

**Time-Out Discipline: Does Isolation Really Work?**

by Roberta Munoz Link: http://www.education.com/magazine/article/time-out-discipline/

Parents have been saying something along the lines of, "Go to your room!" even before it was common for kids to have rooms of their own—the practice is as old as time. But is isolating a child on "time-out" really a productive form of punishment?

Most parents simply wing it when deciding how—and when—to call time-outs. Often, you tend to do what your own parents did without really unpacking the practice and examining the effects of isolation on you and your child. Confining a child to a room, a chair or a corner has a long history—but no real rule book.

While there aren't strict guidelines, there *are* some basic principles to keep in mind when using time-outs as discipline. "Time-out [should not be] used as a punitive, hurtful, spiteful reaction," says Dr. Thomas McIntyre, author of the *Positive Parenting Practices* podcast (look for it at BehaviorAdvisor.com inside the Parent Page or ParentingDoneRight.info "It's used to give the parent and child some time to cool off, re-engage positively afterwards and teach each other how to respond in situations in which the child (and perhaps the parent) responded poorly."

When done properly, time-outs can defuse the situation so that you can move on to more constructive interactions. Try these positive and productive techniques for effective time-outs:

* **Stay present.** Time-outs don't necessarily mean your kid should be completely incommunicado. In fact, some experts believe that using complete isolation as punishment is actually detrimental to children. Dr. Peter Haiman, author of *The Case Against Time-out,* suggests forcing your child to be alone when he's most upset can add feelings of fear and worry on top of whatever other issues he's trying to deal with. Instead, try putting your child on time-out on a chair or rug in the same room as you. If you have a toddler on your hands, hold him on your lap. The main point of this discipline is to intervene and remove your little one—either physically or psychologically—from the negative behavior or situation.
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* **Immediate intervention.** Don't wait until the situation escalates—you'll be more likely to send your tiny troublemaker away upset if you blow up. Instead, step in as soon as you see a situation brewing, such as a tug of war over a toy. Remove the "trigger" for the behavior (the doll, toy or forbidden cookie) so it's out of sight. Once the source of contention is gone, calmly tell your kid he needs to take a time-out.
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* **A predictable place.** Designate a regular "time-out" spot, such as a bean bag, rug, or chair. After his first trip to time-out, your child should know exactly where he's going, to eliminate any fear of the unknown on top of the anger and frustration that he's already feeling. Carry the littlest ones to the established "cool off" zone, and request that bigger kids make their own way there. Fight the urge to drag, tug or pull older children—this can act to increase their defiance, and make you even more angry.
* **Beyond reason.** Don't try to reason or explain anything right away—a child in tantrum mode is incapable of understanding reason. Dr. McIntyre calls this state "brain-static" or "contaging", two terms that describe the moment when your kid's overwhelmed by emotions and unable to think straight. Allow him to simmer down on time-out, and save the discussion for later.
* **Measure in minutes.** As a rule of thumb, Dr. McIntyre advises that a good guideline for the length of a time-out is a minute for each year of age. Three minutes may not seem like a very long time to you, but it's about a trillion years in toddler time. Remember, this is a flexible guideline—if your four-year-old calms down within a minute or two, that's enough time, so long as he's achieved the purpose of the intervention.
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* **Exit strategy.** Create a predictable plan for ending the time out. If you leave your child completely alone, tell him a specific amount of time when you'll be back—and stay true to your word. You can add in where you'll be, such as the next room, to help ease any separation anxiety. He should know that if he's cooled down by the time you return, the time-out will end.
* **Listen and learn.** When your kid's regained control of his emotions after a stint on the time-out chair, start a discussion about why he was disciplined. Keep your comments short, fact-based and focused—don't just present a long list of bad behaviors. Ask your child what happened, and be patient as he tells his version of events—even if it's not very accurate. If he feels you're listening, it's less likely he'll be combative and negative. If he insists the argument wasn't his fault, don't jump down his throat. Instead, get more information by asking him, "Where did you get hit?" and "Why do you think your playmate was angry?"

The goal of time-outs, like all forms of discipline, is to reduce negative outbursts and encourage positive behavior, all while supporting your child's emotional growth. "When the parent escorts the child to the time out place, we reduce the emotional distress or support him/her silently during the distress." says Dr. McIntyre. "When the child is calm, we are there to help him/her make sense of the situation."

Isolation is sometimes necessary, but like all forms of control, it should be used sparingly and with patience. Used correctly, time-outs can provide loving support and a learning opportunity for those times when your little one can't control himself.

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