

Common Questions about Time Out

What is time out? The purpose of time out is to give a clear consequence to a child in response to a specific behavior. It also has the added benefit of giving both the parent and child a break to help calm down a situation. Time out is an effective tool for discipline that involves placing a child in a quiet area with no attention/stimulation for a set amount of time (1 minute for the child's age; So, a 3-year-old would be in time out for 3 minutes). Set a timer so that the child hears it go off. An ideal place for time-out would be a chair in the corner of a room not frequently used by the family during that time. (Note: Time out can be done outside of the home as well. Just find a corner of a room or other place away from others.)

Are there things I should do before starting to use time out with my child? Before starting a new form of discipline, it is always important to explain it to the child before you actually use it. You want to do this when the family is calm, and not when actual misbehavior is occurring. Explain to your child what you will be doing, some examples for why he/she will be sent to time out, where time out will be, and what is expected of the child during time out.

When can time out start to be used with a child? Remember that time outs should not be used until a child is old enough to understand it. This typically occurs around 2 1/2 but can vary depending upon the child. You also only want to use time out with toddlers and preschoolers for more serious misbehaviors.

Should I use time out every time my child misbehaves? Do I warn my child first? Time out should only be used when house rules are clearly broken, such as your child hits another child. For clear violations like this, a warning is not needed. Simply tell your child in a calm voice, "You broke our house rule of no hitting. You are going to time out." If the child does something less severe like not complying with your request, then first give your child a warning and, for younger children, you may want to help them get started on their task. Tell your child that if he/she doesn't do what you have asked, then he/she will go to time out. If your child then complies, praise him/her for the behavior ("Nice job putting away your toys!"). If the child's doesn't comply, then you need to put him/her in time out. Remember that after time out, your child should then go finish the task that he/she had been asked to complete. If you don't do this, then your child effectively avoided the task.

What do I do if my child screams/cries while in time out? You can choose to just ignore this behavior. If your child is still screaming/crying at the end of the time out, do not let your child out of time out until he/she has stopped. This can be even just a couple of seconds long.

What do I do if my child won't stay in time out? Your response to this depends on what you are most comfortable with. A common approach is to calmly return the child to the timeout chair for the remainder of the timeout. If the child gets up again, then you can tell the child that he/she now has lost a privilege for the day (ex. you cannot watch your favorite TV show).

What should I do after time out? If your child needs to complete a task, then make sure he/she does that first. As soon as possible, make sure that you catch and praise a positive behavior that a child is doing so that a more positive tone is set.

For More Time Out Tips, visit www.cdc.gov/parents/essentials/timeout