The "Fool-Proof" Time-Out

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Time-out is one of the most frequently used and successful behavior management strategies for children ages 3 through 12. A "time-out" means placing a child in a quiet area where they can calm down and think about how they can behave better. It is a form of punishment that should be used when children break family rules. Time-out will only work as a punishment if the "time-in" is full of enjoyable activities with lots of praise and encouragement from parents. Time-out teaches a child what they are not supposed to do. However, praise and rewards are important tools for teaching a child the good behaviors that should replace their bad behavior.

Time-out is a very simple strategy for correcting a child's behavior. It is also one of the most powerful strategies that parents can use. Some parents claim that their child doesn't seem to respond to timeouts. It is very rare for a child not to improve their behavior if their parents follow a reasonable and consistent time-out strategy.

Keep this in mind: Using time-out will not correct your child's behavior overnight. It takes some time. In fact, children often fight time-outs at first. Their behavior can get worse before it gets better. Hang in there. If it doesn't seem to be working, refer back to these guidelines to make sure that you haven't gotten off track somewhere.

This report will help you develop a step-by-step procedure for using time-out in your home.

Setting Up Time-Outs

1. Find a suitable place for time-out to occur.

   It is best if this place is a little out of the way, such as a corner of a room, but allows you to keep an eye on your child during time-out. Do not use closets, the basement, or the garage for time-out. You don't want to isolate your child and you won't be able to monitor them. Also, it's best for many children if they "see what they're missing" by being in a corner of the room with other activities going on.

   Many parents find that it is helpful to place a small chair facing a corner of a room when...
time-out is needed. Make sure that there are no toys or activities that your child can entertain themselves with (i.e., you don't want them to watch TV, read, or play games during time-out).

2. Explain time-out to your child.

It's best not to "spring" time-out on your child. Sit down with them when they're in a good mood and explain how and why you're going to start using time-out. Emphasize that you want to help them behave well so that they can enjoy more activities with the family. Explain that time-out is meant to give them time to calm down and relax. Avoid focusing on time-out as a punishment (even though it is); rather, encourage your child to think of time-out as a way to remind them when they're not behaving well.

It's okay to tell your child that you don't like putting them in time-out, but that everyone needs help learning to behave their best. Some parents even tell their children that they needed similar help when they were a child.

3. Make a list of family rules with your child.

These are rules that, if broken, will lead to a time-out. Focus on "problem" behaviors that you have with your child. Don't make a rule for every possible misbehavior.

Limit your list to 3 to 5 important rules that you want to focus on. Problem behaviors might include: hitting, swearing, sassing (make sure that you don't punish them for calmly trying to explain their position or side of the story), picking on a sibling, or throwing a tantrum.

It is also recommended that you add "not following directions" to your list of family rules. This rule allows you to correct rare, but important, problem behaviors that don't always fit under a family rule category. It also emphasizes to your children that it's important to follow your directions.

Avoid using time-out for "nagging" behaviors, it's best to ignore these. Never use them for honest mistakes or emotional expressions (e.g., spilling milk, doing a homework problem wrong, crying, or feeling angry or frustrated).

4. Establish how long time-out will last.

Most children can start taking time-outs around age 3. Some professionals recommend that parents begin teaching their children how to take time-outs around age 2½. Time-outs don't need to last long. A good rule of thumb is to make time-out last 1 minute for every year of age (e.g., 3 year-olds get 3 minutes, 4 year-olds get 4 minutes, etc.). Some very active children or those with short attention spans may need shorter time-outs. For these children, 4 to 5 minutes can seem like an eternity. You can try shortening the length of time-out if your child can't sit still for any activity for more than a couple of minutes. However, make sure that you give the longer time-outs an honest try first.

Do not give a young child 15-20 minutes or more in time-out. This punishment is not called time-out, it is called isolation and should be reserved for older children in the form of a room restriction.

Giving your child such long time-outs sets you up to be an inconsistent parent. Think of it this way, time-out is designed to be an efficient and easy behavior modification strategy that parents can use several times during the day to correct a variety of problem behaviors. If you are giving your child longer time-outs, they will fight you harder, you will have to monitor them closely for a longer period of time, and they will have fewer
opportunities to show you that they can behave well. Time-outs will end up being as much a punishment for you as it is for your children. Consequently, you are likely to hesitate to give time-outs when they are needed and you will fall into the trap of parenting your children inconsistently. So, remember to keep your time-outs short and simple.

