



American College of Pediatricians

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Patient Information Handout

Discipline of the Child Series: TIME-OUT

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The Procedure

Time-out is a popular and effective form of punishment which capitalizes on a child's desire for his parent's attention. When disobedience occurs, the child is taken to a quiet, boring area of the home and required to sit in a chair for a designated period of time. Time-out locations should be dull and non-stimulating, such as the corner of the living room, dining room or hallway. Once chosen, the same location should be used each time. A wooden or metal chair serves as an ideal time-out chair since it is relatively uncomfortable and indestructible. The duration of time-out should be customized to a child's level of development and a good rule of thumb is one minute of time per each year of age up to a maximum of five minutes. For a two year old, two minutes is best; for a six year old, five minutes is best. The use of a kitchen timer will keep both parent and child honest about the exact duration of the time-out period.

Once placed in the chair, the child is told to stay seated until the timer alarms. The parent should not provide a rationale for the punishment or argue with the child while he is in time-out. A discussion should only occur once the child's behavior is appropriate and the time-out is over.

Time-out is most effective if general calmness is required of the child. Two to three minutes of genuine, tearful crying is acceptable initially. Intentional screaming or theatrical crying are weapons of rebellion directed at the parent and are not acceptable. The duration of time-out may be lengthened for such behavior, or the starting of the timer may be delayed until the child is quiet for several seconds. Disrespect toward a parent (name calling or sassiness) or destructive behavior (pounding on the wall) are not acceptable and may require a spanking to gain control of the unruly child.

When to Use Time-Out

Time-out is best used when your child is mature enough to understand the concepts of time and place. Typically by 18 months of age he is capable of sitting for 1½ minutes in isolation and will understand the association between isolation and the misbehavior.

Time-out is very useful when a child's behavior becomes disruptive and he fails to respond to warnings. For example, when a child is harassing a sibling, refuses to share the toys, or becomes ill-mannered at the dinner table.

When Time-Out is Over

Once the time-out period is over, frankly discuss with your child the reason for the punishment and assure him that further disobedience will be punished as well. This is not a time for further punishment or ridicule of your child, but rather a time to restore the relationship and to reemphasize the order of authority. A remorseful child should be hugged and praised for his change of attitude. After restoring the relationship, the original command must be repeated and your child's obedience required. This is essential to the success of time-out. If the original command is dropped, then your child will learn to use time-out as a way to avoid compliance. If eventual obedience is required, however, your child will learn proper behavior and understand the seriousness of the parent commands.

When Your Child Refuses To Cooperate

If your child leaves the time-out chair before the time is up, return him to the chair and repeat your desire for him to stay until the alarm rings. If after two repetitions he refuses to stay in time-out, return him to the chair and warn of a spanking if he gets out again. If he then gets down before the timer rings, follow through with your promise. Take your child to a private location (bathroom or bedroom), spank him once on the buttocks, re-turn him to the time-out chair and reset the timer. Tell him if he gets down again he will be spanked again.

When time-out is first instituted most children will test their parent's seriousness about its use. Early and consistent use of a spanking to enforce the time-out will result in greater respect for time-out. This ultimately leads to fewer spankings as a child gets older and as he comes to respect the time-out penalty.

Research has proven that a spank is one of the most effective enforcers of time-out. It is the most practical and expedient. Some psychologists recommend that a parent physically hold the child in time-out, or corral the child in a corner of a room. This, however, does not teach the child self-control, but merely accomplishes the child's objective of manipulating the parent and disrupting the events of the moment. Time-out should punish only the child, not the parent.