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Making Time Out Work

Why use Time Out? The short answer is: It works! The research on Time Out shows that not only is it effective in reducing negative behaviors, but contrary to popular belief, there are no negative effects of time-out when parents use it properly. Not only does it reduce the likelihood of negative behavior happening again, but, when implemented the way I've described it here, it also teaches kids how to calm themselves down. Poor emotional regulation is one of the most common reasons kids are referred to professionals for therapy and/or medication, and Time Out can really help develop this important group of skills.

Won't Time Out just make my kid angrier? Yes, in the moment, your child might become more angry - especially when you first start using Time Out. This is not a bad thing. It is important for children to learn how to calm themselves down when they are angry, and Time Out does an excellent job of teaching this skill while keeping everyone safe. Many parents avoid disciplining their children because they don't want their kids to experience distress - however it is important for children to experience difficult emotions and learn how to manage them in appropriate ways. The biggest predictor of high levels of challenging behavior in children - besides specific mental health conditions and disorders - is parents who avoid making their child upset.

Some of the parenting advice out there claims that Time Out is bad for children's emotional development. What does the research say? Proponents of positive parenting and gentle parenting have asserted that Time Out will result in negative outcomes like increased emotional dysregulation, injured parent-child relationships, and re-experiencing of trauma. These claims are largely based on theoretical positions that parents should not impose disciplinary consequences on their children, not on actual research. In fact, the research very clearly documents that when Time Out is delivered appropriately (i.e. predictably, calmly, and for short periods of time), it results in positive outcomes and none of these purported negative results. Because the evidence is so very clear on this, both the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Centers for Disease Control recommend use of Time Out as an appropriate and effective disciplinary strategy.

I've heard that instead of Time Out, parents should use Time In. What is the difference between these two things and why is Time Out better? Time In involves physical proximity and verbal processing with your child with the goals of soothing them, expressing empathy for them, helping them to understand their feelings better, and building positive problem-solving skills. This is an important thing to

do as a parent, under many circumstances. For example, if your child is upset that their favorite stuffy has been lost, absolutely you should give them comfort and the space to express their feelings! However, if they just hit their brother because he took that stuffy, then for many children giving empathy and positive attention (which is experienced as a good thing that kids usually like) is absolutely going to reinforce the hitting behavior and it will likely happen again. In the second scenario, Time In is a bad idea, and Time Out would be a much more appropriate and effective response that helps teach your child that hitting is not okay. While your child works to calm themselves down in order to be done with the Time Out, they will be learning self-soothing skills. When they are done with Time Out, that is the time to discuss what they were feeling and what they could do differently next time – not in the heat of the moment when their emotions are riled up and they are not capable of listening and learning.

What if I've tried Time Out, and I already know it doesn't work for my child? Most parents have tried some version of Time Out at one point or another but it hasn't worked. There are some tricks to making the Time Out procedure effective, including how you get your child to Time Out, where you position the Time Out, requiring the child to stay in Time Out until the time is up, and requiring them to be quiet before their time starts. One of the biggest problems is when parents use Time Out inconsistently. If you decide to use Time Out, you have to commit to using it every single time the child exhibits the behavior for which you have decided the consequence should be a Time Out, and for a period of at least 3 weeks. If you have tried Time Out but you didn't use it every time and for at least 3 weeks, it's really not fair to say that you've truly given this approach a solid try. Similarly, if you haven't followed the Time Out procedure that I've described here, that could be the reason it didn't work. I can honestly say that for every single parent I've ever worked with who has been able to implement this Time Out procedure with fidelity, they have happily reported significant decreases in the problem behavior.

What if my child doesn't mind being in Time Out? If your child doesn't dislike Time Out, you need to change something. It's not discipline if your child doesn't mind it, and that applies to all discipline strategies – not just Time Out. Think about whether or not you are accidentally rewarding the child while they are in Time Out. Children often find any kind of attention rewarding. If you are reminding your child of the rules of Time Out, talking to them about their behavior, or even just looking at them, this is a form of attention that could be rewarding. If the Time Out spot has a view of the television, or of fun activities that other people are engaged in, then these things can be rewarding too. Make sure that nobody is paying attention to the child in Time Out, and that the Time Out spot is in a place where there is nothing fun to see or interact with.

What if my child will not stay in the Time Out chair? There are some children who will not stay in Time Out. If the child is just learning about Time Out, place the child back in the Time Out spot and remind them that they must stay there until their time is up. Then, start the timer over. If this doesn't work, sometimes just holding the child's hands in their lap is sufficient, or standing very close so that you can immediately put them back in the chair if they start to get up. A very determined child who refuses to stay in the Time Out chair may need to be held in the chair – certainly this may be the case for maintaining safety in the home. There are safe ways to do this, but there are also some very unsafe ways to do this. It is NOT recommended that you hold your child in Time Out unless you have been shown how to do this safely by a professional. In any case, it is critical that whatever physical means you need to use to keep your child in Time Out doesn't feel like physical affection to them. This is NOT a hug or a game of tickle – it is discipline, and by definition, this means it needs to be something your child does not like. If you find that your child enjoys being held in Time Out, put back in Time Out, or otherwise physically restrained because they are physically unsafe, you should consult a behavioral specialist about more appropriate discipline techniques as well as preventive strategies.

