

Do time-outs help or hurt? It depends

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOR PARENTS EVERYWHERE

Time-out—the practice of removing a child from a situation—may not be appropriate for every child or every unacceptable behavior. How can parents decide?

- What you are feeling? Sending a child to time-out when we're angry or frustrated says more about our lack of control than helping a child learn desirable behavior.
- What has the child done wrong? Hitting another child or having a temper tantrum may warrant removing the child from the situation. But forgetting to feed the dog or talking too loud at supper may not.
- Are you using time-out as punishment? The goal of time-out is to help a child calm down. It's an alternative to yelling and spanking. If used to punish or shame, the child may think it's OK for people to be mean to each other.

Rethinking misbehavior

What we might think is misbehavior is usually a child being a child—not knowing how to act or trying to get needs met. Children are not born knowing acceptable behavior; parents and other adults must teach them.

Ideally a family sets three or four house rules, such as “Be kind. Treat things with care.” By about age 3, children can learn reasons for rules and may begin contributing to setting rules and deciding what happens when a rule is broken.

Consequences for breaking a rule are reasonable, respectful of the child, and related to the behavior—what psychologist Dr. Jane Nelsen calls “the three R’s.” For example, when 4-year-old Lisa rides her tricycle over her little brother’s chalk scribbles on the sidewalk and makes him cry, the consequence is to put away the tricycle for two days—not go to time-out.

A child’s needs may include physical needs such as hunger and sleep as well as emotional needs such as attention, a sense of belonging, more independence, security, and acceptance. As parents, we can prevent unacceptable behavior by being alert to our children’s needs and respond to them before a situation gets out of hand. When trouble starts brewing, it may help to hold the child and sit for a while. Avoid criticizing or lecturing, just listen and affirm. “Yes, I understand.”

Firm rules provide a sense of security. We need to apply the consequences immediately and every time a specific misbehavior occurs. We also need to follow the rules ourselves. At the same time, we need to remember that it’s harder for 2- and 3-year-olds to remember rules than for 4- and 5-year-olds.

Time-outs can be effective with children between ages 2 and 5 as long as parents provide *time-in* as well. This means recognizing good behavior, acknowledging effort in completing a task, giving a



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spontaneous hug or pat on the back, giving a high-five or thumbs-up, expressing thanks—all positive affirmations and validations of our love and respect for the child.

In addition, we need to remember that time-out is only one technique; it's not the answer to correcting every bad behavior. Younger children may respond well to redirection—focusing their attention on banging on an oatmeal box instead of clanging together pot lids, for example. It's also important to anticipate potential problems—cutting short a trip to Grandma's when a child is worn out from playing soccer, for example.

Guidelines

If you choose to use time-out, consider the following:

- Select a quiet spot, perhaps the same place every time, where a child can practice self-calming. It can be a chair or rug, and it needs to be away from toys, TV, and other distractions.
- If possible, introduce the space when you're both in a good mood. Explain that it's a quiet place to calm down.
- When you use the practice, state the reason simply and matter-of-factly: "We don't hit. Hitting hurts. It's not kind."
- Avoid giving an order like a drill sergeant. Instead of "Go to time-out!" try "Looks like you need to calm down."
- Refrain from scolding. Take deep breaths, and encourage the child to do the same. It's hard to just turn off emotions; let the child cry it out if needed.
- Keep time-out short. Some parenting experts say one minute for every year of the child's age, but the child may regain emotional control sooner than that. Avoid rigidity.
- As time-out ends, describe the desired behavior. "We use words—not hitting." Express confidence that the child will behave in an acceptable way the next time.

By the time a child reaches age 6, time-outs are largely ineffective. Taking away a privilege related to the behavior may work better, but what if you can't think of one, or the place or time isn't appropriate? Consider taking the child aside—no public humiliation—and coaching the child in using words to convey their needs, express feelings, and solve problems.

Ultimately all children's behavior is communication. They're trying to tell us something about their needs, or about their ignorance of safety or socially acceptable behavior. ■

Household chores: What's your idea of *clean*?

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“When I was growing up, our parents made us do chores,” says Marie in a parenting education class. “But he (pointing to her husband) doesn’t think we should do that.”

Dorothy, another parent, speaks up: “My parents never made us do chores. They let us play while they cleaned the house.”

“But how can we expect children to learn responsibility if we just let them play all the time?” asks Marie.

“Well, I learned to be responsible,” says Dorothy, “and it went beyond household chores.”

At this point, the class facilitator interrupts: “I’m hearing two different issues. There’s the issue of who does household chores, and there’s the issue of how children learn responsibility.”

Children and chores

It’s unreasonable to expect children to physically help with chores in a substantial way before they are 4 or 5 years old. But as they see their parents washing dishes and carrying out garbage, they come to understand that cleaning house is a part of life.

Consider these suggestions:

- Observe children’s interests. In many cases, a younger child will show curiosity about a chore, such as sweeping the floor. Invite the child to get involved in some way, such as holding the dustpan.
- Make cleaning up a part of routines. Encourage younger children to put away toys after playing with them, for example, and help clear the table after a meal. Don’t expect children to do it perfectly every time.
- Have a policy of clean-up-as-you-go. After drinking juice, we put the glass in the dishwasher, for example. Or last-one-using-it-cleans-it. If you’re the last one to use the bathtub at night, you wash away any dirt ring and wipe the tub dry, for example.

