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What Makes Time-Out Work (and Fail)?

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History of Time-Out

Ever since Charles Ferster introduced the concept of “time-out from positive reinforcement” into the literature in 1957, time-out has been one of the main procedures that parents attempt to use to discipline their children. Within a few years of Ferster’s initial research (which started with pigeons and was later applied with chimpanzees), studies on the use of time-out with children started appearing in the research literature. The initial attraction of time-out was that it was conceptualized as a non-punitive form of punishment. That is, it could be used to reduce the likelihood of a child engaging in selected behaviors without having to resort to more classical forms of punishment like spankings.

Although there are many forms of discipline, time-out has the most published outcome research of any discipline procedure. In preparing this manuscript, the authors reviewed several hundred published studies on the use of time-out. Other disciplinary procedures that were identified had very few published outcome studies, and those studies were typically with a unique population such as participants with developmental disabilities or children who were not defined as oppositional.

Most of the early research on time-out examined various aspects of the procedure such as the duration of time-out (shorter time-outs are generally as effective or more effective than longer), what to do if the child tries to leave time-out (providing a barrier is as effective as a spanking or attempting to hold the child), and the role of warnings (warnings did not increase effectiveness). Other studies found that exclusionary time-outs (physically separating child from parents) are no more effective than non-exclusionary or “sit-and-watch” time-outs; and room time-outs as a back up to disruptive behavior during time-out are more effective than a spanking.

Time-out plus time-in

Over the years, the time-out literature with children has expanded to include not only the key concept of removing available rewards, but also the importance of the ability to **earn** rewards with appropriate behavior. The term “time-in” refers to the circumstances outside of time-out when the child is getting a lot of positive attention from his caregivers for appropriate behavior. Historically, when some of the early researchers were working on what was referred to as “parent training” that included a discussion of discipline strategies, they included teaching parents how to be more nurturing. They would explain the concept to parents, model it for the parents, and then prompt the parents to interact more positively with the children in front of the professional who could provide immediate feedback to the parents.

In a pivotal article published in 1977, Solnick, Rincover, and Peterson compared what they

referred to as “enriched time-in” with “impoverished time-in” and showed that the more enjoyable (enriched) a child’s environment, the more effective the use of time-out was as a discipline strategy. In other words, if a child’s environment is boring and unrewarding on a regular basis (impoverished time-in), it really may not feel much different than a time-out, thus reducing the likelihood that the time-out will have the desired impact on behavior.

Although the professional literature typically continues to associate time-out with the behavioral concept of unavailability of rewards, the popular press has been quick and persistent in making up rules for the use of time-out that are not evidence based and, in fact, seem to have no factual basis whatsoever!

Ferster’s pigeons never got a lecture on their way to time-out, nor did they have to say “I’m sorry” after their time-out was finished—two typical requirements of today’s children in time-out. Other classic misconceptions include that time-out cannot be used with toddlers or adolescents, that a response from the child about why he was in time-out will help him avoid the behavior the next time, and that punitive versions of time-out such as standing with one’s nose in a corner are most effective. Indeed, if one interviewed 3 different professionals or parents, 3 different versions of time-out would most likely be offered as the one to use with a child. It is perhaps the confusion surrounding the “right” way to do time-out that has led many parents to claim that “time-out doesn’t work!”

So just what are the key behavioral factors of time-out that help it succeed as a discipline strategy with children and, when absent, doom it to fail? The discussion below highlights the main components that influence the effectiveness of time-out for behavior change in children. These components are based on the initial behavioral underpinnings of Ferster, the behavioral literature in general, as well as on the clinical experience of the present authors.

Setting up a successful time-out

1. Provide an enriched, nurturing environment.

A child’s daily environment must be pleasant and full of positive attention from caregivers if time-out is going to work. In short, if a child spends most of his day being bored, ignored, belittled, and yelled at, going to time-out might not seem that much different and consequently will not change his behavior. In fact, many children will misbehave on purpose, even during time-out, just to get some kind of attention, resulting in their parent’s faulty thinking that even more severe discipline strategies are needed.

Children **must** experience some type of “time-in” if time-out (or any other discipline strategy) is expected to work. The rules for time-in are quite straightforward and are summarized in the [sidebar](#).

2. Keep instruction for time-out short and unemotional.

Parents often make the mistake of giving a child many warnings or a long lecture before implementing a time-out. If a parent has stated a rule to the child once, the next step should be an unemotional instruction to go to time-out. In our experience, we find that using a

Time-In

Rules for Time-In:

- 1. Any time your child is behaving or even just being “neutral”, provide her with positive attention.**

“word per year of age” is a helpful guideline.

