

Why Time-Out Is Out

Six experts explain why one of the most popular discipline tactics is also one of the most misused.

By Becky Batcha, Photos by Andrew Bordwin



 Andrew Bordwin

Family doctor Burt Banks, M.D., was at his wits' end -- locked in a power struggle with his son Trenton, then 4. "There was much shouting," he recalls. "It was difficult to keep my son in time-out. Trenton kept getting up and moving around. I was raising my voice and scolding him."

Dr. Banks, who teaches at the James H. Quillen College of Medicine at East Tennessee State University and has a practice in Bristol, TN, had not set out to be a cranky, loudmouth dad. He felt discouraged, but instead of throwing in the timer, he delved into the research on childhood discipline to see if science could show him a better way.

What he found was an eye-opener. First, Dr. Banks learned that he was doing time-outs all wrong. "The key is to completely ignore your child," he says. "A lot of misbehavior in children is done to get attention. Scolding gives them the attention they are seeking. It was actually the worst thing I could do."

The clinical evidence also showed that time-outs don't work unless parents practice time-ins -- positive, sometimes physical, reinforcements of good behavior. "Periodically, you touch your child's head, or smile, or say a word of praise," he explains. This essential yin to the time-out yang was not something that had been stressed in medical school.

Dr. Banks's review concluded that time-outs are often an effective and appropriate discipline for children up to age 5 or 6 but the technique is being poorly managed by parents like him in the real world of tantrums, tears, and sibling smackdowns. "Other people are doing exactly what I had done," says Dr. Banks.

Parents' Biggest Mistakes...



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Thirty years after it came into vogue as an alternative to spanking, time-out is getting its middle-age checkup from physicians and other child advocates. Some staunch opponents have gone so far as to recommend banning it. Most experts, however, remain in favor of the time-out tactic, which has enabled millions of families to spare the rod while teaching children limits. Still, they say parents need to refine their understanding of the classic technique and overhaul the way they use it at home.

Simply put, time-out is supposed to be a brief pause in a caregiver's interaction with a child, its purpose being to allow the child a chance to practice self-calming skills. What it isn't: "Time-out isn't a chair; it isn't a corner; it's not a length of time," says pediatrics professor Edward Christophersen, Ph.D., of Children's Mercy Hospital in Kansas City, MO, who helped pioneer the technique in the 1970s, after researchers at the Universities of Kansas and Alaska borrowed the term from animal-behavior studies. "It's supposed to be time out from positive reinforcement," he says. "As soon as the concept became a chair, it was ruined."

The biggest mistake parents make is to insist that time-outs last one minute for each year of a child's age. According to Dr. Christophersen, the minute-a-year guideline is supposed to be a maximum time, not a hard and fast rule. "Like so much else in childcare literature, time-out has been over-codified," says renowned British child psychologist Penelope Leach, Ph.D., who says that this formula is too simplistic. "A time-out is meant to give a child a

break from a situation that has overwhelmed him into unacceptable behavior. The sooner the child can get back in charge of his emotions and join the rest of his family, the better. If that turns out to be 45 seconds or even less, that's fine. And please, don't use a special time-out chair that is only meant to shame a child."

Making the chair the focal point is another common foible. While a designated seat can be useful for kids who need physical space to help them regain their composure, it's not necessary. Merely sitting in a chair is not a hardship -- nor should it be treated as such, says Dr. Christophersen. In addition, yelling at a child to "go to your chair" is like administering a verbal spanking, he says. The only discomfort a child should be made to feel from time-out is the withdrawal of your attention, which is distressing on its own. (Grown-ups might recall how dejected they feel when they're excluded from a dinner party conversation.)

Parents' third major tactical error, as Dr. Banks learned to his chagrin, is to muddy the message by talking too much -- before, during, and after time-outs. Warnings are counterproductive, Dr. Christophersen says: "If time-out means I'm going to stop interacting with you, how can I possibly give you three warnings? Each one is an interaction." What's more, lecturing after the fact serves no purpose, other than to remind the child why she was out of control and perhaps send her back to that state.

Finally, some parents cling to time-outs after their kids have outgrown them. By the time a child is 6 or 7, she's likely to overthink time-outs and spend her cooling-off period plotting revenge against her parents, says Dr. Banks. At this age, a better maneuver is to take away privileges that are logically connected to the problem at hand. If a child refuses to turn off the TV when asked, for example, there's no TV for a while.

