s time. The child determines what to

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do, when to do it, and whether to do it at all. Special time is an intimate frame in a day, set aside for parent and child encouragement. The parent is unconditionally available to the child regardless of the youngster's conduct throughout the day. It is the parent's opportunity to teach the child that the child is good enough just as he or she is and is loved unconditionally. Alternatively, the parent is not expected to denigrate his or her own respect in order to offer special time to the child; that is, the adult is not obligated to chase down the child in order to offer special time. It is only necessary for the adult to offer special time at the negotiated time. Further, the adult is not obligated to comply with an unreasonable request. For example, if the child asks the adult to go 2 miles across town to an ice cream store and return with a sundae, the adult is not obligated to comply. In this instance, rather than asking to engage in a sharing special time, the child is making an unreasonable autocratic demand of the adult. Alternatively, if the child asks the parent to accompany him or her to an ice cream store for a favorite sundae, it is a reasonable request so long as it is within the limits of the adult's financial resources and time.

### **Steps for Implementing Special Time**

**1. Introduce the concept of special time to the child.** At a neutral time the adult should ask the child if he or she would be interested in spending special time with the parent every day, every other day, etc. The child must understand that it will be his or her own time with the adult, to do as he or she wishes, within the limits of mutual respect and physical reality.

**2. Negotiate a time with the child.** The adult must discuss appropriate and convenient times with the child, stipulating when the parent can meet regularly, and, in turn, asking the child to select a preferred time. The amount of time spent with the child is an individual matter which might vary from the weekday to weekend. The guide to action should be the parent's ability to fulfill the commitment.

**3. Adhere to the schedule.** Once a time has been agreed on, it is frequently helpful to post the schedule in a central location within the home. When families first implement the procedure, they frequently cancel, skip, or inadvertently miss a special time. A schedule helps both parents and children remember. When it is necessary to reschedule a session, it should be negotiated democratically between between the adult and child.

**4. Special time is offered unconditionally.** Special time is offered unconditionally to the child regardless of the child's conduct throughout the course of the day. One emphatic intention of the strategy is to teach the child, via deed and word, that he or she is a valued individual. However, there is one exception to this rule which requires comment: If the child is uncooperative, destructive, or disrespectful of the adult during special time, the adult is

not obligated to continue. The adult may cancel the session until the next scheduled time or terminate and resume the activity when the child chooses to cooperate.

**5. Special time is for one child and parent.** Unless otherwise negotiated, special time is designated for one parent and child. It is that child's time with the parent of his or her choice. Each parent is expected to offer and arrange special time with each sibling. For parents of large families, it may be necessary to alternate children every other week.

**6. The child has freedom of choice.** The child has the freedom to choose the activity for special time, within reasonable limits of parental time, financial resources, and individual rights. The parent provides choices for the child but never sacrifices his or her own rights or dignity. For example, with younger children, parents may find it necessary to offer a series of activities from which the child may choose. He may suggest Leggos, reading *The Rescuers*, or sledding for half an hour. The child is then free to choose among these activities. For older children, or children who are accustomed to special time, the parent may not find it necessary to generate a series of choices. In these instances, the child may have a list of things he or she would like to do. In this situation the adult seeks to comply with the child's first choice if feasible. For example, if the child chooses to play circus and throw pies at the adult, there would be no need for the adult to grant that wish. The child's choices must be within the realm of the social order, the family routine, and the basic dignity of people. Some typical special-time activities chosen by children include: sledding; reading; bicycle riding; fixing something; cleaning something; building something; or going to a movie, play, symphony, or sporting event.

### **Behavioral Goals and Expectations**

If parents and children learn to anticipate special time, many clashes can be eliminated. For example, if daughter Susan is demanding that Mother play a certain game, Mother can refuse the bid for attention by saying, "I would like to play, but I must finish reading this book. I would be glad to play with you during special time if you like."

In the case of power struggles, the strategy is not as direct, but equally effective. During special time, the parent says via word and deed, "You are the boss; I am here to do as you choose as long as you respect my rights and dignity." The parent complies with the child's requests and suggestions, acknowledging the child's rights in the situation. Further, by respecting the child's decision, the adult tells the child that the child's ideas and capacities are a valuable force to be considered seriously.

Because the adult takes action on the word of the child, the child experiences cooperative democratic action first hand. For example, the child

may decide to work with plastic shrink art. Perhaps the child decides to build a plastic valentine and in the process makes a number of requests of the adult. These requests require that the adult do a specific task for the child and generally assist the child in the completion of the activity. In this situation the tables are turned; that is, the adult responds to requests and assists the child in accomplishing a work task. The child is soon cued to the fairness, cooperation, friendliness, and respect that the adult is offering the child. By example, the child experiences the benefit of cooperative behavior and soon comes to value it and seeks to offer it to others.