- Once children reach school age, have a discussion about how everyone in the family contributes to its well-being. Contributing means helping with cleaning.
- Make a list of chores and offer choices. Amy may prefer mopping the bathroom floor, for example, while Zack may prefer emptying the cat’s litter box.
- Teach children how to do chores, starting with simple ones like dusting furniture. Clear up misconceptions: “We wash the outside of a saucepan—as well as the inside.” When children reach middle school, they can begin learning how to do their own laundry.
- Avoid gender stereotypes. A boy can help cut up vegetables for supper and fold towels, for example, and a girl can rake leaves in the yard and help wash the car.
- Allow children to be responsible for tidying up their own rooms. Recognize that one person’s idea of *clean* may not match another person’s. Rather than nagging Jordan about making up his bed, his mom simply shuts his bedroom door.
- Have a general rule: “If it bothers you, clean it up.” When a fastidious 6-year-old gets irritated about bits of leaves tracked in the front door, for example, he vacuums or sweeps the entryway.

Teaching responsibility

Responsibility includes taking care of yourself, managing your personal belongings, and respecting other people and their belongings. Learning to be responsible is something children will need when they go to school, get a job, raise a family, and participate as a citizen of the community.

Learning responsibility takes time. You can start the process in several ways.

- Remember that what you do as a parent sets a

powerful example for children. If you leave newspapers strewn on the living room couch, children may assume that it's OK to do the same with their things.

- Agree on who does what and when. Without agreement, motivation can falter and complaints may arise. One family posts a checklist on the refrigerator door. Columns note the chore, the person responsible, and the date for finishing. Another family agrees to spend Saturday morning doing chores as a group and no one leaves until all chores are finished.

CONTRIBUTING MEANS HELPING WITH CLEANING.

- Recognize effort. "Jeffrey cut up all the potatoes for the stew. Thank you, Jeffrey," a parent might say. Focus on the positive, not the negative.
- When possible, allow children to experience the consequences of irresponsibility. Leaving a backpack outside overnight may mean it gets chewed up by a stray dog. The consequence may be that the child uses a paper sack until saving up enough allowance to buy another.
- Be on time. Pick up children from the child care program before it closes. Avoid being late to doctor and dental appointments. Children will take their cue from you.
- Keep promises. You've agreed to go fishing with Grandpa and the children on Sunday afternoon. Avoid postponing or canceling without good reason.
- Avoid making excuses and shifting blame. Instead of blaming the store clerk for overcharging, acknowledge that you misread the price.

Most of all, remember that all families are different. How you decide to handle chores and teach responsibility won't be the same as another family. The key is to respect each other and communicate expectations openly. ■

Bad weather? Fine ways to stay physically active

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Winter weather, whether wind, rain, or snow, can cause even the heartiest among us to wrap up in a blanket and watch videos all day.

But howling winds and freezing temperatures don't have to keep you from regular exercise. Think of the benefits for your family: Physical activity can lift cranky moods, maintain healthy weight, get fresh air, reduce high blood pressure and cholesterol, keep muscles toned, improve sleep, and promote overall health.

How do we get ourselves and our children moving—and liking it?

A word of caution: Double check the weather forecast. For safety's sake, don't go out if lightning or thunderstorms threaten. Avoid the risk of biking or driving on icy roads.

- If you face nothing more than low temperatures, bundle up and go out. You need only 30 minutes or an hour of walking or tossing a Frisbee in the park. The fresh air will feel invigorating. If you

live where it snows, you can build a snowman, go sledding, or have a snowball fight.

- Go roller skating or bowling.
- Walk the mall. Put the baby in a stroller and stride briskly, taking care to dodge shoppers. Play I Spy on items in store windows. Set a rule before leaving home: No cookies or ice cream so we don't ruin our appetites for lunch (dinner).
- Clear a space indoors where you can play active games without endangering children or breaking household items. Draw a hopscotch grid on an old sheet and lay it on the floor. Have a Hula Hoop contest. Play the boom box and dance. It's more fun if you do it with your children.
- Play balloon volleyball. Lay a piece of string on the floor as a center line, and have the child run from one side to the other to hit the balloon before it lands on the floor. See if your child can keep it airborne 21 times, the usual score in volleyball.
- Find exercise videos for children on YouTube, such as "Animal exercise for kids with animals" (6.5 minutes) at www.youtube.com/watch?v=26guG6wr5so. An easy and effective physical activity for children is the jumping jack. A harder one is walking like a crab—hands and feet on the floor, belly facing up.
- Check what's available at the local YMCA, city recreation department, gym, and your church or synagogue. Gym memberships and classes can be expensive, but you might be able to sign up for a free trial or come as a member's guest.
- Enroll children in a class such as gymnastics, tap dancing, or swimming (indoor pool). Set up a car pool with other parents for transportation.
- Organize an exercise or game group with friends, neighbors, or co-workers. Someone may offer a large empty garage or playroom. Another family may have a basketball hoop in a cul-de-sac, a ping

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pong table in the basement, or a soccer net in the backyard.

- Teach children to skip and jump rope. Gather three or more children and do skipping songs and jump rope rhymes. See a list at www.buyjumpropes.net/resources/jump-rope-rhymes-songs-buyjum-propesnet/.

A few final words

- Remember that daily exercise doesn't have to occur in a single 30-minute episode. You can split it up: two 15-minute or three 10-minute sessions. One 10-minute session, for example, could consist of three minutes of climbing stairs, one minute of jumping rope, and six minutes of dancing.
- Look for exercise opportunities in everyday activities. Take the stairs instead of the elevator, and park in the farthest corner of the parking lot instead of a space near the door. Take the dog for a walk or rake leaves.
- Set limits on screen time—TV, computer, video games—to no more than an hour for preschoolers. Research shows that limiting screen time helps children behave better, get more sleep, and perform well in school.
- Be aware that the same exercise, whether at home or the gym, can get boring. Avoid boredom by trying something new, varying the routine, finding activities you really love, making it a game, or doing it with companions. ■