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Time Out: Intervention Of Choice For The Irrational Years

This easy-to-learn, easy-to-use technique will help you better handle your child's aggressive and disruptive behavior in the toddler and preschooler years-and often well beyond. (see article on "Discipline and Your Child").

How do I use a time-out?

Time-out consists of immediately isolating a child in a boring place for a few minutes whenever he/she misbehaves. It is also called quiet time, thinking time, or cooling-off time. Used repeatedly and correctly, this technique can change almost any undesirable childhood behavior. Time-out is the most effective consequence for toddlers and preschoolers who misbehave -- better than threatening, shouting, or spanking. It also has the advantage of providing a cooling-off period to allow both child and parent to calm down and regain control of their emotions. Every parent needs to learn how to use time-out effectively.

Time-out is most useful for aggressive, harmful, or disruptive behavior, such as hitting or biting, that cannot be ignored. It is unnecessary for most temper tantrums, which can and should be ignored. Time-out is not needed until at least 8 months of age, when children begin to crawl. It is rarely needed before 18 months because younger children usually respond to verbal disapproval. The peak ages for using time-out are 2 to 4 years. During these years, children respond to action much better than words. Time-out can also be used for older children if removing privileges and possessions does not work.

Choosing A Place For Time-Out

What Is A Time-Out Chair?

If you use a chair for time-out, it should be in a boring location, facing a blank wall or corner. Your child should not be able to see TV or other people from the chair. Usually the chair is placed in a hallway or room next to where you are. Some children under 2 years of age have separation fears and need to have the chair in the same room as the parent. If your child is in the same room, carefully avoid making eye contact with him/her.

A good type of chair to use for time-out is a heavy one with side arms. Placed in a corner, such a chair surrounds the child with boundaries, leaves a small space for the legs, and reduces thoughts of escape.

Do not use a rocking chair or other chair that might tip over easily.

Instead of using a chair for time-out, you can have your child stand in a particular corner, sit on a particular spot on the floor, or stay in a playpen if he/she is not old enough to climb out of it.

What Is A Time-Out Room?

If your child refuses to stay in a time-out chair, send him/her to a time-out room. It is easier to make a child stay in a room, and some children are more cooperative about going to a room. The room should be one that is safe for your child and contains no valuables. Avoid any room that is dark or scary (such as closets and some basements), contains hot water (bathrooms), or has filing cabinets, bookshelves, or wall units that the child could pull over. Young children always need supervision while in time-out.

The child's bedroom is often the most convenient and safe place for time-out. Although toys are available there, your child probably will not play with them at first because he/she is upset about being excluded from family activities. During time-out, forbid the use of a radio, stereo or video games.

What Do I Do When Away From Home?

Time-out can be used effectively in any setting. It is helpful to bring a portable timer with you for this purpose. At the supermarket, for example, you can put a younger child in the grocery cart. In a shopping mall, your child can take time-out sitting on a bench. Sometimes you may need to take your child to the car and have him/her sit in the back seat for the required minutes.

How Do I Administer A Time-Out?

Practicing time-out with your child

If you have not used time-out before, go over it with your child in advance. Tell him/her it will replace spanking, yelling, and other forms of discipline. Review the kinds of behavior that will lead to time-out. Also review the positive behavior that you would prefer. Then pretend with your child that a rule has been broken.

Review the steps of time-out so there will be no misunderstanding how a time-out works when it becomes necessary to use. Also teach this technique to your babysitter, relatives and others who take care of your child. It may be helpful to give them a copy of this handout.

Deciding the length of time-out

Time-out should be short enough so that your child has a chance to go back to the original situation and learn the acceptable behavior. A good rule of thumb is one minute for every year of age up to a maximum of ten minutes. After 6 years of age, most children can be told to stay in time-out "until you can behave." This allows them to choose how long they stay there. If the problem behavior recurs, make the next time-out the full length.

Setting a portable kitchen timer for the required number of minutes helps time-out succeed for children over 2 years of age (younger children cannot understand the concept of the timer). The timer will stop your child from asking you when the time-out is over. The best type to use is one that ticks continuously and rings when the time is up. The best place to put it is where your child can see and hear, but out of reach. You can have your child bring you the timer at the end of time-out.