For example, a 3-year-old can be sent to time-out with a “time-out hitting” instruction. This seems to help parents keep in mind the more general behavioral goal of delivering the consequence closer to the behavior. Warnings only teach a child that she can misbehave at least once (or more) before she will be sent to time-out. Many parents will say that their child will only listen to them after they are on their third command (and yelling), unaware that this is what they have trained the child to expect!

Lectures also are not helpful as they interfere with the behavior-consequence connection. Furthermore, most adults talk far above the child’s cognitive capabilities, especially when lecturing. Children learn to simply tune their parents out, resulting in more frustration and less effective discipline on the part of the parent.

3. Do not provide any attention during time-out

Time-out really is not time-out unless this component is in place. Many parents will swear that they are good at ignoring their child in time-out as they tell you how they remind the child over and over why he is in time-out, how many minutes he has left, that he can only get out when they say he can get out, and so forth. Of course if the child should happen to do something unpleasant in time-out such as spit, swear, or call the parent a name, surely some attention must be paid to the new infraction.

Parents also often insist they must address a child who is laughing in time out, pretending that he likes to be there. It can be very difficult to ignore a child in time-out, especially

4. Your attention should be brief and frequent. Most of it can be nonverbal so as not to disrupt your child’s activities.

3. Recognizing your child’s positive behavior must be done consistently across the day, especially when you are busy doing other things like talking on the phone or doing chores.

4. Make the most of the day-to-day activities parents engage in naturally with their children. Provide positive attention while riding in the car, cooking together, watching TV, completing a bedtime routine, etc

Ideas for Enriching Time-In

- **Verbal praise**
- **Pat on the back**
- **Brief back rub**
- **“Thumbs up”**
- **“High five”**
- **Hug**
- **Hand squeeze**

Ideas for Time-In Activities

- **Play a game**
- **Read together**
- **Go for a walk or bike ride**
- **Cook or bake together**
- **Enjoy a snack together**

Common Mistakes of Time-In (“Impoverished Time-In”)

- **Taking good behavior for**

one who is pushing all of the right buttons to make a parent angry. Given how vital this aspect of time-out is for success, however, parents must be given very clear instructions on what “ignoring” and being “unemotional” means. In our clinical practice, we tell parents not to look at, talk to, or talk about the child. We tell them to remain calm, stay in sight, and to find something distracting to do (magazine, grocery list) until the child calms down.

If possible, it can be even more effective if the child sees he is missing out on something fun. For example, a parent might continue to play with the blocks while the child is in time-out for throwing the blocks at the cat.

granted

- Ignoring good behavior because you just “expect” it to be so
- Ignoring good behavior so you can “get things done” while your child isn’t causing you any problems
- Only providing attention when it is convenient for you or when your child has misbehaved

4. Focus on building self quieting skills versus a time limit

One mistake that a lot of parents make is that they keep children in time-out far too long. Initially, we recommend that children only need to stay in time-out until they have self-quieted, no longer. In this way, the child can learn to associate self-quieting (and not just the passing of some arbitrary amount of time) with getting out of time-out. If time-out is seen as a means of helping a child learn how to calm down, then versions of time-out can be started with toddlers.

Once a toddler (perhaps between 12 and 18 months) starts to test the limits of his exciting environment, a parent can use the simplest version of time—out—removing the child from the situation. For example, instead of slapping the hand of a toddler who is exploring the DVD player, a parent can simply move the child to another part of the room where more appropriate toys are available.

As the toddler gets older and cries with this redirection, the parent can ignore the crying behavior by not looking at or talking to the child. Of course once the crying stops or even slows to a whimper, the parent can engage the child again, thus providing the “time-in” for calming down and playing appropriately.

Once a child is in preschool or older, the same basic principles should apply. Children of this age can even “practice” time-out to learn the parent’s expectations. Time-out can take place on a step or in a chair for repetition sake as long as parents continue to focus on the self-quieting aspect and do not start to make time-out about the chair by reprimanding the child in time-out for not sitting still or correctly.

If parents are able to use time-out successfully with children when they are younger, there’s no reason in the literature why they cannot continue to use it through the school and adolescent years. With adolescents, the location of time-out and the child’s behavior during time-out is rarely a concern.

