

Time-Outs 101

Of all the discipline tools available, time-out may be the most misunderstood. I hear parents say all the time, “I tried using time-out, but it never seems to work.” Just as with any other tool, the key is to use it properly

Time-outs are really an extension of the removing-your-child-from-the-situation tool. The idea is get your child away from a situation that has spiraled out of control and give her time to collect herself. Additionally, there is a punitive element—no one enjoys forced isolation. Time-out tends to work best during the [preschool years](#), but even a [toddler](#) can spend a couple of minutes in time-out, and [older children](#) and [teens](#) may respond to a variation on the technique. At moments when you’re so upset you think you might do emotional or physical harm, you may even need to put yourself in time-out until you can cope with a situation constructively.



Time-out worthy behaviors

Your child should know ahead of time what behaviors will earn a time-out. Preschoolers are likely to need a lot of repetition before they really get the picture, so if you see a time-out behavior creeping up, remind your child what may come next. One warning, however, is enough. Giving multiple warnings turns a reliable consequence into a gamble. You’ll want to choose a time-out spot that is away from other people and is not a lot of fun, like a chair in the corner. If your child’s time-out spot is in front of a video game, for example, she’s probably missing the point. One of the advantages of time-out is that you can impose it nearly anywhere that’s safe, from a restaurant to the grocery store to a friend’s house. I have yet to figure out how to impose time-out in a moving vehicle.

Timing the time-out

Establish the duration of the time-out ahead of time. As a rule of thumb, most people use the child’s age plus 1 year, but for an especially patient or stubborn child you might have to use a different rule of thumb, like your age minus the age of your car. Whatever the time is, try to set a timer. That staves off the question, “Can I come out of time-out yet?” If your child hasn’t heard the timer, she knows the answer. Speaking of questions, time-out is not conversation time. You should let your child know why she’s in time-out when you’re putting her there. Once she’s there, it’s not time for a long discourse on the nature of her actions and their consequences. Conversation is a form of attention, and as such it sort of blows the whole time-out concept. Your child may yell, scream, or even throw a [tantrum](#) while in time-out. Unless she is a danger to herself or others or is doing property damage, let it pass without comment.

If your child tries to leave time-out early (as she inevitably will at least once), return her there and let her know her time-out is starting over and will every time she leaves. You may end up needing to hold her gently and firmly in place, letting her know you are doing so because she tried to leave. You may have to add a backup consequence for leaving time-out. On the flip side, sometimes you just need your child to get her behavior under control. Especially with older children you can offer an open-ended option: “You can come out of time-out as soon as you feel you can control your behavior.”

When to put yourself in a time-out

How you behave before, during, and after time-out can be just as important as how your child behaves. There is some chance that by the time you get to imposing a time-out you'll be angry yourself. You should be firm and gentle in placing your child in time-out; if you feel like you want to hurt her, put yourself in time-out first. One way to ensure a smooth transition to timeout is to use it early and often. Rather than waiting for a behavior to reach crisis level, put your child in time-out as soon as the behavior begins.

Like with all your discipline tools, you'll want to be consistent in using time-out. If hitting her brother gets your child a time-out sometimes and not others, she never knows when it's OK to slug him! After time-out, let your child know if she's done a good job. She has served her time and doesn't need a lecture or to be forced to apologize now. Imagine you've hit the reset button on the day. If you notice your child seems to be getting a lot of time-outs, think about showing her more affection and attention when she's not misbehaving. She may have decided that misbehaving is the only way she can get your attention.

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