Sending your child to time-out

Older children will usually go to time-out on their own. Younger children often need to be led there by the hand, or in some cases, carried to their room despite their protesting (forced time-out). If your child does not go to time-out within five seconds, take him/her there. Do not yell, scream or lose your temper. You do not want your child to think his/her action has upset you (even though it probably did). Do not allow your child to have any toys, pacifiers, security blankets, pets, or other objects of comfort when taking a forced time-out.

Do not lecture, spank, or answer your child's pleas on the way to time-out. Explain what was done (in one sentence) that was an inappropriate behavior, such as "No hitting" or "No biting." If possible, clarify the expected behavior: "Be kind to Dr. Bob." These brief comments give your child something to think about in time-out.

Behavior in time-out

The minimum requirement for completing time-out is that your child does not leave the chair or time-out place until the time-out is over. If your child leaves ahead of time, reset the timer.

Some parents will not accept a completed time-out unless the child has been quiet for the entire time. Until 4 years of age, many children are unwilling or unable to comply with a quiet rule.

Ignore tantrums in time-out, just as you would tantrums outside of time-out. Also ignore noisemaking, cursing, and complaining. If your child vomits while in time-out, clean him/her up quickly and start the time-out over.

After 4 years of age, quiet time is preferred but not required. You can tell your child, "Time-out is supposed to be for thinking and to think, you have to be quiet. If you yell or fuss, the time-out will start over." If your child makes a mess in his/her room (empties clothing out of drawers or takes the bed apart), everything must be cleaned up before he/she will be released from the time-out. Toys that are misused, can be stored away temporarily. You can prevent some damage by removing items such as scissors, crayons, or markers from the room in advance.

Releasing your child from time-out

To be released, your child must perform a successful time-out. That means staying in time-out for the required number of minutes. Your child can leave when the timer rings or you announce, "Time-out is over. You can come out now." Many parents of children over 4 years old require that they be quiet at the end of time-out. If your child is still noisy when the timer rings, you can reset the timer for one minute.

Once time-out is over, treat your child normally and start with a clean slate. Do not apologize for setting limits and do not insist that your child apologize for his/her behavior. That can make your child feel he/her has been labeled a bad person.

What Can I Do When My Younger Child Refuses To Stay In Time-Out?

If your child escapes from time-out (gets up from the chair or spot), return him/her back quickly and reset the timer. This approach works for most children. If your child refuses to stay in time-out, take action rather than arguing or scolding.

A strong-willed child of 2 or 3 may need to be held in time-out temporarily to reinforce that you mean what you say. Place your child in the time-out chair and hold him/her by the shoulders from behind. You can release your hold once your child stops trying to escape. Then avoid eye contact and any more talking.

Do not yell, scream or lose your temper. This may only make the problem worse. Smile and remain calm. Your child will quickly realize that your actions in disciplining him/her do not bother you. Following this advice will teach your child that escape attempts will not be tolerated.

Several options can be used for the young children who continues to resist staying in time-out:

- Install a gate blocking the door.
- A parent with carpentry skills can install a half-door. Cut the door about 10 inches above the doorknob and reverse the lock on the bottom. You will have the option of keeping the top open or closed.
- You can install a hook and eye from the door to the frame. If long enough, it will allow your child to open the door a few inches, but not enough to get out.
- If you don't want to hold the door, you can put a latch on the door that allows you to lock it temporarily.
- If you cannot or do not want to block the door, you can close it and hold it shut for the three to five minutes it takes to complete the time-out period.
- Be very careful not to leave the door locked for more than a few minutes. Most children learn quickly to stay in time-out in order to avoid being locked in the room.

What Can I Do When My Older Child Refuses To Stay In Time-Out?

An older child can be defined as one who is too strong for the parent to hold in a time-out chair. In general, any child older than 5 years who does not take time-out quickly should be considered a refuser, and you should escalate to a consequence that works.

You can extend the time-out, adding one extra minute for each minute of delay. If five minutes pass and your child still has not gone to time-out, you can ground him/her.