Frequently, children will choose activities in which additional training is required for mastery of a task; for example, making a bed, tying shoelaces, washing dishes, etc. These choices give the parent an opportunity to provide invaluable training at a neutral time. By definition, neutral time exists when no conflict situation is present. Typically, parents attempt to train children when both parent and child are wrought with feelings of frustration, anger, and impatience. In these situations of high anxiety, it is unlikely that the child will be able to learn from any constructive criticism or instructional information. Thus, it seems reasonable to train the child when conflict does not exist. The adult should attempt to focus on the child's needs in the situation, not the adult's criteria for performance or perfection. Every attempt should be made to commend the *effort* made by the child instead of commending the *perfectly* completed task. In fact, the adult should strive to commend effort made in situations of failure as well as situations of success. It is in exactly these situations, situations of failure, that children need the greatest amount of encouragement. Therein lies the difference between encouragement and reinforcement. That is, reinforcement can only be given upon the successful completion of a task; alternatively, encouragement may be given in the face of failure or when a strong effort has been made. Thus, when children choose activities that involve training, parents have a classic opportunity to train the child in a cooperative encouraging way.

Regardless of the activity chosen by the child, special time always provides an opportunity to offer encouragement in regard to specific behaviors. For example, the child may choose to listen to a record on the record player located in his or her room, an activity that requires the adult to go into the child's space and attend to the child physically and emotionally. Similarly, the child may choose to put together a new puzzle, in which case the adult and child may get on the floor together and solve the puzzle. By design, these activities are encouraging because the adult attends exclusively to the child; stays in close physical contact; and, for that period of special time, gives himself unconditionally to the child. The child quickly learns that he or she is the center of the adult's world for that moment in time. Thus, special time is, in itself, the act of encouragement.

In many instances, the activities chosen by a child are of value and

benefit to others. For example, a particular child frequently chose to deliver meals on wheels with her parents. This task was a direct act of altruism or other directness. According to Adler, social interest may take this concrete form (Adler, 1956).

A point that passes almost without notice is the fact that special time may be educational, for example, when the child chooses to ride the city bus for the first time, visit a museum, attend the symphony, go to the sailboat races, or read a story. The choice frequently involves the joy of learning and doing.

Because parent and child are so intimately involved in special time, both experience strong feelings of satisfaction, warmth, self-esteem, and confidence. According to Dreikurs, the notion of self-esteem is critical. All of our actions are determined, first, by our self-evaluation and, second, by physical reality (Dreikurs, 1971). This statement is equally true for adults and children. Adults frequently comment on the guilt and frustration they experience because they are unable to build strong intimate relationships with their children. According to Dreikurs, guilt serves the purpose of identifying the good intentions we never had (1972:47). Actions speak louder than words. By implementing special time, adults create an action arena. Special time serves to encourage adults as well as children. Having offered special time systematically, the adult gains a sense of fulfillment, parental effectiveness, and self-esteem. In short, the parent and child experience encouragement and a felt plus. By taking action during special time, children and adults elevate their self-esteem, improve rapport, and change their behavior for the better. According to Dreikurs (1971), the notion of self-esteem is critical. All of our actions are determined, first, by our self-evaluation and, second, by physical reality.

If special time is scheduled early in the day, it sets a positive tone; adult and child are off on the right foot, feeling cooperatively toward one another. This tone can be maintained throughout the day.

### **Cognitive Goals**

Through the use of special time, children begin to learn through their own actions, and those of their parents, that cooperation works. They experience first hand an improvement in the family's quality of life.

Each child quickly learns to recognize and believe that he or she is valuable, important, and worthwhile. Adults teach children that they can determine their own worth and dignity. This is accomplished in several ways. First, through providing the child with choices, children learn via word and deed that they are capable of assuming responsibility for the orchestration of special time. By extension, children learn that they are capable of assuming responsibility for a myriad of behaviors; namely, that each person is respon-

sible for his or her own happiness, satisfaction, and mastery of tasks. After realizing that they are competent, children become courageous. These actions gradually lead each child to the realization that he or she should, and is, capable of determining his or her own value (Dreikurs, 1964).

Finally, children and parents realize that responsible concern and respect for others result in personal feelings of worth and importance. During special time, the adult literally takes the lead from the child's initiative. In the process, the adult may literally carry out a request or command given by the child. More important, the adult attends particularly to the child's nonverbal as well as verbal cues. By attending to these cues, the adult teaches the child that he or she is sensitive to the child's needs, rights, and dignity. In this way, the adult communicates, through actions, that he or she respects the child; and, by being responsible and respectful toward the child, both adult and child experience a sense of freedom. Thus, parent and child quickly come to value the independence, freedom, and privileges offered by responsible concern for others. In short, the child learns that by demonstrating respect toward others and being sensitive to their needs, one's payoff is freedom.

### **Conclusions**

Special time is a comprehensive, high-impact strategy. Like most Adlerian principles, it is designed to be of mutual benefit to parents and children. Unlike other activities, it can produce instantaneous reward for both. Parents soon perceive a direct relationship between misbehavior and the lack of special time and an increase in cooperative behavior and the presence of special time. They are genuinely surprised to find that children of all ages quickly grasp the concept of special time. This strategy seems to effectively serve notice to all family members that one's special time is valued.

Special time provides a cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral model for the democratic constructs espoused in the Adlerian child-rearing system. Further, it offers conclusive evidence that cooperation, other directness/social interest, democracy, and respect for the social order are not philosophical pies in the sky, but realistic guides to living. If internalized and implemented, one quickly experiences genuine shifts in family and community life. Special time can influence the adult/child relationships in every major life task: work, love and intimacy, family and friends, and self-existence. Special time is one of the most holistic, prolific, and easy implemented strategies available to counselors, teachers, and parents.

### **References**

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