

Discipline

When time-out doesn't work: A parent guide

Parents sometimes become discouraged with time-out because their child immediately misbehaves in the same way when they release him 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 won't 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 isn't some better, magical approach. If you use time-out repeatedly, consistently, and correctly, your child will eventually 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 her being good. Try to hold her for one or two minutes every 15 minutes when she's not in time-out or misbehaving. Play with her more. Children who have an "affection deficit disorder" don't want to please their parents.

Clarify for your child what you want him to do. Explain the house rules. This will help your child be more successful in avoiding misbehavior. Review the rules at a time when he's in a good mood.

Use time-out EVERY time your child engages in the behavior you are trying to stop. For the first two or three days, you may need to use time-outs 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, don't 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 her starting to raise her arm or clench her fist and before she makes others cry. For other behaviors, remind your child of the rule, count to three, and if she doesn't stop immediately, put her in time-out.

Put your child in time-out earlier. Don't wait until his behavior escalates. He is more likely to accept a time-out calmly if he's put in promptly rather than late (and screaming). Also, putting him in early means you will be more in control. Try to send him to time-out before you become angry. If you are yelling, time-out will not work.

Put your child in time-out quickly. Don't talk about it first. When she breaks a rule (especially one concerning aggressive behavior), have her in time-out within ten seconds. For rules she may have forgotten, consider giving one warning or counting to three before putting her in time-out.

Be kinder in your delivery of time-out. This will help reduce your child's anger. Say you're sorry he needs a time-out, but be firm about it, and don't apologize for setting limits. Try to handle him gently when you take him to time-out.

Give your child more choices about how she takes 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." For older children, the choice can be, "Do you want to take time-out, or do you want to be grounded?"

Don't talk to your child during time-out. Don't answer his questions or complaints. Don't lecture him.

Ignore tantrums in time-out. Don't 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 he escapes. Have a back-up plan. For details, see the parent guide "How to use the time-out technique," available from our office and on our website.

Make the time-out place more boring. If your child doesn't seem to mind time-outs, eliminate sources of entertainment. Move her chair to a more boring location. If you use her bedroom, close the blinds or shades. Make sure that siblings or pets aren't visiting her. 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, he may need a longer time-out to get his 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 out of her reach. She is more likely to obey a timer than to obey you.

Give your child the option of coming out of time-out as soon as he is under control. Allow him to come out when he feels ready rather than taking the specified number of minutes. This can help with children who feel overly controlled.

Praise your child when she takes a good time-out. Forgive her completely when you release her from time-out. Don't lecture her or insist that she apologize. Give her a clean slate, and don't tell your spouse or other relatives how many time-outs she needed 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.

Don't punish your child for normal expressions of anger. Don't put him in time-out for such behavior as saying angry things or looking angry. Don't try to control his behavior too much.

Use a variety of consequences for misbehavior besides time-out. Don't forget to ignore harmless behaviors. Also, use techniques such as distraction for bad habits and logical consequences, including 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 parent guide and the one on "How to use the time-out technique."