

Time-Out Guidelines

When Time-out's Work: Time-out works because the child no longer has access to items, persons, or activities that were reinforcing the problem behavior.

When Time-out's Don't Work: Some common pitfalls that teachers and parents make when using time-out (especially seclusionary time-out) render the procedure ineffective immediately and may make the problem behavior worse.

Talking: Many adults feel the need to talk to the student either on the way to the time-out or during the time-out. On-going explanations, warnings, arguments, only provide the student with the additional reinforcement. Don't get caught in these traps:

- Arguing about whether time-out is fair or the behavior was bad enough to warrant time-out
- Answering questions (either on the way or while in time out) posed by the student regarding how much longer or "when do I get out"
- Attempting to counter misbehavior by adding on minutes or reacting to ANY misbehavior that occurs during time out.
- Attempting to calm the student down by cajoling, urging, threatening, singing, etc.

Hesitancy: Any hesitancy displayed by adult to implement the procedures are quickly noticed by most students. This reluctance results in continued problem behavior. In addition, threats without follow-through also render the procedure ineffective.

Length of time-out: Many adults wish to add minutes onto time-out as a way to penalize students for not calming down. Many professionals recommend a preset length of time for the time-out, usually 1 or 2 minutes. One major pitfall of using this preset time, is the possibility of the child exhibiting severely aggressive or self-injurious behavior just before the preset ending time, and "believing" that behavior was the reason time out ended. One way to avoid this type of learning, is to have the child determine the end of time out by telling you he or she is "ready". This must be said in a calm, age appropriate voice. If using this procedure, you may prompt the student every 1-minute with a short statement like, "when you are calm say ready." This provides the appropriate words for the child (in case they are so angry or emotional they have forgotten their words), provides an appropriate adult-check of the child, and allows the child to know that they have not been left alone.

Believing the child is ready to leave time out before they child is ready to comply: Some children can easily say "ready" in an appropriate voice but the minute you remove them from the time out, they bolt or again begin to display the problem behavior. Of course, they need to go back to time out. One way to attempt to prevent this kind of back and forth scenario is to require the child to complete a small compliance task after saying "ready" and before they are allowed to leave the room (e.g., write your name and date on this paper). The task does not need to be hard, it only needs to show that he/she is ready to be compliant. Some things to consider:

- Make sure the task is something the child can do independently
- Make sure the task is something that won't hurt if it gets thrown at you
- Make sure the task is always readily available and not something you have to hunt down.

Excessive use of time-out: Because using time-out correctly is effective, teachers sometimes begin to over use the procedures. It is not uncommon to find teachers implementing seclusionary time-out for less severe behaviors, or for students who do not have a support plan or parental consent. Remember, time out should be used thoughtfully, not spontaneously in reaction to problem behavior. Time out is for the child, not because the teacher is frustrated. In addition, the use of time out without other components of a behavior support plan (primarily positive reinforcement procedures) is a punishment procedure and therefore, if overused can actually increase or intensify the behavior.

Physical battles: A serious pitfall of using a time-out room is that students don't always walk to the room willingly. Or, more importantly, if they are calm enough to walk independently, is time-out the right consequence to be using, remember, seclusionary time out should be used for severe behaviors only. Any need to move a student physically requires comprehensive staff training.

Features to Consider for Effective Time-Out

Physical Space: The space or room chosen for seclusionary time out should be considered very thoughtfully. Many precautions need to be considered: (this list is only a beginning)

- size – the room should be large enough that the child does not feel cramped or boxed in. However, the room must be small enough that the adult that is monitoring can always see every square inch of the room.
- ventilation – the room temperature needs to maintain at least at the same temperature the rest of the building is. If the room is too warm the child will become too overheated. Any kind of vent that allows air to move into and out of the time out area is a good idea.
- lighting – the room definitely should have a light (if a small room, a non heat supplying light is suggested). For safety with electrical equipment and to maintain constant visibility the switch that controls the light should be on the outside (adult side) of the room. If the switch is inside, it should be rendered ineffective during time out.
- The door to the time out room should NEVER be locked (this violates fire code).

Adult supervision: No child should ever be left alone in a time out situation. A child should be monitored at all times. A viewing window or peep-hole should be in the door.

If the window or peep-hole does not allow for viewing of all corners of the room, use non-breakable mirrors mounted on the ceiling or high on the walls to assist.

Adults monitoring should never take their eyes off of the child. They should not make eye contact, but keep visual contact to insure that the child does not hurt himself.

If the child calms, it would be best to leave the door open while waiting for the "ready" signal or for the child to finish the compliance task. Follow all other time out procedures as if the door was closed.

Documentation: Consider the following:

- The time the child entered and exited time-out must be documented.
- The total length of time child is in time-out must be documented.
- The child's behavior and the adult's behavior must be documented on a minute by minute (literally!) basis. This is to insure that child is safe and that visual contact is kept at all times.