"Grounded" in the younger child means no TV, radio, stereo, video games, toys, telephone access, outside play, snacks, or friends over. Once you have instituted a punishment, try not to give in because you feel sorry for your child. This will only make future attempts more difficult.

"Grounded" in the older child or teenager should concentrate on taking away certain

privileges for a set period of time. You should clearly establish what you consider inappropriate behavior and spell out what you expect from your child. You and your child should discuss beforehand the consequences of any inappropriate behavior, so there will be no surprises. Grounding can include the following: taking away driving and/or phone privileges, not going out on weekends with friends, etc.

After grounding your child, walk away and do not have anymore conversation. Grounding ends only after your child takes the regular time-out plus any penalty time. In the older child, the length of grounding will depend on the grounding arrangements made with your child.

Let our office know if your child does not respond to our suggestions.

Call our office during regular hours if:

- Your child hurts himself/herself during time-out.
- Your child runs out of the house to avoid time-out.
- Your child has to be kept in his/her room with the gate up or the door closed for time-outs for more than two weeks.
- Your child refuses to take time-outs despite being grounded for three days.
- If your child refuses to cooperate with time-outs after using this approach for one month.
- If your child has other behavioral problems.

If Time-Out Does Not Work, What Other Options Do I Have?

Parents sometimes become discouraged with time-out because their child immediately misbehaves in the same way when they release him/her from time-out. Other children improve temporarily, but by the next day are repeating the behavior the parent is trying to stop. Some children refuse to go to time-out or will not stay there. None of these situations means that time-out should be abandoned.

With a 2 to 5-year-old child, time-out is your trump card. There is not some better, medical approach. If you use time-out repeatedly, consistently, and correctly, your child will eventual improve. The following recommendations can help you improve your skills in applying time-out:

- Give your child more physical affection each day. Be sure your child receives two "time-ins" for every time-out each day. A time-in is a brief, positive, close human interaction. Try to restore the positive side of your relationship with your child. Catch him/her being good. Try to hold your child for one or two minutes every 15 minutes when not in time-out or misbehaving. Play with him/her more.
- Clarify for your child what you want done. Explain the house rules. This will help your child be more successful in avoiding misbehavior. Review the rules at a time when your child is in a good mood.
- Use a time-out EVERY time your child engages in the behavior that you are trying to stop. For the first two or three days, you may need to use timeouts 20 or more times a day to get a defiant toddler's attention. Brief time-outs are harmless, and there is no upper limit on how many times you can use them as long as you offset them with positive interactions.
- Use time-out, do not just threaten to use it. For aggressive behaviors, give no warnings, just put your child in time-out. Better yet, intercept your child when you see him/her starting to raise or clench a fist as if getting ready to hit someone. For some behaviors, remind your child of the rule, count to three, and if your child does not stop immediately, institute a time-out.
- Put your child in time-out earlier. Do not wait until your child's behavior escalates. It will be easier for you to put your child in time-out calmly before the screaming begins. Instituting a time-out

early means you will be more in control and will lessen your anxiety. If you are yelling, time-out will not work as effectively.