The Time-Out Procedure
(Think W-a-i-s-t, Not Waste)

Step 1: **Warn them.**

When your child breaks a family rule that deserves a time-out, give them one warning by saying, "Johnnie/Janey if you do not (stop screaming) you will have to take a time-out." Do not say anything more. If the child wants to argue his/her case, allow them to do so as long as they remain somewhat calm and respectful. After all, you may have misunderstood the situation and your child has a right to explain his/her behavior.

Step 2: **Announce.**

If they continue the behavior, tell him/her that they need to take a time-out by saying, "Johnny/Janey, I told you to (stop screaming) but you didn't. Now you must go to time-out." Don't yell, criticize your child, apologize, or ask them to take a time-out. Be very firm in telling them that they must take a time-out. Stay away from discussions or arguments over whether they deserve a time-out unless you are truly unsure of the situation, then ask lots of questions.

Step 3: **Ignore.**

It's very important that you ignore all temper tantrums, begging and promises designed to get out of taking a time-out. Once you have announced that your child must take a time-out, there is no going back (unless, of course, you realize that you misunderstood the situation or made a mistake). Most children will try to convince their parents that they will "never do it again." Ignore them.

Don't get upset by their temper tantrums. Expect them. Your child is likely to be very upset that they have to take time-out. That's good. You don't want them to enjoy time-out.

Resist the impulse to increase the length of their time-out or give them greater punishments. You may wish to say something like: "We can talk about this after your time-out," or "The sooner you start taking your time-out, the sooner it will be over." If your child absolutely refuses to take a time-out, you can gently guide him/her toward the time-out chair by walking behind them while wrapping your arms around their arms and chest.

Step 4: **Start the time-out.**

Once your child is in their time-out place and calm, you can start the time-out. An egg timer is handy here. Set it for the duration of the time-out and let your child keep track of the time. It helps stop them from repeatedly asking, "How many minutes do I have left?" You should tell them to look at the timer. Even younger children learn how an egg timer works when they are motivated to get out of time-out. Oven timers work too, but egg timers are better because you can move them from room to room, or even outside.

Make sure the timer is within your child's view but out of their reach. Tell them that when the bell goes off, their time-out will be over. Remind them that they must sit in time-out quietly and not get out of the chair or else the time-out will start over. That's it. **Do not argue or discuss anything with your child.** Talking to them any further only reinforces their efforts to get out of time-out.

If they begin talking, yelling, or getting out of the chair, quietly turn off the timer and calmly tell them that the time-out will start again when they
are quiet and following time-out rules. Do not add minutes to the length of their time-out to punish them more. They will soon realize that the quicker they calm down and take their time-out, the quicker they can get back to playing games and other fun activities.

Let your child sit in the time-out chair for a couple of hours if you have to (it almost never happens). They will learn that the length of their time-out is completely under their control.

If your child refuses to sit in the chair, hold them in your lap with your arms folded around their arms and chest. Don't talk to them. Begin the time-out when they have calmed down. After a few episodes of this "holding time-out," you should find that your child will begin taking their time-outs on their own.

Step 5: **Talk to your child, if they're ready.**

When the time-out is over, give your child a chance to talk to you about their behavior. Let them argue why they thought the time-out was unfair if they want, as long as they do it respectfully. If your child doesn't want to talk about it, don't make them.

Try to arrange an enjoyable activity that brings them back into the group and rewards them for completing their time-out. In fact, it's best that you compliment them for taking a good time-out rather than lecturing them about their bad behavior. In most cases, your child already knows why they took a time-out and lecturing them will only make them feel more angry, ashamed, and determined to get back at you with more bad behavior.

**Some Final Recommendations**

Time-outs can be used for children up to their teenage years. After that, kids resent being treated like young children and will become openly defiant over attempts to place them in time-out. Use other methods of punishment such as taking away privileges, assigning more chores, or curfews as punishments for older children.

Remember, time-out is considered an effective "first-line" strategy for correcting your child's misbehavior. Use it this way. However, always combine it with lots of praise, positive reinforcement, and pleasant time with your child. You'll find that these enjoyable activities will encourage your child to behave well and avoid time-out.