

When you think of the “silent treatment” you might not see it as harmless because you’re not saying anything hurtful or yelling and screaming.

The silent treatment sends a message to your child that they are not safe in their world. Children look to their parents for safety and significance in this scary world.

Unconditional Love

When you look in your child’s face you want them to know that they are loved unconditionally. This is their most important and powerful emotional need. What exactly does this mean? That your love has no conditions. They don’t have to do anything to earn your love. It is there whether they are good or bad. You love them when they make you proud but also when they disappoint you. Your love for them doesn’t go up or down like a thermometer with weather. When you use the silent treatment to punish children, it quickly ceases to be about their behavior and becomes about your love for them.

Cooling Off Period

Do not confuse the silent treatment with something known as the “cooling off period.” The cooling off period is where one person is so angry or disgusted by the other person that they just cannot deal with the situation in that state, and need time to calm down before they begin speaking to this person.

While the situation might be emotionally charged this is a healthy response where you set boundaries and you don’t make the other person feel like you’re punishing them. You are simply asking for the space you need in order to resolve your distress and come back to the conflict in a healthy way.

Silence is Negative

Silence is never neutral—it is always interpreted as negative. The parent knows the child desperately wants some words, a smile, a response. Yet the parent withholds those things to make the child hurt. The message to the child is that you are bad, insignificant and not lovable.

Your Response

If you were disciplined with the silent treatment, then chances are also you will use this on your children or others you love. The most important thing is to recognize it and then monitor yourself. If you are doing this to your child, remember this lesson. Talk to someone. Find a support group that can help. Most importantly, remember that you are the parent. You are the only one who can fill your child’s emotional tank. Even when you discipline your child, you should always be thinking of your end goal: how this will help him be a better person in the end.

Resources:

1. Zwolinski, Richard. “The Silent Treatment and What You Can Do to Stop It Cold.” Psych Central, Psych Central, 18 Nov. 2014, psychcentral.com/blog/therapy-soup/2014/11/the-silent-treatment-and-what-you-can-do-to-stop-it-cold#1.
2. Jantz, Dr. Gregory. “Portrait of an Emotional Abuser: The Silent Treatment Abuser.” Edmonds, WA Patch, Patch, 19 Apr. 2012, patch.com/washington/edmonds/bp--portrait-of-an-emotional-abuser-the-silent-treatment-abuser.
3. Scott, Kellie. “The Effects of the Silent Treatment in Families and Relationships.” ABC Everyday, ABC Everyday, 16 Dec. 2020, www.abc.net.au/everyday/the-effect-of-silent-treatment-in-relationships-families/11059348.