

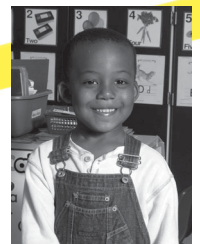
Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning



Project funded by the Child Care and Head Start
Bureaus in the U.S. Department of Health and
Human Services

The Role of Time-Out in a Comprehensive Approach for Addressing Challenging Behaviors of Preschool Children

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SERIES

WHAT WORKS BRIEFS

The Role of Time-Out in a Comprehensive Approach for Addressing Challenging Behaviors of Preschool Children

This *What Works Brief* is part of a continuing series of short, easy-to-read, “how to” information packets on a variety of evidence-based practices, strategies, and intervention procedures. The Briefs are designed to help teachers and other caregivers support young children’s social and emotional development. In-service

providers and others who conduct staff development activities should find them especially useful in sharing information with professionals and parents. The Briefs include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments.

What Is Time-Out?

Time-out is a form of discipline that can be effective in reducing challenging behaviors in young children. The term “time-out” is short for “time out from positive reinforcement.” The strategy is similar to an extended form of selectively ignoring disruptive behavior. Children are removed for a brief time from all sources of reinforcement (e.g., teacher and peer attention) following serious challenging behavior. Usually this strategy requires that a child be removed from an ongoing activity for a brief time, typically by having the child sit on the outside of the activity within the classroom until the child calms down and is ready to rejoin the activity and try again. Time-out is intended to be a nonviolent response to conflict that stops the conflict, protects the victim, and provides a “cooling-off” period for the child.

Time-out is only effective when used in the context of a comprehensive approach to behavior support that is designed to teach, nurture, and encourage positive social behaviors. Time-out should be used only by well-trained teachers and caregivers when less intrusive discipline procedures have been tried and deemed unsuccessful and only in combination with positive procedures designed to teach new skills and prevent challenging behaviors from occurring (please refer to other CSEFEL What Works Briefs for effective practices for preventing behavior problems). Effective management of behavior should always start with praise and encouragement for prosocial behaviors and self-regulation and be accompanied by distraction, redirection, withdrawal of attention, and logical and natural consequences.

This Brief provides an overview of a comprehensive approach to supporting children’s behavior and discusses the role of time-out in the context of a comprehensive approach. Although time-out has been demonstrated to be effective in some situations, it should not be overused and should be reserved for high-intensity behaviors such as aggression toward peers and adults and destructive behavior. Because of a lack of evidence to support its use with very young children as well as the research on the social-emotional development of very young children, the use of time-out with infants and young toddlers is not recommended.

We would like to acknowledge the input of the following individuals:

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Deborah Miller, AI duPont Children’s Hospital, Jefferson Medical College
Carolyn Webster-Stratton, University of Washington

Mark Greenberg, Penn State University

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Joseph Hagan, University of Vermont College of Medicine

Edward Carr, State University of New York at Stony Brook

Edward Christophersen, Mercy Children’s Hospital, University of Missouri at Kansas City School of Medicine

Nicholas Ialongo, Johns Hopkins University

A Comprehensive, Positive Approach to Behavior Support for Preschool Children

Serious challenging behaviors that may benefit from the use of time-out include aggression, destruction of property, and noncompliance. Time-out is one option to include in a comprehensive approach for addressing these serious challenging behaviors when less intrusive methods are unsuccessful. A comprehensive, positive approach should include the following:

1. Building Positive Relationships.

It is critically important that every child feels valued by the adults in the classroom. A caring relationship between the adult and the child serves as a foundation for teaching behavior expectations and social skills. Adults must be generous with their approval of the child, providing positive feedback to the child and building an affectionate relationship. When children feel liked and valued by adults, they are more motivated to seek adult attention in positive ways and accept adult guidance. Children who have positive and caring relationships with their caregivers are able to acquire the skills and understanding they need to regulate their emotions and behavior.

