

Tools for Effective Time-Outs

Sometimes kids do things that are unsafe, harmful, or hurtful. This includes bad behavior like being aggressive (such as kicking, hitting, pinching), darting/running off, breaking things, and regularly not listening to adults. Time-Out can be a very good way to help kids learn that these types of behaviors are not okay and to do them less and less over time.

When done right, Time-Out can work for kids as young as 1 year and as old as 10. Of course not all toddlers need Time-Out to learn, and some 10 year olds are ready for other types of discipline. To get the most out of using Time-Out, parents should follow several important steps.

The “Core” of Time-Out: Time-Out isn’t a certain chair or place. Instead, it is creating a specific type of experience right after kids’ misbehavior. It involves removing a child from anything fun/interesting right away. This can be a dining chair in a corner, the bottom step of a staircase, or a quiet corner of a room. It should be away from activities like TV or toys and should be a place parents can monitor but don’t have to hover. TIME-OUT NEEDS TO BE BORING!!!

Where to do Time-Out: Avoid places like a busy living room with a TV or other kids playing, sending the child to his or her room, or other places where there is a lot of activity. Also, try to use a space that makes it clear where the child needs to stay. While there is no “magic” place, often families find the following places are good for Time-Out:

- Dining chair in a corner of a quiet room or hallway
- Bottom step of stairs in hallway
- At dining room table without others around
- On floor next to parent with parent’s back turned (for preschoolers)

Starting Time-Out:

1. **Label the bad behavior.** Right after doing something that is dangerous or aggressive, the child should be briefly told why s/he is being put in Time-Out (e.g., “You hit. Now you have to go to Time-Out”). **Say nothing else to him/her.** Parents should avoid arguing with children, providing reasons as to why it’s better not to misbehave, and so forth.
2. **Place in Boring Spot Quickly.** Immediately take the child to Time-Out. Avoid simply telling the child to go because that can lead to verbal “battles” about going. Instead, gently take the child to the boring spot. Once s/he is in the Time-Out chair, quickly walk away.
3. **Ignore “New” Misbehavior.** If kids start whining, fussing, yelling, or even continue being aggressive, this should be ignored. Any attention at this point makes it so that Time-Out is not boring.

Note, if a child is being sent to Time-Out for not listening, it’s okay to give 1 warning, such as “If you don’t pick up those toys like I told you, you’re going to Time-Out” and then wait a short time (about 10 seconds) to see if s/he listens. If not, a parent can say, “You didn’t listen, you have to go to Time-Out.”

During Time-Out:

1. **Length of Time-Out.** For preschoolers, 2 minutes is fine. For older kids, about 5 minutes is fine. However, when first starting to use Time-Out, or if kids are having a hard time staying in Time-Out, a shorter length is okay. This teaches them that, if they stay on their own, the Time-Out ends.
2. **Misbehavior During Time-Out.** Keep ignoring any crying, screaming, or “bargaining” (“okay, I’ll listen” or “I’m sorry”). If parents talk to their kids during Time-Out, it’s not boring enough.

3. **If Kids Get Up.** Sometimes kids will get up out of the chair. Parents should keep putting their child back into the Time-Out WITHOUT SAYING ANYTHING or making eye contact. This helps kids learn that Time-Out is going to happen no matter what.

Ending Time-Out:

1. Time-Out is over when the time is up and the child is sitting and is quite.
2. Give a brief explanation of why the Time-Out happened (“You went to Time-Out because you hit. Remember, we don’t hit.”).
3. If the child went to Time-Out for not listening, s/he has to be ready to do the task to get out of Time-Out.
4. Look for some positive behavior to praise shortly after the Time-Out is over. This gets things focused back on positives for everyone.

Other Tips for Making Time-Out Work:

1. Practice Time-Out before starting to use it. During a neutral time, parents can show kids what “good” Time-Out behavior looks like. Then, the child can practice showing that behavior and earn a reward for doing so.
2. Parents need to stay calm during the entire Time-Out. The less reaction children get for their misbehavior, the better.
3. While children are in Time-Out, parents should seem indifferent to kid misbehavior. They can look at a magazine, talk to another adult, or continue house chores.
4. When first starting Time-Out, it can be a good idea to simply count the time that the child is sitting in the chair while not worrying about whether s/he is quiet. Once kids show that they can stay in the chair, parents can expect more and more “quiet” before kids can get up. Some children sit quietly in a chair and do not speak while in Time-Out. Others may talk softly to themselves or fidget—this counts as quiet and calm. Others may be calming down from crying, but haven’t completely stopped—the sniffing that goes along with this should also be counted as quiet and calm.

Please note that resources such as this are intended to offer guidance and suggestions. However, no claim is made that the information provided is appropriate for any specific child or family. Many families will find this information helpful and sufficient for addressing child rearing issues. Others will not. Parents are encouraged to talk with their child's pediatrician or seek help from a mental health professional if needed.

Prepping for Success

To get the most out of Time-Out, parents should make sure that they are ready by thinking through all of the steps in the process. To help with this, parent should fill answers to the following items to help them be ready.

What Behaviors Get Time-Out?: Time-Out should be for more serious behaviors, like hitting, running off, or breaking things. Using Time-Out for other more “minor” (though problematic and annoying) misbehavior like whining or back talk may lead to kids being in Time-Out too much.

For my child, I will use Time-Out for the following behaviors (try to be very specific):

Where Will Time-Out Happen?: Time-Out should happen in a boring place that is safe for the child.

For my child, Time-Out can happen in the following places:

Time-Out Will Last for How Long?: _____

What Will I do if My Child Misbehaves in Time-Out?:

If my child whines, cries, yells, or says “sorry” during Time-Out I will

If my child gets up out of Time-Out, I will

What is Going to Be Hard About Doing Time-Out?: It will be easier to do Time-Out if parents have thought about what might go wrong or be hard about it and what they plan to do.

What Will Go Wrong/Be Hard?	What Will I do About That?