

Time Out

What is the concern?

Sometimes children behave in ways that are disruptive, out of control, or defiant. With dangerous behaviors like hitting, biting, or pulling hair, children need adults to address these behaviors right away and to show them how to calm down.

What is time out?

Time out is a method to stop undesired or dangerous behavior by giving your child a break from rewarding, enjoyable activities and from your attention. It can be used when your child needs to calm down, when he does something wrong on purpose, or breaks a known rule. If you keep talking and interacting with a child who is supposed to be in time out, this method will not work.

- When you first start to use time out, it is helpful to try it with just a few target behaviors.
- Teach your child about time out before it is needed. You may want to practice with dolls or puppets. He should understand the purpose of time out and which behaviors result in a time out.
- Use time out in combination with special play time, specific praise, and rewards for good behavior.
- Time out works best when it is performed immediately, consistently, and not overused.

How do I use time out with my child?

- Time out should occur in a boring, but safe spot (e.g., hallway). Use a nearby chair or a step where you can watch the child. He should be away from toys, people, windows, TV, or anything he likes. Toddlers may be placed on the floor or in a playpen.
- Rather than use time out for a specified amount of time, the end of time out depends on the time it takes for him to self-calm. For toddlers, very brief time outs are highly effective, for example, 20 seconds. Time out should not last longer than a few minutes.
- When you give an instruction to your child, wait about 5 to 10 seconds to see if the child is going to follow the instruction. If your child has not begun to follow the instruction, give a warning such as, “If you do not put your toys away now, you will go to time out.”
- If your child is aggressive or clearly breaks an established rule, she should go to time out immediately with a brief explanation. “You hit your sister so you have to go to time out.”
- If he refuses to go, lead by the hand, or carry him if needed. If a toddler, carry him facing away from you or look away so that there is no confusion between a hug and a trip to time out.
- Simply and calmly state the rule that was broken or the reason for the time out. Say, “Because you played with the stove, you have to take a time out.”



Tips to Remember:

- Use time out when your child needs to calm down or does something wrong on purpose.
- Teach your child about time out before you use it.
- Time out works best when consistent and not overused.
- You use time out in combination with special play time, specific praise, and rewards for good behavior.
- If these suggestions do not work, please talk with your pediatrician for more ideas.

By Meghan McAuliffe
Lines, PhD
Doug Tynan, PhD
Lynn Chaiken, MSW

- Tell him to sit down on the chair. He is not to talk to anyone or to play with anything while in time out. Do not interact with your child when he is in time out; refrain from talking, lecturing, or scolding.
- The first few times you use time out, your child may scream, cry, kick, or look for something to throw. As long as the child remains seated, ignore the tantrum by turning away, engaging in a task, or playing with other children.
- Do not let your child leave time out before you have told him to do so. If he gets up or leaves time out before it is over, immediately return him to the chair without talking. You may have to repeat this procedure several times. He will soon learn that you will always put him back in the chair and therefore, he will eventually stay seated.
- After your child has calmed down, tell him that he can get up. If he is crying in time out, he needs to be quiet for the last 20 seconds before he can come out.
- After time out, redirect your child to an acceptable activity. If he refused a direction, give the direction again. Say, “You’re calm. Time-in. Please put the blocks in the box.” Be sure to praise your child for compliance with your instruction.
- If he refuses to listen, then put him back in time out. Repeat this until he does what he is told.
- Immediately after time out, make sure the child engages in high quality activities with you. A clear contrast between time out and special play time with you increases the effectiveness of time outs.

Cautions

- Bedrooms should not be used for time out. There are usually too many interesting things in children’s bedrooms and parents may not be able to observe when the child has calmed down if they are not in sight. Also, some parents have been known to forget that their child was in time out!
- Children should never be in time out so long that they fall asleep. This does not teach them self-calming skills.
- Parents, not children, are in charge of deciding when they are calm or when time out is over. When children say they are calm or time out is over, this is their attempt to control the situation.

What should I do if time out is not working?

- Make sure all adults responsible for disciplining your child are using time out consistently. You should agree with your partner about when and for what behaviors to send the child to time out.
- Continue to catch your child being good. Remember to use special play time and to let him know when he is following the rules. Signs of affection (for example, a pat on the shoulder) are an additional way to show positive attention.
- Use a chart or log book to see if this method is working.
- Even if your child tries to convince you that time out is fun and therefore not working, still persist. Over time, the difficult behaviors for which you use time out should occur less often.
- You may feel the need to “punish” your child for doing something inappropriate in the time out chair (such as cursing or spitting). However, it is very important to ignore the child when he behaves poorly in time out in order to teach him that such attention-getting strategies do not work.
- Seek additional assistance if nothing improves.