Preparing for Time Out

1. Decide on your household rules and consequences. You should do this with the participation of your child(ren) if they are old enough to understand. Write the rules and consequences down and put them up in a visible location like the refrigerator. Include visual pictures for kids who aren't old enough to read. And remember – don't use Time Out as a consequence for everything!

- If you've never used Time Out before, pick the one most serious behavior to start out with. If you feel Time Out is effective after using it for several weeks, and you are able to use it every single time the child shows that behavior, you can then start to use it with other behaviors.
- It is important that your child knows what behaviors will result in Time Out ahead of time, so make sure you've educated your child about the rules and consequences before implementing them.
- Time Out is most appropriate for serious offenses like hitting another person, or throwing something that could hurt another person.
- Time Out can also be used for times when your child is not following directions, but they should always be given fair warning that if they do not do as you asked, you will put them in Time Out. Give them a chance to follow your directions by first giving the direction in a firm but polite voice. If they refuse, then say, "If you do not start brushing your teeth by the time I get to 3, you are going to Time Out. One.". Proceed to count to 3 in slow, even, counts. Do not use half-numbers or introject other comments allowing extra time between each number. If you reach 3 and your child has not started doing what you asked, the Time Out should be enforced – even if they suddenly do what you asked after you got to 3.
- For other behaviors that aren't so serious, verbal redirection, reminders, or logical consequences should be used first. Harsh treatment of a toy or refusing to clean it up might result in taking the toy away until your child earns it back. A verbal redirect might sound like, "Don't swing that stick – you could hit the dog and hurt him. Why don't you hit the tree?". Logical consequences might be to take the stick away before anyone gets hurt, "You are being dangerous with the stick. I'm going to take it now." A reminder of the rules might be, "Be careful not to hit the doggie with that stick or you will be in Time Out". If these other mild consequences don't work (i.e. your child ignores you, or is overtly defiant), then you might decide to use Time Out.

2. Decide on a sitting place for Time Out. This should be a place where the child doesn't have anything to play with or entertain themselves with. For example, make sure they can't see the TV if it's on (or you are willing to shut the TV off when they are in Time Out), and that there are no toys, papers, or other objects for the child to pick up and play with while in Time Out. Other children should be instructed not to interact with the child who is in Time Out. Sometimes a kitchen chair pulled into the middle of the room or placed in the corner of the room is most effective at limiting exposure to interesting things. Remember, Time Out really means time out from all fun activities, so make sure your Time Out spot accomplishes this.

3. Post the Time Out Rules (see the attached poster) somewhere your child can see them, but not where they can reach them. Otherwise, the poster will most likely get pulled down and ripped up.

4. Decide on the amount of time for your child's Time Out. A good place to start is one-half of the child's chronological age – i.e. 3 minutes for a 6 year-old. If you find that after Time Out, they return to acting out behaviors, you will know the Time Out wasn't long enough and you should make it longer. If they make it to 2 minutes 30 seconds and then start squirming and impulsively talking out or attempting to get out of the chair, then your Time Out might be too long and you should shorten it to 2 minutes.

5. Get a visual timer and put it in a place where your child can see it, but can't touch it. A timer has several advantages over simply watching the clock. 1) It teaches your child about time because they can see how much time is going by, 2) Since your child can see how much time they have left, they cannot use this as an excuse to ask you this question, and 3) You can go about doing other things without having to rigidly watch the clock (provided your child has learned to sit in Time Out). While an egg timer can be used, the best kind of timer is a "Time Timer" which will show a section of red depicting the amount of time left to be served. As the time counts down, the red portion gets smaller until the time is all done. A "Time Timer" can be ordered online.

6. Explain and practice the Time Out procedure with your child. You can do this at the same time that you talk to your child about the rules and consequences. This should not be done when you are angry about something the child just did. This conversation must be done when everyone is calm. Explain when Time Out will be used and make sure the child understands what the rules of Time Out are (see below). Sometimes it's even helpful to have the child sit in the Time Out area for a few seconds to get a feel for what it will be like, but don't have the child do this unless they are completely willing.

7. Begin to use Time Out every single time the rules are broken. This is extremely important! If you do not use Time Out every single time, your child will learn that sometimes they can get away with breaking the rules. If that happens, your child has learned that they don't have to listen to you or follow the rules, and will only result in more poor behavior choices.

8. Be prepared for things to get worse before they get better. If you have not been very consistent with discipline before using Time Out, your child is going to be pretty unpleasantly surprised that you are now using an effective discipline strategy every single time they break the rules. They will probably try very hard to get you to give in and give up. The more they protest, the more you will know that you are now being effective as a parent, and that this is exactly what your child needed! Do not give up – it will get better with time. If you've given it three weeks and Time Outs are still frequent and long, you should consult with a behavioral specialist for advice.

