

DEFINITION

Time-out is a form of discipline used to interrupt unacceptable behavior by isolating a child in a chair or room for a brief period of time. Time-out has the advantage of providing a cooling-off period for both the child and the parent. It gives a child over 2 or 3 years old a chance to think about his misbehavior and feel a little guilty about it. When a child is less than 2 years old, time-out mainly establishes who is in charge.

Misbehaviors that respond best to time-out are aggressive, harmful, or disruptive behaviors that cannot be ignored. Time-out is much more effective than spanking, threatening, or shouting at your child. Time-out is the best form of discipline for many of the irrational behaviors of toddlers. As a child grows older, use of time-outs can gradually be replaced with logical consequences.

CHOOSING A PLACE FOR TIME-OUT

1. **Playpens or cribs.** Playpens or cribs are a convenient place for time-out for older infants. A playpen near a parent is preferable to isolation in another room because most infants are frightened if they are not in the same room as their parent.

2. **Chairs or corners.** An older child can be told to sit in a chair. The chair can be placed facing a corner. Some parents prefer to have their child stand facing the corner.

3. **Rooms with the door open.** Many parents prefer a room for time-out because it offers more confinement than a chair. The most convenient and safest room for time-out is the child's bedroom. Until 2 years of age, most children become frightened if they are put in a room with a closed door. Other ways to confine your child in a room without completely closing him off are a gate, a heavy dresser that blocks the lower part of the door frame, or a piece of plywood that covers the bottom half of the door.

4. **Rooms with the door closed.** Some children will come out of the bedroom just as soon as they are put in. If you cannot devise a barricade, then the door must be closed. You can hold the door closed for the 3 to 5 minutes it takes to complete the time-out period. If you don't want to hold the door, you can put a latch on the door that allows it to be temporarily locked. Be sure not to forget your child. The time-out should not last longer than a few minutes.

HOW TO ADMINISTER TIME-OUT

1. **Deciding the length of time-out.** The time-out should be long enough for your child to think about his

misbehavior and learn the acceptable behavior. A good rule of thumb is 1 minute per year of the child's age, with a maximum of 5 minutes. A kitchen timer can be set for the required number of minutes. If your child leaves time-out early ("escapes"), he should be returned to time-out and the timer should be reset. By the age of 6 years, most children can be sent to their room and asked to stay there until they feel ready to behave.

2. **Putting your child in time-out.** If your child misbehaves, briefly explain the rule she has broken and send her to the time-out chair or room. If your child doesn't go immediately, lead or carry her there. Expect your child to cry, protest, or have a tantrum on the way to time-out. Don't lecture or spank her on the way.

3. **Keeping your child in time-out.** Once children understand time-out, most of them will stay in their chair, corner, or room until the time is up. However, you will have to keep an eye on your child. If he gets up from a chair, put him back gently but quickly without spanking him and reset the timer. If your child comes out of the room, direct him back into the room and reset the timer. Threaten to close the door if he comes out a second time. If your child is a strong-willed 2- or 3-year-old and you are just beginning to use time-outs, you may initially need to hold him in the chair with one hand on his shoulder for the entire 2 minutes. Don't be discouraged; this does teach him that you mean what you say. If your child yells or cries during time-out, ignore it. The important thing is that he remain in time-out for a certain amount of time. Your child will not be able to understand the need for quietness during time-out until at least 3 years of age, so don't expect this of him before then.

4. **Ending the time-out.** Make it clear that you are in charge of when time-out ends. When the time is up, go to your child and state, "Time-out is over. You can get up (or come out) now." Then treat your child normally. Don't review the rule your child broke. Try to notice when your child does something that pleases you and praise her for it as soon as possible.

5. **Practicing time-out with your child.** If you have not used time-out before, explain it to your child in advance. Tell him it will replace spanking, yelling, and other such forms of discipline. Talk to him about the misbehaviors that will lead to time-outs. Also discuss with him the good behavior that you would prefer to see. Then pretend with your child that he has broken one of the rules. Take him through the steps of time-out so that he will understand your directions when you send him to time-out in the future. Also teach your babysitter about time-outs.

DISCIPLINE: PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT

The place of physical punishment in discipline is controversial. There are several good arguments for not using corporal punishment at all. We can raise children to be agreeable, responsible, productive adults without ever spanking them. All children need discipline on hundreds of occasions, but there are alternatives to spanking, such as sending a child to his or her room. Spanking carries the risk of triggering the unrelated pent-up anger that many adults carry inside them. This anger could find an outlet in the spanking and end in child abuse. Parents who turn to spanking as a last resort for "breaking their child's will" may find that they have underestimated their child's determination. In addition, physical punishment worsens aggressive behavior because it teaches a child to lash out when he or she is angry. Other forms of discipline can be more constructive, leaving a child with some sense of guilt and contributing to the formation of a conscience.

If you feel the need occasionally to spank your child, follow these guidelines for safe physical punishment:

- Hit only with an open hand. Hit through clothing. It is difficult to judge how hard you are hitting your child if you hit him or her with an object other than your hand. Paddles and belts commonly cause bruises.
- Hit only on the buttocks, legs, or hands. Hitting a child on the face is demeaning as well as dangerous; in fact, slapping the face is inappropriate at any age.
- Give only one swat; that is enough to change behavior. Hitting your child more than once may relieve your anger but will probably not teach your child anything additional.
- Don't spank children less than 1 year of age. Spanking is inappropriate before your child has learned to walk and should be unnecessary after the age of 5 to 6 years. Use negotiation and discussion to resolve most differences with school-age children.
- Avoid shaking children, because of the serious risk of causing blood clots on the brain (subdural hematomas).
- Don't use physical punishment more than once each day. The more your child is spanked, the less effect it will have.
- Learn alternatives to physical discipline. Isolating a child in a corner or bedroom for a time-out is much more civilized and effective. Learn how to use such forms of discipline.
- Never spank your child when you are out of control, scared, or drinking. A few parents can't stop hitting their child once they start. They can't control their rage and need help for themselves, such as from Parents Anonymous groups. They must learn to walk away from their children and never use physical punishment.
- Don't use physical punishment for aggressive misbehavior, such as biting, hitting, or kicking. Physical punishment under such circumstances teaches a child that it is all right for a bigger person to strike a smaller person. Aggressive children need to be taught restraint and self-control. They respond best to time-outs, which give them an opportunity to think about the pain they have caused.
- Don't allow baby-sitters and teachers to spank your children.