



Time-Out: When It Doesn't Seem to Be Working

Some parents become discouraged with time-out. Their child repeats misbehavior immediately after release from time-out. Other children seem to improve temporarily but by the next day are repeating the behavior the parent is trying to stop. Some children refuse to go to time-out or won't stay there. None of these examples means that time-out should be abandoned. It remains the best discipline technique for 2- to 5-year-old children. If you use time-out repeatedly, consistently, and correctly, your child will eventually improve. The following recommendations may help you fine-tune how you are using time-out.

1. Give your child more physical affection each day. Be sure your child receives two time-ins for every time-out each day. A time-in is a positive, close, brief human interaction. Try to restore the positive side of your relationship with your child. Catch him being good. Try to hold your child for 1 or 2 minutes every 15 minutes when he's not in time-out or misbehaving. Play with your child more. Children who feel neglected or overly criticized don't want to please their parents.
2. Use time-out every time your child engages in the behavior you are trying to change (target behavior). Use time-out more frequently. For the first 2 or 3 days you may need to use time-outs 20 or more times a day to gain a defiant toddler's attention. Brief time-outs are harmless and there is no upper limit on how many times you can use them as long as you off-set them with positive interactions.
3. Use time-out. Don't just threaten to use time-out. For aggressive behaviors, give no warnings, just put your child in time-out. Better yet, intercept your child when you see her starting to raise her arm or clench her fist and before she makes others cry. For other behaviors, remind your child of the rule, count to three, and if she doesn't stop immediately, put her in time-out.
4. Put your child in time-out earlier. Put your child in time-out before his behavior worsens. Your child is more likely to accept a time-out calmly if he's put in early rather than if he's put in late (and screaming). Also, putting him in early means you will be more in control of your emotions. Try to put your child in time-out before you become angry. If you are still yelling when you put your child in time-out, it will not work.
5. Put your child in time-out quickly. Don't talk about it first. When your child breaks a rule, have her in time-out within 10 seconds.
6. Don't talk to your child during time-out. Don't answer his questions or complaints. Don't try to lecture your child.
7. Ignore tantrums in time-out. Don't insist on quietness during time-out because it makes it harder to finish the time-out.

8. Return your child to time-out if he escapes. Have a back-up plan for further discipline; for example, holding a young child in the time-out chair, or grounding an older child.
9. Consider increasing the length of time-out. If your child is over 3 years old and needs to be placed in time-out more than 10 times each day, a longer time-out may be needed to get her attention. A preschooler with a strong-willed temperament may temporarily need a time-out that lasts 2 or 3 minutes per year of her age. Children younger than 3 years should receive only brief time-outs (1 minute per year of age) because it is difficult for them to stay in time-out any longer.
10. Make the time-out place more boring. If your child doesn't seem to mind the time-outs, eliminate sources of entertainment. Move the time-out chair to a more boring location. If you use your child's bedroom, close the blinds or shades. Make sure that siblings or pets aren't visiting. Temporarily remove all toys and games from the bedroom and store them elsewhere.
11. Use a portable timer for keeping track of the time. Your child is more likely to obey a timer than to obey you.
12. Be kinder in your delivery of time-out. This will help reduce your child's anger. Say you're sorry he needs a time-out, but be firm about it. Try to handle your child gently when you take him to time-out.
13. Praise your child for taking a good time-out. Forgive your child completely when you release her from time-out. Don't give lectures or ask for an apology. Give your child a clean slate and don't tell her father or relatives how many time-outs she needed that day.
14. Don't punish your child for the normal expression of anger, such as saying angry things or looking angry. Don't try to control your child too much.
15. Give your child more choices about how he takes his time-out. Ask, "Do you want to take a time-out by yourself or do you want me to hold you in your chair? It doesn't matter to me." (For older children, the choice can be, "By yourself or do you want to be grounded?")
16. Give your child the option of coming out of time-out as soon as she is under control rather than taking the specified number of minutes. Some children feel overly controlled.
17. Use a variety of consequences for misbehavior. Ignore harmless behaviors. Also use distraction for bad habits. Use logical consequences—such as removal of toys, other possessions, or privileges—for some misbehavior.
18. Clarify with your child what you want him to do. Also clarify the house rules. Review this at a time when your child is in a good mood. This will help him be more successful.
19. Use time-out with siblings when appropriate. Be sure that one sibling isn't being treated preferentially. If siblings touch the timer or tease the child in time-out, they should also be placed in time-out.
20. Teach all caretakers to use time-out correctly and consistently.