- Put your child in time-out quickly. Do not talk about it first. When a rule is broken (especially one concerning aggressive behavior), a timeout should be instituted within ten seconds. For rules that may have been forgotten, consider giving one warning or counting to three before starting a time-out.
- Be kinder in your delivery of a time-out. This will help reduce your child's anger. Say you are sorry he/she needs a time-out, but be firm about it, and do not apologize for setting limits. Try to handle your child gently on the way to the time-out.
- Give your child more choices about how he/she takes time-out. Ask, "Do you want to take a timeout by yourself, or do you want me to hold you in your chair? It does not matter to me." For older children, the choice can be, "Do you want to take time-out, or do you want to be grounded."
- Do not talk to your child during time-out. Do not answer any questions or complaints. Do not lecture your child.
- Ignore tantrums in time-out. Do not insist that your child remain quiet during time-out because it makes a completed time-out harder to accomplish.
- Return your child to time-out if there is an escape. Have a back-up plan. See above for more detail.
- Make the time-out place more boring. If your child does not seem to mind time-outs, eliminate sources of entertainment. Move the timeout to a more boring location. If you use her bedroom, close the blinds or shades. Make sure that siblings or pets are not visiting. Temporarily remove all toys and games from the bedroom and store them elsewhere.
- Consider increasing the length of time-out. If your child is more than 3 years old and needs to be placed in time-out more than ten times each day, the length of time-out should be changed to get your child's attention. Some preschoolers with a strong-willed temperament may need two or three minutes per year of age temporarily. Children younger than 3 years of age should receive only brief time-outs (one minute per year of age) because longer time-outs are difficult to attain.
- Use a portable timer to keep track of the time. If you are not already using a timer, get one, preferably a kitchen timer that ticks. Put it where your child can see and hear it, but is out of reach. Your child is more likely to obey a timer than you.
- Give your child the option of coming out of time-out as soon as he/she is under control. Allow your child to come out when he/she feels ready rather than taking the specified number of minutes. This can help with children who feel overly controlled.
- Praise your child when he/she takes a good timeout. Forgive completely when your child comes out from time-out. Do not lecture or insist on an apology. Give your child a clean slate, and do not tell your spouse or other relatives how many time-outs were necessary that day.
- Use time-out with siblings when appropriate. Be sure that you are not favoring one sibling over the others when you enforce discipline. If siblings touch the timer or tease the child in time-out, they should also be placed in time-out.
- Do not punish your child for normal expressions of anger. Do not use a time-out for such behavior as saying angry things or looking angry. Do not try to control your child's behavior too much.
- Use a variety of consequences for misbehavior other than time-out. Remember, ignore harmless behaviors. If you use a time-out for every little thing your child does wrong, it will not be as effective. In addition, this will only frustrate you more. Pick and choose your battleground. This keeps you in charge. Use techniques such as distraction for bad habits. Use logical consequences, such as removal of toys, other possessions, or privileges when appropriate.
- Teach all your child's caretakers to use time-out correctly and consistently. Babysitters and relatives who care for your child should be familiar with time-out techniques and able to use them effectively. You may find it helpful to give them copies of this handout.

Dr. Bob's Keys To Effective Discipline

DISCIPLINE: Your child requires some form of discipline at every stage of his/ her life. It is important that your child learns the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behavior at an early age. The following list contains suggestions that you may find helpful in developing your own pattern of discipline.

- Never feel guilty about disciplining your child-it is for his/her benefit.
- Your child will often try to ignore you, hoping that you will become frustrated and give up. Being persistent will keep you in control of the situation.
- In some situations, it may be necessary to physically remove your child to a safer setting.
- Discipline and punishment are not the same and should not be confused. Discipline is a form of teaching in which you as the parent take control of a situation involving your child.
- There are many ways to carry out effective discipline. Do not make threats that you have no intention of carrying out. Your child will pick up on this very quickly and take advantage of you.
- Never hold a grudge. This only makes the situation worse.
- Temper tantrums are a learned behavior used by your child to get your attention. If you do not consistently ignore these tantrums, they will continue to occur. It is important that your child does not see you get upset by what he/ she may be doing during a tantrum.
- When you begin to discipline your child, his/her negative behavior may initially increase as he/she tests you. Be consistent and your child will quickly learn that you mean business.
- Teach your child that good behavior makes you happy and will be rewarded. Stress that unacceptable behavior (tantrums) will not be rewarded.
- Your goal is to develop in your child an acceptable form of self discipline which will guide him/her in the future. Be patient-you have plenty of time, but now is the time to begin.
- The key to meaningful discipline is persistence, consistency, and effectiveness. All discipline problems and their solutions must be individualized to the particular family and child. Our list is intended to be a stepping stone for you. Effective discipline is not easy. Ask for advice on ways to help discipline your child.

Adapted from Barton Schmitt: Your Child's Health, Ed 2. New York, NY, Bantam Books, Inc., 1991.

This information should not be used as substitute for the medical care and advice of your child's physician. Health related topics found on the Andorra Pediatrics web site should not be used for diagnosing purposes or be substituted for medical advice. As with any new or ongoing treatment, always consult your professional healthcare provider before making any changes in treatment or beginning any new treatment. If you have any questions or concerns, please call our office.