
USING TIME-OUTS FOR BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS

The following is a detailed handout on how to do time-outs. With his permission, we adapted this handout from Dr. Christophersen, who wrote *"Little People: Guidelines for Common Sense Child Rearing"*. You may also find *"Max Learns About Time-Outs"* by Dr. Wanda Venters helpful (available on Amazon.com).

USING TIME-OUTS FOR BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS:

Time-out involves placing your child in a separate area (i.e. chair or room) for a short period of time following the occurrence of an unacceptable behavior. This procedure has been effective in reducing problem behaviors, such as tantrums, hitting, biting, leaving the yard without permission, and others. Parents have found that time-out works better than spanking, yelling, or threatening their children. This handout is most appropriate for children from 18 months through 10 years.

A. PREPARATIONS

1. You should purchase a small portable kitchen timer.
2. A place for time-out should be selected. This could be a chair in the hallway, kitchen, or corner of a room. It needs to be a dull place, where your child cannot view the television or play with toys. It should not be a dark, scary, or dangerous place. The aim is to remove your child to a place where not much is happening, not to make your child afraid.
3. You should discuss with your child which behaviors will result in a time-out. Consistency is very important. It is also very important that you only try to correct a few problem behaviors at a time.

B. PRACTICING

Before using time-out discipline, you should practice using it with your child at a pleasant time. Tell your child there are two rules when in time-out.

RULE 1: The timer will start when he is quiet. Ask your child what would happen if he talks or makes noises when in time-out. Your child should say the timer will be reset or something similar. If he does not say this, remind him of the rule.

RULE 2: If he gets off the chair or leaves the room before the timer rings, you will replace him in the chair or room.

Mention to your child you will be using this technique instead of spanking, yelling, or threatening. Most children are pleased to learn this.

C. PROCEDURE

STEP 1: Following an inappropriate behavior, say to the child, "Oh you... (Describe what the child did, e.g. "Hit your sister, go to time-out please".) Say this calmly and only once. It is important not to lose your temper or begin nagging. If your child has problems getting to

the time-out quickly, guide him with as little effort as needed. This can range from leading the child part way by hand to carrying the child. If you have to carry your child, be sure to hold him facing away from you so he doesn't confuse a hug with a trip to time-out.

Step 2: When your child is in time-out and quiet, set the timer for a specific number of minutes. The rule of thumb is one minute for each year of age up to five minutes. A 2-year-old would have two minutes; a 3-year-old, three minutes; and a 5-year-old, five minutes. For children five years and above, five minutes is the maximum amount of time. Sometimes less time is required. You want the time-out to last only long enough for your child to quiet down and understand that the behavior that got him into time-out will not be tolerated.

STEP 3: After your child has been quiet and seated for the required amount of time, the timer will ring. Go to the time-out chair and ask your child if he would like to get up. Do not speak from across the room. A nod of the head or a positive or neutral answer is required. Answering in an angry tone of voice or refusing to answer is not acceptable.

STEP 4: After your child finishes a time-out period, he should start with a "clean slate". It is not necessary to discuss, remind or nag about what the child did wrong. It would be wise to take your child to a different part of the house and start him in a new activity. Within five minutes after a time-out, look for and praise good behavior. Remember, **"Catch 'em being good"**.

D. SUMMARY OF THE RULES

1. For Parent:

- Decide which behaviors will result in a time-out. Discuss these with your child. It is good to write these rules down so that you and your child remember them.
- Do not leave your child in time-out and forget him.
- Do not nag, scold, or talk to your child when she is in time-out. All family members should follow this rule!
- Remain calm—take some deep breaths if needed—particularly when your child is being testy.

2. For Children:

- Go immediately to time-out when you're asked to. Don't argue.
- Remain quiet and stay on the time-out chair or room until you are asked to get down. You will spend less time in the time-out chair that way.

3. Brothers and Sisters:

- If you tease, laugh at, or talk with your brother or sister while they are in time-out, you may be placed in time-out.

