

TIME OUT

Young children between 1 and 3 years of life are beginning to learn what behaviors are acceptable and what actions are not appropriate. They will normally try many “anti-social” behaviors like hitting, kicking, biting, pinching, and pushing to see if those actions will help them get their own way. It is important for children to learn these behaviors will not help them and are not acceptable.

“Time out” is one way to teach children how to control their behavior. Toddlers as young as 15 to 18 months of age can learn to use “time out” when they have behaved in an unacceptable manner. There are many benefits to using this as a teaching tool. These benefits include:

1. “The punishment fits the crime”. Children who have behaved in an “anti-social” way spend “time out” in a quiet place away from other people.
2. “Time out” also allows angry or frustrated parents to separate themselves from their children so no one is physically hurt.
3. “Time out” helps a child learn how to obey her parents. If she knows how to “sit and stay” in time out, she is essentially learning how to obey.
4. “Time out” also provides your child with a quiet place where he can “regroup” - where he can calm himself, get himself under control, and learn to think about his actions.
5. Most importantly, “time out” is one of the best teaching tools to help your child develop her own self-control.

To teach your child the concept of “time out”, begin by playing a game of peek-a-boo.

- +Choose a small, moveable object that your child can sit on, like a pillow, pillowcase, or towel
- +Ask your child to sit on the towel until he sees your face
- +Turn your face away for just a few seconds to play peek-a-boo
(You may need to gently hold your hand on your toddler’s shoulder to help her stay seated until she sees your face.)
- +Quickly let your child see your face and praise him for staying seated
- +Gradually lengthen the time before you turn your face back to your child
- +Gradually move away from your child so you can stand several feet away with your back turned. Your child should remain seated.
(If you have ever trained a dog to “sit and stay”, these concepts will sound familiar. If a dog can learn this behavior, you know that your toddler can learn it, too!)
- +Now...you can begin using the concept of “time out” to help your child learn appropriate behavior.

When your child behaves in an unacceptable way, put the towel down in an area that is not exciting or busy. (If everyone is in the living room, for example, “time out” would be in the hallway.)

- +Firmly state what behavior was unacceptable. “It is not right to kick your cousin.”
- +Tell your child to sit on the towel until she sees your face. Now label this as “time out”.
(Since this is a change from the fun peek-a-boo game, you will probably need to gently hold your toddler’s shoulder again to keep her sitting.)
- +Turn your face away so your child does not see your face or have your attention
- +After a few seconds, pick your child up, give him a hug, remind him that you love him, but state that his behavior (hitting, kicking) was unacceptable. The message to your child is “Your behavior was wrong, but I still love you.”

GUIDELINES FOR USING TIME OUT

1. Time out is just one of many teaching tools. It can be used when your child hurts another person (or animal). It can also be used when your child deliberately defies or disobeys you.
2. Time out will not work unless your child has plenty of “time in” – time with you, receiving nurturing attention from you.
3. Time out does not cause your child to feel abandoned. Children yearn for parents to set consistent guidelines and limits. Research shows that children feel safer and more comfortable when they know their parents will help them control their behavior.
4. Time out should probably not occur in the child’s bed or bedroom. You might not want your child to associate “time out” with the place he goes for nap or bedtime.
5. Time out should only last a few seconds for the toddler. “One minute per year of age” may sound like a good concept – but one minute for a toddler is probably too long for time out.
6. By the time your child is 2 years old, you can allow your child to decide how long she will stay in time out. She can decide when she is ready to return to the activity without behaving inappropriately. “You can come back to play with your cousin when you are ready to play without hitting.” This allows your child to develop her self-control!
7. Some parents use a specific place or chair for time out. If you have such a place, you may find your child putting himself into the time out chair when he is feeling out of control. This shows you that your child understands that time out is a place where he is safe and where he knows he will not hurt himself or any one else.

TEACHING TOOLS

Other teaching tools that can be used for toddlers include:

1. Praising behavior that is acceptable. “I appreciate seeing how you cleaned up your toys.”
2. Offering choices. “Would you like the cheese or the peanut butter sandwich?”
3. Distraction. Offering other options that will capture her attention
4. Practicing appropriate behavior when your child is in a good mood. “Let’s practice how to touch the baby with a soft, slow touch.”
5. Giving information. “Instead of whining, use your quiet voice.”
6. Ignoring your child. When he whines again, remind him to use his quiet voice. Then walk away. If he changes his tone of voice and stops whining, immediately pay attention to him. He will learn that whining will not bring him your attention.
7. Changing your tone of voice. Children pay more attention to your facial expressions and your tone of voice than they pay to your words. If you want your child to stop a behavior, make sure your face and tone of voice show you are serious. Don’t smile when telling your child to stop a behavior. That will confuse her.
8. Don’t ask a question if you are really telling your child what to do. Don’t say, “Shall we leave the park now?” if you really are saying it is time to leave. Asking a question means the child can answer with “no”.
9. Give the child an advance notice of a change. “In 5 minutes we will need to leave the park.” This lets your child know that her activity will be ending – even though she doesn’t understand the concept of 5 minutes.
10. Express emotions. Since your toddler probably cannot say the words, express your child’s emotions for him. “I know you are disappointed we have to leave the park.” “I see how frustrated you are.” Your child will often respond positively when he knows you understand what he is feeling. This is also good teaching so he will learn to express his emotions later on.

We hope these ideas will help you fill your “teaching tool kit”. As your child learns what is appropriate behavior, you will see that she is happier – and you can enjoy each other even more.

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