



## USING TIME-OUT

Time-out is a very effective tool to use for managing misbehavior in children. Simply put, time-out means that the child is removed from a reinforcing situation and is instructed to spend time in a dull, nonreinforcing environment. The time-out procedure is a useful tool for producing rapid behavioral change. Some misbehavior will decrease if the parents ignore the misbehavior. However, for highly annoying misbehavior such as sibling rivalry, temper tantrums, constant whining and the like, ignoring takes too long to produce behavioral change and it is unlikely that most parents would have the patience to ignore such misbehavior for very long.

The first step in using time-out is to identify the misbehavior for which you will use a time-out punishment. Remember, whenever you use a punishment program to change misbehavior, it is important that you also institute a reinforcement program to encourage more positive behavior. Your *Target Behavior List* might look something like this:

### Target Behavior List

#### Misbehavior to Time-out

Teasing baby sister  
Temper tantrum  
Whining

#### Positive Behaviors to Reinforce

Playing nicely with sister  
Accepts "no" pleasantly  
Asks politely

The second step in using time-out is to decide on a place to put the child when he/she misbehaves. The child's room may be an acceptable place. Some parents prefer to use a time-out chair placed in a corner and instruct the child to sit in the chair facing the wall. The chair should be located in an area of the house which has few if any distractions so as not to inadvertently allow the child to receive any reinforcement while in time-out.

The third step in using time-out is to decide on the appropriate length of the punishment. A good rule of thumb to use is one minute of time-out per year of age of the child for misbehavior and two minutes per year of age for more serious misbehavior. It is very helpful to use a portable timer with a bell or buzzer to signal the end of a time-out period.

The fourth step in using time-out involves instructing the child to go to time-out and enforcing the time-out punishment. Since the purpose of using time-out is to replace more aggressive, negative, and/or emotional forms of punishment such as yelling, scolding, and spanking, it is important that instructions to go to time-out be given to the child in an unemotional way using firm and assertive communication. The parent should avoid lecturing, name calling, arguing, or asking rhetorical questions such as "How many times do I have to tell you not to do that?" or "When are you going to listen?" This only serves to provide more attention to the child for his/her misbehavior and may inadvertently reinforce the undesirable behavior. That is, when the parent becomes emotional, the child learns to "push the right buttons" and this actually increases the misbehavior.



For example, after observing the child teasing his baby sister, the parent should say:

*“Mark, stop teasing your sister.”*

The parent should then count silently to five. If the child has stopped teasing, the parent should reinforce him for listening. If the child continues to tease, the parent should walk over to the child, make eye contact, and assertively say,

*“Mark, you did not listen to me. If you do that again you will be sent to time-out.”*

The parent waits another five seconds. If the child obeys and stops the teasing, the parent reinforces the child with appropriate praise for listening. However, if the child continues to misbehave, the parent should once again make eye-contact with the child and, in a firm, no nonsense voice, order the child to go to time-out.

*“Mark, you did not listen to me. Go to time-out right now.”*

At this point, the parent should escort the child to the time-out place, set the timer, and instruct the child to stay there until the timer goes off. After time-out is over, the child is allowed to return to activities. Avoid lecturing at this point; start over with a clean slate.

Not all children respond to time-out cooperatively. Some children resist going from the start and will aggressively test the limits of the program. Many children do this by arguing with the parent to see if they can successfully persuade the parent not to enforce time-out. Children are quite skilled at doing this and employ all sorts of tactics such as promising never to misbehave like that again for the rest of their life, blaming their misbehavior on someone else, or just plain denying that they ever misbehaved in the first place. It is essential that the parent ignore these excuses and promises and follow through with time-out regardless of the child’s pleadings. By giving in to the child’s manipulations, the parent loses credibility, making it only that much more difficult to enforce time-out with the child in the future.

Some children use more aggressive tactics than just verbal persuasion to avoid going to time-out. In some cases a child will physically resist being placed in time-out. When this happens, the parent may have to use physical force to put the child in time-out. The parent may have to firmly grasp the wrist of the child and walk him or her to time-out, or in some cases, the parent may have to carry the child to time-out. If neither alternative is possible due to the size of the child, then the parent may have to remove additional privileges (television time, playtime, outside time, etc.) from the child until time-out is served.

Another problem may arise once the child is placed in time-out. Some children will tantrum, scream, or threaten to leave time-out prematurely. In such cases, the parent must firmly remind the child that time-out will not start until he/she is quiet. If the child continues to misbehave during time-out, do not start the timer until the child quiets down. If the child, nevertheless, terminates time-out without permission, the parent should immediately go over to the child and say, “Time-out is not over. You must stay in time-out.”

If the child does not heed the parent’s warning to stay in time-out, there are a few options. The parent can stay nearby and repeatedly put the child back in time-out. A more useful option is to force the child to stay in the time-out room by holding or locking the door from the outside or placing a childproof doorknob cover on the inside doorknob. (Of course, in that case, the parent should stay nearby to detect a serious problem in the room since the child won’t be able to get out.) Another alternative for the child under three years of age is for the parent to hold the child on the parent’s lap while sitting in the time-out chair. This is to be done without speaking to the child or giving the child any attention whatsoever. The purpose of this holding is merely to restrain the child in time-out. Usually children dislike being confined in an adult’s lap and after a few times of testing the limits the child will give up the struggle to get out of serving the time-out and will comply more willingly.



Time-out can be an effective method of punishment for managing misbehavior. However, for it to work, it has to be used properly. And please remember, it does take time for the child to realize that mom and dad mean it when they say go to time-out. Below are some common mistakes parents make in applying time-out.

### Common Mistakes Parents Make When Using Time-out

1. Not using time-out soon enough after the misbehavior occurs. Most parents mistakenly warn the child to listen or stop misbehaving several times before issuing a time-out. It is important that the parent react promptly to misbehavior by using time-out after the first warning.
2. Letting the child talk them out of using time-out.
3. Talking too much, verbally scolding the child or showing intense emotion while placing the child in time-out.
4. Allowing the child to physically intimidate them into not enforcing time-out fully.
5. Not using a companion reinforcement program to positively reinforce corresponding appropriate behavior.

A few more comments:

Parents sometimes expect their children to have the same values and priorities as they have, which they do not. Most children really don't think it's important to clean their rooms. Children are self-centered by nature and believe what they want now is what they should have. Parents get frustrated when their children do not see things their way, but these attitudes are part of normal development, and it is inappropriate to expect children to think and act like adults.

The time-out methods can be adapted for use in public. Children often misbehave more in public because parents are embarrassed and do not discipline as readily. Some ideas for the time-out place are one particular square tile on the floor of the grocery store, going back out to the car, the restroom, or outside. Also consider a reward that must be earned by good behavior; be sure to tell your child ahead of time what is expected.

Time-out is useful for stopping undesirable behavior. To encourage good behavior (such as eating properly, doing homework, cleaning up toys, etc.), try the following:

1. Praise often and genuinely. We all feel good when we are praised. Try to praise at least twice for every negative comment given to the child.
2. Kitchen timers--play "beat the clock" for cleaning up the toys, etc.
3. Charts for tasks with rewards.

Excellent references on this subject are the books and videotapes by Thomas Phelan, Ph.D. entitled "1-2-3 Magic". You may access them at <http://www.parentmagic.com/> or call 1-800-442-4453 for ordering information. It may also be available at the public library.

We hope this information is helpful. Please discuss further concerns with your health care provider.