

Time-Outs Do's and Don'ts

It's almost dinnertime. Dad is trying to cook. 5-year-old Isabelle is watching TV with her 7-year-old brother and doesn't like what they are watching and smacks him on the head. A couple minutes later, Father yells out through steam after dumping the pasta into the colander, "don't hit your brother". As he is warming the sauce he sees her hit him again but it's not too hard so this time lets it go with a simple "I told you not to do that." A few minutes later, as he is pulling garlic bread out of the oven, he hears a yell from the boy and he looks up to see her hitting him again. "Go to time-out," he says but he keeps cooking. Eventually, he gets a few plates together and tells the 12-year-old to start everyone on dinner and only then tells Isabelle to go to her room for a time-out again. She does go to her room where she plays with an iPad for 15 minutes and then comes back down. She calmly sits at the table and starts eating. When Dad gets up to get some more spaghetti for one of the kids he sees Isabelle smack her brother again but no one blows up because they are all eating and Dad ignores it.



So this time-out didn't work. It didn't even stop her from hitting her brother for 5 minutes, unless you count the time she was playing on her iPad. But why? Time-outs do work for most children. It turns out there are some important components to a time-out. That's right, people have actually studied time-outs and we have real data to suggest some important time-out do's and don'ts.

Time-Out Top 10

- 1) **Age.** Time-Outs work best for children 3-7yo. Before age 3 some kids do not have the ability to make a connection between their behavior and the subsequent time-out. After about age 7-8 time-outs become less effective.
- 2) **Background.** Time-Outs work only if kids are getting positive reinforcement the rest of the time. A time-out won't work if a child doesn't want a parent's attention or if she likes time-outs more than her usual environment.
- 3) **Immediacy.** The time-out has to happen right after the behavior to be effective.
- 4) **Warnings.** A single warning is fine...more than that and time-outs don't work as well.
- 5) **Consistency.** Once the process of time-out has begun it is important to follow through with the time-out.
- 6) **Location.** The time-out location should be as isolated as possible from other people and distractions. If you are yelling at your child during time-out that is not a time-out. If you child has her iPad it is not a time-out.
- 7) **Escape.** Kids will often leave time-out. There is less data on this however I recommend calm repeated return to the time-out location for younger kids and further loss of privileges (If you leave time-out no iPad for an hour) for older kids. While erecting barriers can be effective (locks etc.) it may lead to dangerous conditions especially for younger children. Holding a child in time-out is not recommended.
- 8) **Duration.** 3-5 minutes is reasonable. Longer time-outs do not improve their effectiveness.
- 9) **End.** The end of a time-out needs to come from the parent. "come back down when you're ready," decreases the effectiveness of time-outs.
- 10) **After.** The original desired behavior should be reiterated at the end of the time-out. "You were in time-out because you hit your brother. It is not OK to hit people."

It's almost dinnertime. Dad is trying to cook. 5-year-old Isabelle is watching TV with her 7-year-old brother and doesn't like what they are watching and smacks him on the head. Immediately Dad says, "Isabelle don't hit your brother. If you do that again you'll have to go to time-out." As he is warming the sauce he sees her hit him again. "Isabelle you can't hit your brother. Go into the living room for a time-out. I will come get you when time-out is over." Isabelle goes and sits on the living room couch. The living room is quiet and boring. After she has been there for a minute she returns to the kitchen. Her father immediately leads her back to the living room. "This is your time-out. I will come back and get you in a few minutes if you're calm." After about 5 minutes her father comes in, Isabelle is calm, he tells her she can't hit her brother and if she is upset she should tell her brother and try to work it out or tell him. They sit down to dinner. When dad gets up to get some more spaghetti for one of the kids, he sees Isabelle open a mouth full of food at her brother and all the kids laugh. Dad ignores it. There have been enough time-outs tonight.

Did you think the second example was going to be perfect? Every child is different and time-outs will be more or less effective depending upon the child. And remember, no discipline technique works every time. Following these guidelines will increase your chances of success. If you are doing your best and things aren't getting better you may need additional help. Please see your pediatrician for additional advice and possible referral to mental health practitioners.