...And What They Should Do Instead

Despite all the confusion, there is still ample support for the judicious use of a time-out. Properly administered, it's the single best-documented technique in all of pediatrics for reducing unwanted behavior, according to Dr. Christophersen. "Parents can give the message, 'I'm not going to play with you until you can stop that,' in many different ways depending on a child's age and situation," says Dr. Leach. "It's sometimes enough to look away from a toddler or move away from a preschooler." However you do it, the act of giving a child the opportunity to pause and start over may enable him to take charge of his own behavior or at least to hear what the adult is saying, she says.

Toddlers and preschoolers are the core audience because their parents' affection is extremely important to them. Discipline strategies that rely on reasoning or empathy are

less effective at these ages because kids are self-centered and lack the necessary verbal and logical skills.

Then there's the matter of technique. Parents should introduce time-outs to their kids using as few words as possible: "Time out. No hitting. Hitting hurts." Start with a brief withdrawal of attention, usually lasting no more than two to three seconds, says Dr. Christophersen. Then the time-out can be lengthened, as necessary, by a few more seconds each time. A quick ending is key too. Kids should be welcomed back into the social thick of household life soon after they regain composure. "Look for that first relaxation," says Barbara Howard, M.D., assistant professor of pediatrics at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore. "Then quickly get your child out of time-out and move her on to something else."

The Guidance Approach

In part because of unpleasantness associated with time-out, like screaming and thrashing, some experts have begun to promote what they call a more positive, guidance-based approach to discipline. The guidance camp seeks primarily to effect change in schools and daycare centers, where time-outs are sometimes meted out as shameful punishments instead of brief withdrawals of attention. "I have visited schools where the teacher says, 'This is our ugly chair; this is where children sit when they're being ugly,'" says Karen DeBord, Ph.D., an early childhood specialist at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. "What goes along with that in a child's world is devastating. It's the dunce cap, the nose in the chalk circle. It just breaks my heart to see how time-outs are misused."

The basic idea behind the guidance approach is to teach rules of behavior by talking them over with your child and finding opportunities for your child to make an emotional connection to them, explains early childhood educator Lois Robbert, who teaches in the education extension department at the University of California at Los Angeles. A child who has hit a playmate, for example, would be asked: "Can you tell me the rule about not hitting other children?" His input would also be encouraged: "How could we have done this in a different way?"

Critics are skeptical of this technique because it attempts to teach kids a lesson in the heat of the moment, which hinders retention. The once-trendy "think about what you've done" approach to discipline was discredited for this very reason, says Dr. Christophersen. But Dr. DeBord explains that the guidance approach is more of a preventive tactic: "It's a way of creating the positive interactions all along, instead of just when the child does something wrong. It lays the groundwork for what the expectations are." Parents can start to guide

their children when they're very young -- sometime around the age of 2 -- but they shouldn't expect the messages to sink in with the children right away. "Remembering what you said comes later -- at about age 4 or 5," she says.

Why Variety Is Essential

No matter where they stand on the issue of time-outs, proponents and opponents agree on one thing: Time-outs were never intended as the be-all and end-all of discipline. Parents need a big bag of tricks, experts say, including redirection (interrupting a tantrum in progress with distractions like "Look at that fire truck!") and prevention (cutting short a trip to the grocery store when you know your little one has had a long day). Guidance advocates are also huge fans of positive reinforcement for good behavior (sometimes referred to as time-in) and of modeling the behavior adults would like children to emulate, both of which bring them squarely in line with the pediatric and child development mainstream.

If the discipline tactics you use at home are not as varied as they might be, take heart. You are not alone. Experts on discipline techniques say that parents tend to rely almost exclusively on time-outs and spanking until they're educated about options like redirection, prevention, and setting logical consequences for misbehavior. "Parents aren't born knowing these things," says Dr. DeBord.

Neither are parents naturally endowed with the ability to institute perfectly executed time-outs. While the concept of withdrawing your attention from a misbehaving child is easy enough to grasp, putting it into practice is much, much harder than the accepted wisdom might have you believe. Dr. Banks says he and his wife struggled mightily to overcome their instinct to react to Trenton's tantrums by hollering back at him. "I had to sometimes remove myself from the situation," he admits. "As we practiced, it became easier to ignore him." Their other major challenge was to be consistent, since it's so much easier to give in to a screaming child than it is to ride out the storm until he's able to calm down -- even for a trained family physician.

Dr. Banks's advice to fellow parents: Stay the course. Once he and his wife learned to ignore the loud protestations of Trenton, now 7, his son quickly got the knack of taking time-outs without resorting to all the drama. And since then, Trenton's 3-year-old sister, Skylar, seems magically to have picked up her brother's exemplary time-out behavior.

The siblings still torment each other and talk back -- "only every other day," Dr. Banks says with a laugh. But they've started to build the self-calming skills that time-outs encourage. "We are not having to discipline nearly as often," he says, without a hint of crankiness.

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