



TIME-OUTS

by Andrew R. Riley, PhD

“**T**IME-OUT DOESN'T WORK.” I hear this from parents at least once a week. And it's true that for those parents, time-outs haven't been working; otherwise they wouldn't be in my office. What's usually also true is that those parents have very different ideas of what time-out is and how it works than I do as a pediatric psychologist.

Time-out is extremely common—nearly everyone has heard of it—but also widely misunderstood. In fact, my colleagues and I recently surveyed over 300 parents and found that over eighty percent of them do time-out in a way that makes it less effective (see Riley et al.). Misinformation in the media and on the internet is probably partly to blame for this, but child healthcare providers need to do a better job communicating about time-out and discipline. The truth is, when done well, time-out is an effective way to decrease problematic behaviors, many of which are well-known to parents of children with ADHD.

Time-out is not a certain thing or set of procedures, but a concept. It stands for *time-out from reinforcement*. This means that for time-outs to work, the child has to go from an interesting, stimulating, and engaging environment to one that is boring, bland, or dull; and that place stays boring no matter what the child does. As long as you can make this happen, you can create effective time-outs.

There's no time-out without time-in

Since time-out is the *removal* of everything fun or interesting, there needs to be stimulating and interesting stuff, or *time-in*, happening for time-out to work. Time-in is what should be happening when kids are well behaved, and consists of things like attention from adults, praise for good behavior, and access to privileges. Time-out won't work without time-in, because there is nothing to take away. If life is already boring, a little more boredom won't be very motivating. It's the *contrast* between Time-in and Time-out that changes behavior.

Sometimes for kids with challenging behavior (certainly many with ADHD), it's easy for their parents, teachers, or other adults to fall into a pattern of mostly negative feedback (“Don't! Stop! Knock it off!”), but miss chances for time-in (“Thank you for listening! Wow, you're being so patient! I can tell you're trying really hard!”). When that's the case, it's very important to focus on increasing time-in first. Time-out won't work without it.

There's no single way, but there's a better way

As I mentioned above, there is no single way to do time-out, but we have learned a lot about some ways to make time-out most effective. Here is a quick summary of almost five decades of research on time-out.

BE SELECTIVE. Time-out shouldn't be used too much. I recommend parents use time-out for behaviors that are dangerous (aggression, doing things that are unsafe), destructive (damaging things), or noncompliant (not following instructions). For more minor misbehaviors like whining, yelling, swearing, or other obnoxious things, it's usually best to just ignore them.

BE QUICK. Time-out will work best when it happens immediately after a child misbehaves. The quicker time-out starts, the better. Avoid repeated warnings (one is fine), lengthy explanations, or anything else that delays the start of time-out. There is no need to talk much. I suggest very quickly labeling misbehavior that earned the time-out, but that's it ("No hitting, that's time-out").

BE BORING. Time-out is about making things uninteresting for kids. Guess what interests kids? Their parents! Parents are so interesting to kids that any attention, even negative attention, is very stimulating. This (again) means keeping talking to a minimum and staying calm. Getting angry won't help; it'll probably hinder. Avoid eye contact and other forms of interaction, too. Being boring also means using a dull spot for time-outs. Whatever space you pick, it should be safe and easy to get to, but be away from electronics, toys, books, or other fun things. Kids' bedrooms usually aren't a good spot, because they tend to be full of fun things.

BE PREPARED FOR RESISTANCE. Kids will often leave time-out without permission. Many parents think time-out isn't working because their child escapes, but this is just part of the learning process. What's important is to know how to respond when this happens. For preschool-aged children, it's usually easiest to just repeatedly return them to time-out without talking (be boring!) until they stay. For older children, you can extend the time-out a little if they leave, or you can take away a privilege ("You left time-out without permission, that's no TV or computer tonight."). When this is consistent, most kids learn to stay in time-out. It also

helps to require kids to be calm before time-out is over, so that even once their time is up, if they are trying to escape, are yelling, or are being otherwise disruptive, the time-out continues until they've quieted down.

BE CONSISTENT AND PERSISTENT. Just like most types of behavior change, time-out takes time. If it doesn't seem to work at first, keep at it. You really can't tell if it works before it's been used consistently for at least a couple of weeks.

There's no one-size-fits-all

For many kids, you could ignore all this advice and time-outs will still work just fine, but others need a more precise kind of time-out to make it work. One study on time-out for kids with ADHD (Fabiano et al.) found that about half responded well to "basic" time-out, whereas others needed a more specialized time-out, like longer durations (fifteen minutes instead of five minutes) or chances to reduce the length of time-out by cooperating (two minutes if you cooperate, five if you don't). So if time-out doesn't work at first, that doesn't mean it can't work, you just have to find the right approach for your child. Time-out is just one of many parenting tools that can improve behavior, and it isn't something every family needs or wants to do. If you're going to use time-out, following these tips should help, but some children will need a discipline plan that's more closely tailored for them. For those kids, talking to an expert who can get to know you and your child is the best approach. 🗨️



Time-Out and the Two Kinds of Nothing

It can be hard to remember all the little details that make up effective time-outs, so here is a shorthand way to see if your time-outs are all they can be. Time-outs are best when they have The Two Kinds of Nothing:

- 1. NOTHING GOING ON.** No TV, no tablet, no books, no toys, no conversation, no eye contact. Nothing. (It's okay if you can't stop everything, just do the best you can.)
- 2. NOTHING THEY CAN DO ABOUT IT.** Kids will try whatever they can to get out of time-out and get back to time-in. They will cry and they will laugh. They will promise to be good and they will threaten to be bad. They will act as if time-out doesn't bother them at all, and claim that it is the worst thing imaginable. Don't be fooled! If you react or end time-out because of these things, they will just happen more. Keep nothing going on until kids learn to accept the time-out.

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ADDITIONAL READING

Riley AR, Wagner DV, Tudor ME, Zuckerman KE, Freeman KA. A survey of parents' perceptions and utilization of Time-out in pediatric primary care in contrast to empirical evidence. Under review.

Outrageous claims regarding the appropriateness of Time Out have no basis in science [press release]. Society for Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology.

Drayton AK, Andersen MN, Knight RM, Felt BT, Fredericks EM, Dore-Stites DJ. Internet guidance on time out: inaccuracies, omissions, and what to tell parents instead. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*. 2014;35(4):239-246.

Fabiano GA, Pelham WE, Manos MJ, et al. An evaluation of three time-out procedures for children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. *Behavior Therapy*. 2004;35(3):449-469.