

Are Time Outs Harmful to Children?

The widely recommended disciplinary technique has its critics. A look at the pros and cons of time outs

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<https://childmind.org/article/are-time-outs-harmful-kids/>

Time outs have been a go-to technique for managing problem behavior for decades, and are a staple of many parent training programs. They are recommended by most pediatricians as a way to curb negative behaviors ranging from talking back to physical aggression. Research indicates that when used properly — along with other techniques that balance nurture and structure — time outs are effective and do not cause harm.

But in recent years, time outs have acquired critics who argue that the experience can be isolating and cause children to feel abandoned in their time of emotional crisis, leading to more power struggles instead of teaching children to regulate their emotions. Critics of time outs encourage “time ins” as a more nurturing alternative, in which the caregiver empathizes with the struggling child and makes him feel heard as he calms down.

Both approaches are valuable and don’t have to be at odds with one another, says David Anderson, senior director of the ADHD and Behavior Disorders Center at the Child Mind Institute. “We want to give parents a toolbox that allows them to be both structured and nurturing.”

The time out debate

Time outs have been a popular tool since psychological behaviorist Arthur Staats coined the term and proved its effectiveness in the 1950s. Created in part as an alternative to the corporal punishment that was popular at the time, time outs remove children from the activity they are engaged in — for a very brief period — if they act out. The idea is that many behaviors are fueled by attention, so by withdrawing attention from negative behavior parents can, over time, extinguish it.

But an article published in 2014 in Time magazine titled ‘Time-Outs’ Are Hurting Your Child caused quite a stir and created a backlash against the technique. The authors, Drs. Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson, wrote “In most cases, the primary experience a time out offers a child is isolation. Even when presented in a patient and loving manner, time outs teach them that when they make a mistake, or when they are having a hard time, they will be forced to be by themselves — a lesson that is often experienced, particularly by young children, as rejection.”

The authors argue that on top of leaving children feeling isolated, time outs are often ineffective and leave children angrier than they were before.

The article refers to studies in neuroplasticity that show that relational pain (i.e. rejection) can look similar in brain imaging to physical pain (i.e. stubbing your toe). However, a subhead added by Time editors incorrectly stated that it is equivalent to physical abuse.

Soon after the article was published, Siegel and Bryson clarified much of the confusion, stating that Time editors had misconstrued what they said and that they are not opposed to time outs when used properly, and in fact expressed their approval of the technique.

“The ‘appropriate’ use of time outs calls for brief, infrequent, previously explained breaks from an interaction used as part of a thought-out parenting strategy that is followed by positive feedback and connection with a parent,” they clarified. “This seems not only reasonable, but it is an overall approach supported by the research as helpful for many children.” Despite their follow-up, however, the damage had been done.

Ignoring problem behavior

One of the key elements of a time out is removing attention and stimulation, and some imagine this to be akin to solitary confinement. However, as Dr. Anderson clarifies, “You are not ignoring the child, you are ignoring the behavior. It is the judicious withdrawal of attention in order to help a certain behavior go extinct. It is not ignoring the child and walking out of the room whenever they’re doing something you don’t like.”

Trying to have a conversation or “time in” with the child in the moment when the child is acting out can lead to arguing, notes Dr. Anderson. The child is likely to make excuses and before you know it you are far afield from the original goal, which was to diminish the likelihood of the child repeating that behavior. Also, “not every single behavior requires a conversation,” he notes. Especially for repeated behaviors, a short time out is sufficient. “You want to get the kid back to appropriate behavior as quickly as possible rather than making them feel that the conversation is an additional punishment on top of the time out,” he says.

How to use time outs

Parents use time outs in different ways, and for a range of offenses, says Matthew Rouse, a clinical psychologist in the ADHD and Behavior Disorders Center at the Child Mind Institute. “Some people really find them effective as a tool and they might use them for something like mean language, or there are other parents who might favor other strategies and might only save them for hitting or aggression.”

Whenever you decide to use time outs, there are some guidelines you should stick to:

Keep them as short as possible (some advise on 1 minute per their age, while others say 3 minutes maximum)

Make it clear what behavior led to the time out

Use time outs sparingly, not for every minor offense

But also use them consistently; if you are trying to curb a certain behavior, use it every time that behavior occurs

Give kids the opportunity to repair their behavior when they return from time out

Time outs are best for kids between the ages of two and eight

Balance is key

When talking about the appropriate use of time outs, it's important to reiterate that time outs are only one of many tools to implement, Dr. Anderson notes. Successful parenting is a balance of nurture and structure, he adds, since both help your children develop important traits like positive self-esteem and the ability to respect boundaries. It is also crucial to model the behavior that you would like to see in your children; it is unrealistic to expect them to regulate their emotions if you don't exhibit good stress management strategies.

And the majority of shaping good behavior, he says, comes not from addressing negative behavior after the fact, but actually from "praising positive behavior as it occurs."

Ideally, Dr. Anderson says, parents should be "setting clear expectations, letting the child know when they have done the right thing, or, when a situation has triggered a behavior problem, having good discussions to teach the skills the child might need to know to address situations that are similar in the future."

Stick it out

One of the most important things to reiterate when talking about time outs — or any behavioral strategy — is that consistency is a crucial element, as it is unlikely that the behavior will change after just one attempt at correcting it.

"If you want to teach a child what not to do, especially if the behavior that you're trying to teach them not to do is interesting to the child, it's probably going to take multiple trials," says Dr. Anderson. "What developmentally appropriate consequences like time out or removal of a privilege might do is incrementally decrease the chance that the behavior will occur. Behavioral work is a long-term investment, not a one-time solution."

Dr. Rouse agrees, and also says not to beat yourself up if you are not 100 percent consistent. "If you're doing it the majority of the time it's going to decrease, but it might go more slowly than if you're being consistent," he notes. Doing something is better than nothing, so don't give up.

In addition — and this can be a tough pill to swallow — when trying to extinguish a behavior, things might get worse before they get better. "When new boundaries are set," explains Dr. Anderson, "we have a tendency to push against them. And what that means is that in the process of setting boundaries for your child, your child's behavior gets worse for a brief period because they are pushing against those new boundaries. That actually means it's working."