

# Time-Out Technique

## Definition

- Time-out means putting a child in a boring place for a few minutes to correct a misbehavior.
- It's the most effective consequence (discipline technique) for misbehavior in 2- to 5-year-old children. Every parent needs to know how to give a time-out.
- Time-out teaches a child to stop and think. It provides time to calm down and regain control of the emotions. Sometimes, it also helps the parent calm down.
- Time-out is also called quiet time, thinking time, or cooling-off time.

## Health Information

### When to Give a Time-Out

- Time-out is most useful for aggressive, harmful, or any disruptive behavior that cannot be ignored.
- Time-out is not needed for most temper tantrums.
- Time-out is the most effective consequence for toddlers and preschoolers who misbehave. It's much better than threatening, shouting, or spanking
- The peak ages for using time-out are 2 to 5 years. During these years, children respond to actions much better than words. Time-out is not ever needed before a child can walk. Time-out is rarely needed for children younger than 18 months because they usually respond to verbal disapproval (a simple "No").

### What to Expect

- If you use time-out repeatedly, consistently, and correctly, your child will eventually improve. It can change almost any childhood behavior.

## Care Advice

### How to Give Time-Outs

#### 1. Teach Your Child What a Time-Out Is:

- If you have not used time-out before, go over it with your child.
- Review the kinds of bad behavior that require a time-out. Also, review the good behavior that you would prefer.
- Tell your child it will replace yelling and spanking, if you have used those techniques.
- Then do a practice run. Pretend with your child that he has broken one of the rules. Take him through the steps of time-out so he will understand what to do when he needs a time-out in the future.

#### 2. Time-Out Chair:

- Pick a chair for time-outs. The chair should be in a boring location, facing a blank wall or a corner.
- Don't allow your child to take anything with him to time-out, such as a stuffed animal or security blanket. Your child shouldn't be able to see TV or other people from the location.
- A good chair is a heavy one with side arms. The special chair can also be named after the misbehavior you are trying to stop: such as your hitting chair or screaming chair.
- Alternatives to chairs are standing in a particular corner or sitting on the lower step of a stairway.
- If you are in the same room as your child, carefully avoid making eye contact.

### 3. **Time-Out Room:**

- Children who refuse to stay in a time-out chair need to be sent to a time-out room. Keeping a child in a room is easier to enforce.
- The room should be one that is safe for the child. The child's bedroom is often the most convenient one. Although toys are available in the bedroom, most children do not initially play with them because they are upset about being excluded from mainstream activities.
- Caution: Avoid any room that is dark or scary (such as some basements), contains hot water (bathrooms), or has filing cabinets or bookshelves that could be pulled down on the child.

### 4. **Send Your Child to Time-Out:**

- You ask your child to stop doing something, and they do not. You tell them again, and they do not comply.
- Stop talking and state "you need a time-out". If your child doesn't go to time-out within 5 seconds, take him there. Younger children often need to be led there by their hand. In some cases, they may need to be carried there protesting. Older children will usually go to time-out on their own.
- Take him to time-out without talking. Or you can tell your child what he did wrong in one sentence (such as, "No hitting"). Sometimes also clarify the preferred behavior (such as, "Be kind to Zoe"). These brief comments give your child something to think about during the time-out.

### 5. **Decide the Length of Time-Out:**

- Time-out should be brief so your child can easily comply. A good rule of thumb is 1 minute per year of age (with an upper limit of 5 minutes). There's no evidence that timeouts longer than this work any better.
- After age 6, most children can be told they must take a time-out "until you can behave" or "until you calm down." This allows the child to recover quickly if they are able.
- Setting a portable kitchen timer for the required number of minutes can be helpful. The best type rings when the time is up. A timer can stop a child from asking the parents when he can come out.

### 6. **Quiet Behavior in Time-Out: Required or Not?**

- The minimum requirement for time-out completion 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, return them and reset the timer.
- Some parents do not consider a time-out to be completed unless the child has been quiet for the entire time. Until 4 years of age, many children are unwilling or unable to stay quiet. Ignore tantrums in time-out, just as you would ignore tantrums outside of time-out. After age 4, quiet time is preferred but not required. If you wish, you can tell your child, "Time-out is for thinking, and to think need to be quiet. If you yell or complain, the time will start over."

### 7. **Release Your Child from Time-Out:**

- To be released, your child must have performed a successful time-out. This means he stayed in time-out for the required number of minutes.
- Your child can leave time-out when the timer rings. If you don't have a timer, he can leave when you tell him, "Time-out is over. You can get up now."
- A few children may need to start with shorter timeouts. Even so, you have to stay in charge of when the timeout is over.