THINGS TO CHECK WHEN TIME-OUT DOES NOT WORK

1. Be sure you are not warning your child one (or more) times before sending him or her to the time-out. Warnings only teach your child that he or she can misbehave at least once (or more) before you'll use time-out. Warnings only make things worse, not better. **Be certain that behaviors which are going to result in a time-out are discussed at the beginning of the day, before any rules are broken. If you are not in your home, have a designated time-out place—a car seat or a spot on the curb. Never leave your child alone in the car but you can stand outside with the window open. Threatening a time-out as a punishment later in the day is never a good idea and is very hard to enforce.**
2. All adults who are responsible for disciplining your child at home should be using the time-out. You should agree when and for what your child will get a time-out.
3. In order to maximize the effectiveness of time-out, you must make the rest of the day pleasant for your child. Remember to let your child know when he or she is well behaved rather than taking good behavior for granted (“Catch ‘em being good”). **Most children would prefer being disciplined than to be ignored.**
4. Your child may say, “Going to time-out doesn’t bother me”, or “I like time-out.” Do not fall for this trick. Many children try to convince their parents that time-out is fun and therefore it is not working. You should notice that the problem behaviors for which you use time-out occur less often (time-out is not supposed to be a miserable experience).
5. When you first begin using time-out, your child may act like time-out is a “game” or behave badly (cursing, spitting). He or she may put themselves in time-out or ask to go to time-out. If this happens, give your child what he or she wants—that is, put him or her in time-out and require your child to sit quietly for the required amount of time. Your child will soon learn that time-out is not a game. Your child may also laugh or giggle when being placed in time-out or while in time-out. Although this may aggravate you, it is important for you completely ignore your child when he or she is in time-out.
6. You must use time-out for major and minor behavioral problems. Parents have a tendency to feel that time-out is not enough of a punishment for big things and thereby discipline inconsistently. Consistency is most important for time-out to work for big and small problems.

Choose your battles wisely. Don't use time-out for every little infraction. Too many time-outs may mean you are being too strict. Time-outs are best used for aggressive misbehavior because it makes logical sense that if you are hitting, kicking or biting no one wants to be around you.

Most of parenting and discipline involve helping your child to understand the logical or natural consequences of his or her actions. If you explain that if she runs out into the street, a car may hit her, it is easier for your child to understand the rule of not running into the street. You have explained the natural consequence of running into the street. If she goes into the street, you will have to make her come inside or play only in the back yard. This is the logical consequence of her actions. Teaching your child why you ask her to do certain things is how you prepare her to make good decisions by herself. If you can't think of a logical reason why you want her to do certain things it may not matter if she does them.

Helping your children to understand how they feel—angry, tired, sad or full of energy—teaches them to understand and plan their actions. It is a good idea to anticipate when misbehaviors will occur and give your child another suggestion of what to do. Sometimes a “Time Away” (see “Mommy Unicorn Has a Time Away”) can prevent a time-out. Most importantly, have lots of hugging and tickling time planned into your lives.

DISCIPLINE AND TIME-OUTS

It is important to remember that discipline always works best if there is a natural or logical consequence to the action. In this case, it makes logical sense that if the child hits or kicks or is aggressive, he should go to time-out. Nobody wants to be around someone who is aggressive so that person has to be alone.

A simple example of logical and natural discipline is the following:

If your child is climbing on a chair and you are afraid that he might fall, you can tell him to sit in or get off the chair because he may fall. If he falls, you can say, “Oops, I was afraid of that”. Let his action teach him consequences. If falling is too risky, tell your child that he will need to sit in the chair or get off the chair because you are afraid that he will fall. If he continues to climb, remove him from the chair. Problem is solved; there is no need for punishments or bribes or time-outs.

Sometimes it is tempting to say to a child that he will not get a treat, such as a lollipop, if he doesn't behave. Such a ploy will often backfire. Before long he is testing how many times he can climb in the chair before losing the treat, or if one child behaves and another child does not, you're faced with the situation of one child eating a lollipop in front of the other child. It is always best to think why we want our children to do something and what the natural or logical consequences are if they do not do it.

It is also important to have plenty of ‘time in’ when raising children. “Catch them being good” is one of the hardest but most important rules in parenting. A cardinal rule in all relationships—with spouses, employer-employee, family or friends—is to say 10 nice things for every “critical suggestion”. As a parent your words weigh heavy with your child who is watching you all the time to see what is going to happen next. If you are having recurrent battles with your child, you need to change the routine of your day or the setting of battles.

It is also very helpful to tell children what to do, not just what not to do. Smart phones and tablets have made waiting much easier for parents who frequently share these tools with their children. We do often see parents using their phones and telling their children to sit still and “quit it” as the children start to whine. It is much more effective to have a plan of what your children should do—not just what they should not. It is very hard to “just sit and be still” for any period of time and almost impossible for young children.

There is usually a time in your child's development when they need to learn not to be aggressive. During this period, it can seem that you are always putting them in time-out. Do not despair. If you consistently do not tolerate aggressive activity, within a few weeks the hitting or other aggressive actions will greatly diminish and your evenings will return to a pleasant time to share with your children—not a series of time-outs.

It is important to know that good studies have shown that children see spankings and “hand slapping” by adults as aggressive acts. Children who are spanked have fewer social skills and more trouble controlling anger than children who are taught self-control by time-outs. **The American Academy of Pediatrics officially recommends that parents never use physical punishment with children. Any short-term behavior improvements due to physical punishment quickly stop. Children who are physically punished have more serious emotional problems and more legal trouble than children who are disciplined by other means.**