

TIME OUT: DOES IT WORK?

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Alyssa asks her five year-old son Jayden to brush his teeth following breakfast. They have 15 minutes to get ready to leave the house in order to make it to school on time. Jayden wets the toothbrush and begins flicking water at the mirror. Alyssa then tells him firmly to brush his teeth, hands him the toothpaste, and begins counting aloud – 1, 2, 3. Jayden does a little dance and flicks water in her direction. Alyssa says, “That’s it, go to time-out” and directs Jayden to a chair. Alyssa then goes into the other room to collect their belongings for school. Jayden sneaks out of the chair and grabs some toys. When he loses interest in the toys, he runs out of the room. Alyssa chases him around for a minute and then realizes that, if she tries to finish the time-out, Jayden will be late for school.



Time-out is one of the most popular and highly recommended disciplinary strategies. Unfortunately, it can be difficult to use correctly and, when used inconsistently or in the wrong circumstances, can make problems even worse. This article provides guidelines for using time-out effectively and suggests other strategies for improving children’s behavior.

What is time out?

As the entire name, “time-out from positive reinforcement” illustrates, time-out is supposed to involve removing children from positive and rewarding experiences for a period of time. For example, a parent might take a child away from situations offering a great deal of attention or highly-enjoyable activities and placing them in a less rewarding setting without distractions. This ‘break from the action’ discourages continued problem behavior and may also be used to help a child calm down so he can participate more appropriately when he returns to the situation.

Problems with Time-Out

Although time-out can be used effectively in family homes, there are multiple reasons why using time-out can backfire.

First, time-out can be misused and overused, thereby losing its effectiveness. When time-out is used for a multitude of problem behaviors, including inconsequential behaviors (so called “junk behaviors”) such as Jayden flicking water, expectations and absolute limits regarding behavior become unclear to children.

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Second, time-out can be made more punishing than necessary to correct behavior. Time-out often lasts much longer than necessary or is presented in a way that is exceedingly unpleasant for the child (e.g., having to stay in an uncomfortable position until released). When used in this way, time-out can produce emotional reactions and damage the parent-child relationship.

Third, time-out is often used under the wrong circumstances. Time-out is only effective if the child is taken away from positive activities, including situations involving adult or peer attention. If children use problem behavior in order to get away from requests such as cleaning their bedroom or eating food they do not like, time-out only reinforces the problem behavior because it allows children to avoid or delay unpleasant tasks.

Fourth, time-out is sometimes 'unenforceable.' During time-out, there is risk of children and/or parents escalating if the children do not comply. Power struggles can develop if children repeatedly leave the assigned time-out location or do not calm down quickly. Parents are then confronted with another set of problem behaviors.

Fifth, time-out can be a relief for parents and therefore used at inappropriate times. Time-out provides parents with a period of peace and quiet following disruptive scenes. Although parents certainly deserve breaks, using time-out for this purpose can worsen child behavior while giving parents a pay-off that encourages continued use.

Finally, it can be challenging to finding appropriate locations for time-out, without distraction or entertaining elements such as TV, computer, music, or conversation in busy households. If neutral environments are not created for time-out, parents run the risk of inadvertently rewarding children by placing them there.

Tips for Using Time-Out Effectively:

To avoid these pitfalls when using time-out, the following tips are provided:

- Have a clear plan for when, where, and how time-out will be used.
- Reserve time-out for more significant behaviors, such as hitting or biting.
- Keep time-out brief: 20-30 seconds starts once the child appears calm.
- Monitor children closely and constantly while in time-out.
- Use time-out for behaviors motivated by attention or access to activities (do not use during situations children may want to avoid).
- Use time-out locations that are free of distractions and entertaining elements.
- Have a back-up plan if children resist or attempt to leave the time-out area.
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Alternatives to Time-Out

It is important to consider that there are effective other disciplinary strategies available, which reduce or eliminate the need for time-out. These strategies are proactive, “plan ahead” approaches.

Prompting good behavior. Establishing clear expectations and predictable consequences for behavior, as well as using supportive strategies (e.g., picture schedules, reminders) during potentially difficult times help set the stage for successful behavior. For example, “sharing” is a difficult concept for children, which often results in disputes. Parents can intervene proactively by setting time limits with toys and reminding children to exchange the toys as their time comes to an end.

Avoiding difficult situations. Identifying problem situations ahead of time and avoiding these situations as much as possible can also be a very useful tool. For example, parents might decide to forego grocery shopping after picking up their children from child care in the afternoon when everyone involved is tired after a long day and stores tend to be at their busiest.

Making unpleasant activities more enjoyable. At times it is not realistic to avoid problem situations altogether because the activity is essential. At these times, parents might add something the child likes to the situation to make it more tolerable. For example, before entering a doctor’s office, parents can hand children a “mystery box” (filled with trinkets or items the child typically enjoys) to be opened while sitting quietly in the waiting area.

Teaching appropriate behaviors. Children are less likely to misbehave when they have the skills to deal more effectively with situations or communicate their needs. Parents might show children how to calm themselves (e.g., counting to 10, using deep breathing) in situations which typically would trigger hitting or other inappropriate behaviors.



If Alyssa used some of these more proactive strategies, she might handle Jayden’s refusal to brush his teeth differently:

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Because Alyssa knows that Jayden does not like brushing his teeth, she gets a **Hulk** toothbrush and paste for him in order to make it more enticing for him. She finishes all of her morning chores prior to asking Jayden to begin brushing so she can attend to him while in the bathroom. When they begin, Alyssa reminds Jayden that once he brushes each area of his teeth (top/bottom, front/back, inside/outside) ten times, he will be done. She praises Jayden while brushing and ignores misbehavior since she understands his goal is to distract her and avoid brushing. If Jayden cooperates with tooth brushing and is ready to leave the house on time, Alyssa allows him to choose a toy to take in the car with them. Alyssa decides not to use time-out when asking Jayden to complete self-care tasks since it seems it is difficult to be consistent and make things worse. Instead, she realizes that it is more effective to withhold her attention and toys for misbehavior.

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Conclusion

Children benefit tremendously from proactive family homes – environments that are positive, supportive and reinforcing. Proactive parents do not wait for things to go wrong and then react; instead they set up expectations beforehand, while helping children to be successful through rewards and other natural consequences. Time-out is just one tool of many in a parent’s disciplinary toolbox. It has to be used wisely and correctly in order to improve children’s behavior. Being proactive reduces the need for strategies as time-out, while other preventive and positive strategies become the center of parenting.

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