## **Special Time-Out Problems**

1. **Younger Child Who Refuses to Stay in Time-Out:**
  - In general, if a child escapes from time-out (gets up from the chair), you should quickly take the child back to time-out and reset the timer. This approach works for most children.
  - Some strong-willed toddlers initially need to be held in time-out. Holding your child in time-out teaches your child that you mean what you say and that he must comply. Place your child in the time-out chair again and hold him by the shoulders from behind. Tell your child that you will stop holding him when he stops trying to escape.
  - Then avoid eye contact and any talking. Pretend that you don't mind doing this and are thinking of something else.
  - When the time is up, tell your child "that was a good time-out" whether it was or not. Your child will usually stop trying to escape after a week of this holding approach.
2. **Younger Child Who Won't Sit in the Time-Out Chair:**
  - A last resort for young children who continue to resist sitting in a chair is putting them in the bedroom with a strong gate blocking the door.
  - Occasionally, a parent with carpentry skills can install a half-door.
  - If you cannot devise a barricade, some children will need you to close the door. When you do say, "I'm sorry I have to close the door. I'll open it when you promise to stay in your room for your time-out." Hold the door closed for the 3 to 5 minutes it takes to complete the time-out period. Most children need their door closed only a few times.
3. **Older Child Who Refuses to Stay in Time-Out:**
  - An older child can be defined in this context 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".
  - Time-out always needs a backup plan.
  - Change the consequence to one that matters to your child. If 5 minutes pass without your child going to time-out, take away a privilege or possession. Tell your child that they just lost TV, video games, a favorite toy, outside play or visits with friends until they take their time-out. That can mean for the rest of that day. After giving the consequence, walk away and no longer discuss it.
4. **Time-Out Away from Home:**
  - Time-out can be effectively used in any setting.
  - In a supermarket, younger children can be put back in the grocery cart. Older children may need to stand in a corner.
  - In shopping malls, children can take their time-out sitting on a bench or in a restroom.
  - Sometimes a child needs to be taken to the car and made to sit there with supervision.
  - If the child is outdoors and misbehaves, you can ask him to stand facing a tree.

### **When Time-Outs are Not Working: What to Do**

1. **Don't Give Up on Using Time-Outs:**
  - Some children repeat their misbehavior immediately after release from time-out. Others seem to improve but by the next day are back at it. Some children refuse to go to time-out or won't stay there. None of these examples means that time-out should be abandoned.
  - It remains the most powerful discipline technique for 2- to 5-year-old children.
  - The following recommendations may help you fine-tune how you are using time-out.

2. **Give Your Child More Physical Affection Each Day:**
  - Be sure your child receives several time-ins for each time-out. A time-in is a brief caring human interaction.
  - Try to restore the positive side of your relationship with your child. Catch him being good. Give your child a hug many times a day. For younger children, hold them closely for a few minutes many times a day. Play with your child more.
  - Children who are overly criticized can feel that they are no longer loved. Then they no longer want to please you.
3. **Use Time-Out Only For The One Worst Behavior You Are Trying to Change:**
  - Pick your one main "problem behavior" and concentrate on that. Use your time-out consequence only for that target behavior.
4. **Don't Threaten to Give a Time-Out, Just Do It:**
  - See the popular book "1-2-3 Magic" by psychologist Thomas Phelan PhD. He uses a slow 3-count prior to requiring the time-out. This 3-warning approach helps many children accept the requested change and avoid the time-out.
  - The main point is don't give repeated warnings. If you tell your child to stop doing something and they don't, give them a time-out. No discussion.
5. **Put Your Child in Time-Out Quickly:**
  - Don't argue about it with your child.
  - When your child breaks a rule, have her in time-out within 10 seconds.
6. **Be Gentle When Moving Your Child to Time-Out:**
  - This will help reduce your child's anger.
  - Say you're sorry he needs a time-out, but be firm about it.
  - Try to handle your child gently if you have to carry him to time-out.
7. **Give Your Child a Choice About How He Takes His Time-Out:**
  - Ask, "Do you want to take a time-out by yourself or do you want me to hold you in your chair? It doesn't matter to me." Also known as the easy way or the hard way.
8. **Don't Talk to Your Child During Time-Out:**
  - Don't answer his questions or complaints. Don't try to lecture your child.
9. **Ignore Tantrums in Time-Out:**
  - Don't insist on quietness during time-out. Reason: Makes it harder to finish the time-out and move on.
10. **Return Your Child to Time-Out if He Escapes:**
  - Have a back-up plan.
  - For example, you can hold a young child in the time-out chair, or ground an older child.
  - See detailed discussion under Special Time-Out Problems.
11. **Use a Portable Timer for Keeping Track of the Time:**
  - Your child is more likely to obey a timer than to obey you.
  - A timer can be very helpful for toddlers.
12. **Allow Your Child to Come out of Time-Out as soon as Feels Calmer:**
  - Give your child the option to regain self-control on their terms rather than taking the specified number of minutes. This helps strong-willed children.
13. **Praise Your Child for Taking a "Good" Time-Out:**
  - Forgive your child completely when you release him from time-out.
  - Don't give lectures or ask for an apology.
  - Give your child a clean slate and don't tell your partner how many time-outs he needed that day.

**14. Use Different Consequences for Different Misbehaviors:**

- Ignore harmless behaviors.
- Use distraction for bad habits.
- Use logical consequences -- such as removal of toys, other possessions, or privileges -- for some misbehavior.

**15. Clarify With Your Child What You Want Him To Do:**

- Clarify the important house rules.
- Memory requires repetition. Review rules at a time when your child is in a good mood.
- This will help him be more successful in the future.

## Call Your Doctor If

- Your child has many behavioral problems and is out of control
- Your child refuses to stay in time-out after using this plan for 1 week
- Your child's misbehavior has not improved after using this plan for 4 weeks
- You have other questions or concerns

### Pediatric Care Advice

**Author:** Barton Schmitt MD, FAAP

**Copyright 2000-2023** Schmitt Pediatric Guidelines LLC

**Disclaimer:** This health information is for educational purposes only. You the reader assume full responsibility for how you choose to use it. The information contained in this handout should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. Listing of any resources does not imply an endorsement.