

Time Out

Young children respond best to praise for good behavior. However, sometimes they need to have limits set for them or a space to cool off. Time outs let you do this safely and effectively. A time out is a form of discipline that can be used when your child needs to calm down or when your child does something wrong on purpose.



Time out works best when

- You are calm but firm.
- Your child is taught about time out before it is needed.
- Your child understands the purpose of the time out.

When you decide to use a time out

- Warn your child once before initiating a time out.
- Place your child in a boring but safe and nonscary spot (e.g., a nearby chair or step where you can watch her). Toddlers may be placed on the floor or in a playpen.
- Briefly state the rule that was broken or the reason the child needs to take a time out (e.g., “No hitting. Hitting hurts people,” or “You are getting a little too excited. Why don’t you take a time out.”).
- The time out should begin as soon as the child understands the reason for it.
- Time outs should last approximately 1 minute per year of a child’s age to a maximum of 10 minutes. Some people find that a timer that ticks and has a bell can help signal the end of the time out. Children ages 6 and older may be able to decide for themselves when they feel calm enough to leave time out. Children ages 10 and older generally benefit more from discussion, logical consequences such as repayment for damages, or removal of privileges (including grounding), than from time out.
- If your child leaves time out before it is over, he or she should be put back without comment and held there with your hands or on your lap.
- After time out, your child should immediately be redirected to an acceptable activity.
- Discussion and/or role playing of the incident and alternatives should take place only after your child is calm again.

If “time outs” lead to increasing struggles or do not work, consult your child’s primary care health professional.

*Portions of this tool were modeled on: Sege R. 2000. Time-out! In Sege R, ed., *Violence Prevention for Children and Youth: Parent Education Cards* (2nd ed.). Waltham, MA: Massachusetts Medical Society. Copies available from the Massachusetts Medical Society. Phone: (800) 322-2303; e-mail: dph@mms.org.*

*Cite as: Howard BJ. 2002. Time out. In Jellinek M, Patel BP, Froehle MC, eds., *Bright Futures in Practice: Mental Health—Volume II. Tool Kit*. Arlington, VA: National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health.*