

Time Out

USING TIME-OUT TO HELP YOUR CHILD

"My child never pays attention when I speak." "My child will never listen to reason." "I correct my child over and over again, but I might as well talk to the wall." "Whenever I try to teach my child the difference between right and wrong, all I get is a temper tantrum, and I've had all the screaming and yelling I can take." If these are the complaints you are tempted to make, you need help. But, more particularly, your child needs help. Children don't enjoy being wrong. Battling their parents may get attention, but it doesn't bring happiness. Spanking a child for bad behavior creates fear, usually doesn't correct the behavior, teaches the child to strike others, and may lead to physical abuse. Scolding after a wrong has been done is also usually ineffective, and it too often leads to yelling, which teaches the child to yell, or verbal abuse, which is devastating to the child's self-esteem. Time-out, on the other hand, is a peaceful, constructive, and effective way to teach your child acceptable behavior.

By the time they learn to crawl, children can get themselves into trouble. Children at this age can also learn the meaning of "No." Until they have learned what "No" means, returning them to the playpen for a minute or two when they do not respond to "No" is the most useful teaching technic.

By a year of age, children who need correction can learn to sit still on a chair or stool. After two minutes of time-out in this location, both parent and child will have had time for reflection, and the child can then be given something acceptable to do.

Children between 1½ and 3½ years old are particularly likely to test the household rules. This is an age of exploring, experimenting, and wanting-to-do-it-myself. Children learn to be in charge of their own bodies by trial and error, as well as by watching and listening to others. None of us is immune to making mistakes, and toddlers are no different. But there are a few basic rules and good habits necessary to be learned for safety and household happiness, and we all know that learning new habits is difficult.

It does no good to be angry at a child who makes a mistake or doesn't easily learn a new habit. Try to remind your child before he gets himself into trouble. And particularly at the end of the day when he is tired, try to keep him occupied with things which will keep him out of trouble. But when trouble occurs, this is the time for time-out.

We recommend these rules for use of time-out:

.. Use time-out whenever your child is: (1) having a temper spell, (2) threatening to hurt others, (3) doing something which could be dangerous to himself, (4) damaging property, (5) using inappropriate language (sassing or swearing), (6) throwing something other than a ball, (7) hurting pets, (8) using aggressive behavior (biting, hitting, spitting, kicking or pulling hair), or (9) repeatedly refusing to respond to a parent's instructions. Keep that list - nine items - in your mind!

.. Except when danger prevents it, or when you know the rule is well-known, give your child a ten-second warning about his behavior, or count to three, before using time out. Time out should be used to remind a child of rules he has been told previously, and he may be reminded about the rule. Give him the word, but use time-out promptly if he does not correct his behavior. If he returns to unacceptable behavior, no warning is necessary the second time before time-out.

.. Time-out should be a quiet time in a place which doesn't allow distractions. Younger children who are still fearful when separated from their parents should sit on a chair or stool. Choose a particular chair or stool which is always used for that purpose, one which is not comfortable and is high enough so the child's feet do not touch the floor. Expect the child to remain on it until the end of time-out. Avoid eye contact with the child during time-out. By 3 years of age, the child should sit or stand facing the corner. Older children may be sent to a time-out room, as boring a room as possible, containing no valuables, and preferably no toys.

.. When you put your child in time-out, don't be angry. Lead your child to the time-out spot. Until she learns the rules, you may have to hold her wrist at the start of the time-out, but

keep body contact to a minimum. Older children will often go to time-out on their own.

.. The length of time-out should be long enough time to regain rational behavior. A good rule is one minute plus one additional minute for each year of age up to a maximum of 10 minutes. Use the kitchen timer to measure the time. Children 7 and above usually can be told to come out when they are ready to talk about the problem. Don't talk to your child during time-out, and ignore bad behavior during time-out, but expect her to remain in the time-out location. If she leaves before the end of time-out simply return her to the time out location adding back on any wasted time not spent in time out. Some gentle, but firmly persuasive, hands on holding may be necessary at times for younger children in time out.

Usually they will soon give up the struggle when they learn that you will enforce the time out process regardless of their “acting out.”

“ At the end of time-out do not apologize to your child for setting limits, and do not expect your child to apologize. When the timer bell rings, time-out is over and done. It may be appropriate to say, "Next time please remember the rule that we agreed on," and repeat the rule and the reason why. Then direct your child into a different, quiet activity which will avoid further trouble and allow time for thought, and say no more about the time-out.

“ If your child misbehaves away from home, you can still use time-out. You may want to take your child back to the car for time-out. In the mall, you can use a bench for time-out, requiring the child to look at the floor to avoid distraction. In the supermarket, a small child can be confined to the shopping cart or an older one made to stand in a corner.

“ If an older child refuses to go to time-out or to stay till it is over, you will need other tactics. For each minute of delay in getting started or going back to start over, add a minute to the time-out. If in five minutes he has still not gone to time-out, you should ground him. That means no TV, toys, games, stereo, friends in the house, snacks, outside play, or telephone use until he takes his time out plus five minutes of penalty time. Walk away and refuse to talk to him till he has shaped up. If meal-time arrives, he should be asked to eat by himself. If bed-time comes, he should be put to bed 15 minutes early without a bed-time story, or 30 minutes early if the same situation occurs again.

“ If misbehavior involves more than one child, use time-out for all the offenders, but be sure they are in different locations where they can't see or talk with each other. Establish an understanding with the parents of your children's friends regarding the rules of your house and an agreement so that you may use time out with them if necessary while they are visiting.

“ For time-out to be effective, use it every time your child engages in the behavior you are trying to correct, but after time-out is over, resume normal happy relationships and don't remind your child about the unfortunate experience. Don't threaten to use time-out, and don't nag about your child needing it - just use it promptly when it is needed and get it over with. Then get back to normal, positive family living. But don't forget to praise your child for taking time-out gracefully. And don't forget never to show anger when using time-out.

“ For time-out to be effective, parents need to agree on the way it is to be used. All adults in the family need to understand the rules of time-out

and agree to them. They need to agree on the behaviors for which time-out will be used and the manner in which it will be used, and agree to avoid nagging, scolding, and physical punishment. Because time-out, to be effective, needs to be used promptly at the time of misbehavior, consistency between adult care-givers is as important as consistency in applying time-out every time a broken rule requires it. Be certain that your child's day care-givers and pre-school and school teachers also understand what behavior you correct and your method of using time-out.

For time-out to be effective when it is needed, don't over-use it. Ignore harmless behavior. Don't punish for normal expressions of anger. Send children to another room or out to play when their noise bothers you but is not malicious. When they get restless and seem at risk for trouble, have an activity planned for them. Toward the end of the day when they are tired, try particularly to steer them into quiet activities. If there has been one behavior change which your child has had a particularly hard time learning, discuss it at breakfast and ask her to try to be especially careful about it today. Don't forget to tell her you have confidence in her ability. Never forget to praise the good things!

For further reading on this topic see the American Academy of Pediatrics policy statement on [Guidance for Effective Discipline](#).