Since the family has typically been using time-out for 5-10 years by then, most adolescents will just pick a dull place to sit until they calm down. Also, by then, both parent and adolescent have been relying on time-out long enough that they both know the rules. Time-out means no phone calls, text messaging, video games, or television. Thus, no

phones, MP3 players, headphones, or handheld video games are allowed. One effective addition to enhance time-out with older school age children and adolescents is “Job Grounding” which is described in detail in Eaves et al (2005).

Job Grounding is a more sophisticated version of time-out that involves the child losing all of his or her privileges (grounding) until one job around the house has been successfully completed. Thus, the child is “timed-out” from all positive activities until calming down and completing a chore of the parent’s request. If he chooses to be angry for 3 minutes or 3 hours before completing the chore, then the time-out would be for 3 minutes or 3 hours, giving the responsibility to the child for how long the time-out/job grounding will continue.

5. Use other strategies to teach children new skills

Time-out will not be successful if it is used as a means of teaching a child a new skill. Most parents would agree that sending a child to time-out, for not being able to tie her shoes is ridiculous, yet the parent may not recognize this as a skill that the child has not yet been trained to do.

There are many **social** behaviors that also need to be taught with strategies instead of time-out. For example, if a child is constantly interrupting, it is not safe to assume that the child knows how to get their parents attention without blatantly interrupting. Similarly, if a child is not accustomed to sharing his toys with another child, sending him to time-out for not sharing is not the same as teaching him how to share. Both interrupting and sharing were covered in a previous article on the DBP Web site (Christophersen and Mortweet, 2002, Teaching skills that reduce the need for discipline).

6. Be consistent

As with any discipline strategy, consistency is important if the strategy is to succeed. For time-out, this consistency should be across how time-out is implemented, what behaviors result in a time-out, and for all main caregivers of the child. The way time-out is to be implemented should be well thought out and, if a child has multiple regular caregivers, perhaps even written down.

The “rules” of time-out can describe the role of the adult as well as the expected role of the child. For example, the length of time-out should be defined such as “time-out is over when Grace is quiet for 30 seconds.”

The behaviors that result in a time-out should also be clearly defined and agreed upon by caregivers. Children learn best from repetition and thus consistent time-out consequences by an adult for the same behavior will help them learn more quickly that such behavior is not acceptable. In short, all adults who are responsible for disciplining the child should be using the time-out the same way and for the same behaviors. This is especially true for babysitters and relatives with frequent contact. It can be very difficult to get time-out to work if a babysitter or grandmother always “saves” your child by letting them out of time-out or not sending them at all.

Conclusion

Time-out as a discipline strategy is undoubtedly here to stay. On the one hand, given the amount of research that supports the effectiveness of time-out, the practitioner who chooses to recommend the use of time-out has a solid empirical base for doing so. On the other hand, the popular press, which typically has no rules of evidence, has taken such liberties with time-out that the practitioner has to be prepared to counter some of the misconceptions

that have been offered to the reading public. The authors have a resource published by the American Psychological Association that may be useful for parents and practitioners who are interested in more details about time-out and other helpful parenting strategies (Christophersen & Mortweet, 2003).

When parents come to us looking for discipline strategies to guide their children, they are often so focused on what to do about negative behavior that they forget to even notice positive behavior. By the time they ask their child's practitioner about time-out, they often state that it does not work for their child and that they would like something new and more powerful to try.

Parents are often looking for the proverbial "cattle prod." They want a form of discipline that requires no prior thought, that can be used on a moment's notice, that is effective almost immediately, and is permanent. Unfortunately for those parents, no form of discipline actually works that way. We have found that ultimately the most effective way to get time-out to work for parents is to focus on time-in. As with the early parent training work, spending some quality time discussing, monitoring, and evaluating the time-in a child experiences goes a long way in improving the success of time-out.

One caveat to the time-out research is that most of it has been done on children with mildly inappropriate behaviors. Thus, recommendations for time-out are best started early, before the child has extreme behaviors.

If a child's behaviors seem dangerous or out of the parent's control, a referral to a mental health professional may be warranted. It is not unusual for parents to give up on time-out when it does not work instantly. Thus, frequent monitoring by a caring practitioner can be helpful in sorting out whether the parent needs more direction regarding time-in and time-out or whether more intensive behavioral intervention may be needed.

It is simply not adequate to tell a parent to use time-out and then not revisit the issue unless the parent comes back in a crisis. Parents will be most successful with time-out (or any discipline strategy) if follow-up is provided along with knowledge of the behavioral basics.