Time Out Rules for Adults to Follow

Your approach to each Time Out sets the tone for this disciplinary consequence. It is critical that you remain calm and use this strategy as an alternative to yelling, with a corrective tone rather than a punitive one. Sometimes Time Out is required to maintain safety in your home – for you, your other children, or property. When this is the case, your approach should send the message to the child that you are in control and taking responsibility for maintaining safety for everyone. This is not meant to be a shaming, overly punitive experience, but rather one that mandates that your child take the time and space to calm themselves down.

1. When the child deserves a Time Out, tell them what they did, that they need to take a Time Out, and for how long. Use as few words as possible and STAY CALM. For example, if the child hits the dog you might say, “Zachary, there is no hitting. You are in Time Out for 3 minutes.”

2. Tell the child to go to the Time Out chair or guide them if necessary. Remain CALM and FIRM. Do not yank or unnecessarily drag the child, but do physically escort them to the chair if they will not go on their own. In rare cases, additional consultation and training with a professional may be needed to know how to safely get your child into Time Out.

3. Set the timer. You can add minutes for refusing to go to Time Out, hitting on the way to Time Out, or getting up during Time Out if your child is old enough to understand the ramifications of more time added. **DO NOT START THE TIMER UNTIL YOUR CHILD IS QUIET AND CALM.**

4. Your child must be quiet and calm for the entire duration of the Time Out. If s/he says anything while in Time Out, the timer is started over again. If s/he plays with anything, the timer is started over again. If s/he kicks the wall or hits anything, the timer is started over again. *Exception: During the first one or two Time Outs, while your child is learning about the rules of Time Out, they may need verbal reminders of these rules before the timer is started over again. You might say, “Remember, there is no talking in Time Out and I’m not going to talk to you. If you talk again, I will re-set your time all over again.”*

5. If your child gets up, put them back in the Time Out chair. Hold them if necessary, but only if you have received training in how to do this safely. Sometimes just holding their hands on their lap is enough to keep them in the chair. If you do not want to or do not know how to hold them in Time Out, you can simply stand very close and be ready to prevent them from getting up and out of the chair. There is no need to talk to them when you get them and put them back in Time Out – your child will get the message without you having to verbalize it.

6. Do not talk to your child while they are in Time Out! If they ask when the time will be up, try to apologize, promise better behavior, or swear at you and tells you they hate you, IGNORE THEM. Simply go over to stop the timer. When they are quiet, re-start it.

7. When the timer goes off, you need to indicate to them that they are released from Time Out. Do not let the child simply get up on his or her own. For young children, or children who are just learning about the rules, ask them what the rule is before they are released from Time Out. For children who were really upset by getting the Time Out, you may want to ask them if they are ready to get out of Time Out. If they sound calm, then it’s okay to let them get up. If they still sound upset, or they swear at you, it’s a pretty good sign that they need a few more minutes. For some children, you may find it useful to talk to them about what got them so upset and how they could express these feelings differently next time. If there was

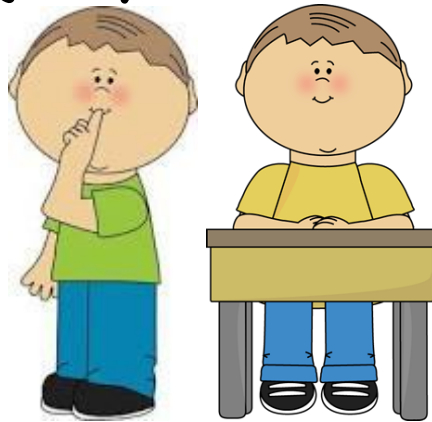
any damage done or mess made during the time that they were upset, they should be required to fix things up before they get to go do anything else. If they hurt someone else in some way, they should be required to apologize before being officially allowed to go on their way. Apologizing is a critical social skill, and even if it isn't genuine, it is important to practice. As children mature and gain the capacity for self-reflection and insight, apologizing will become heart-felt.

7. Forget about the whole thing. Allow your child a fresh start. There are two different responses that many parents have to the “trauma” of putting their child in Time Out. Some parents feel guilty about causing their child distress, and so they offer physical affection in the form of hugs, etc. It is okay to hug your child if s/he seeks it out, but you should not initiate this. Other times, you may still feel angry because what your child did was really upsetting to you. It is okay for you to let your child know that you don't want any hugs right now because you are still upset, but otherwise do your best to let go of your angry feelings. If your child wants to talk about it, feel free to explain that when someone gets hurt, an apology doesn't always fix it right away. Tell them what they CAN do to make it better.

Sometimes (or even often) it can be hard as a parent to know that you are doing the “right” thing in response to challenging behaviors. If you need help, feel free to contact me at Drterib@gmail.com, or check out my website at www.behaviorsolutionsvt.com.

Time Out Rules

1. Time does not start until you are sitting calmly and quietly in the Time Out spot.



2. If you talk or get out of the Time Out spot, the time will have to start all over again.
3. When your time is up, wait for the adult to tell you when you can get out of the Time Out spot.