2. Using Classroom Preventive Practices.

Providing children with structure and guidance for appropriate behavior can minimize problem behavior. Preventive practices such as organized play environments, predictable activities, planned transitions, appropriate materials, opportunities for choice, and adult support for peer interactions minimize the likelihood that children will engage in problem behavior.

3. Teaching Social Skills.

For many young children, a group care setting is their first experience with a large group of same-age peers. The opportunity to play and work with a group of children also brings challenges related to social problem solving, friendship development, conflict resolution, and the expression of emotions. It is important to provide children with explicit and repeated instruction on the social and emotional skills needed for social competence. Effective teaching includes careful planning, the provision of multiple meaningful learning opportunities, promoting prosocial behavior, and the use of guidance procedures such as redirection and planned ignoring to assist children as they navigate the development of social relationships with peers and adults in the classroom.

4. Individualizing Behavior Intervention Efforts.

Young children may engage in a variety of problem behaviors such as hitting, biting, and hair pulling. For many young children, these behaviors are developmentally expected and serve as opportunities for the adult to guide the child to learn the appropriate behavior for a specific situation. For example, the toddler who bites to get a toy can be told, "Biting hurts, ask to play." Based on observations of the child, adults examine the context of the behavior to determine how to intervene. In this manner, the intervention is designed based on the unique, individualized needs of that child. The intervention can also be used when the child engages in persistent problem behavior that is not developmentally expected (for example, a 3-year-old who is aggressive to get toys or objects or a 4-year-old who cries and whines for adult attention). By understanding and recognizing the purpose or function of the problem behavior, a teacher can select an appropriate intervention strategy. The teacher may initiate this process based on his or her observations of and interactions with the child. When the behavior persists, the intervention planning process should include not only the teacher or caregiver but also the family, program administrator, and mental health consultant when possible.

5. Teaching Children Replacement Skills.

Children who use problem behavior to get their needs met are often missing important social or communication skills. Individual intervention efforts should be developed based on an understanding of the behavior and the identification of the skills that the child needs to learn. Once the team has identified what to teach the child, a behavior support plan can be designed that includes prevention strategies that minimize the child's continuing use of the problem behavior, instructional strategies to teach new skills, and responses to the behavior that ensure that the problem behavior does not give the child access to his or her desired outcome.

6. Providing Specialized Services.

Children with severe, persistent behavior challenges may need assessment and support from other professionals (e.g., mental health, special education, or medical consultants) who can team with the early educator in the provision of comprehensive interventions and support to the child and family. In these situations, services may need to extend beyond the early childhood program and include support to the family within the home and community. The early educator should work collaboratively as a team member with other professionals in the design, implementation, and ongoing evaluation of specialized services and supports.

7. *Involving Families.*

Programs should provide information to families about the classroom discipline plan, including the details of how and when time-out will be used for aggressive behavior. If time-out is being considered for a child, the child's parents should be consulted. The family should agree that the challenging behaviors are serious and that time-out is appropriate before the procedure is used. The team, including a mental health consultant when possible, should work with the parents to identify strategies for use at home.

When to Include Time-Out to Address Challenging Behavior

When the strategies described above are in place, time-out may be used to intervene with a child who does not respond to redirection or the teacher's guidance to follow behavior expectations. If the child is not responsive to the teacher and is engaging in problem behavior that is disruptive to the classroom or hurtful to other children, time-out can provide the child with a chance to calm down. Once the child is calm, the teacher should address the behavior with the child (e.g., talk about the problem situation, restate behavior expectations, explore problem-solving options). Time-out may also become a planned procedure for removing a child from engaging in problem behavior that serves the purpose of gaining the teacher's or peers' attention. For example, if a child destroys other children's materials or activities to gain access to teacher attention, a time-out may be used to remove the child from any attention paired with

teaching the child to request attention in an appropriate manner. Time-out can also serve as an effective strategy for interrupting the problem behavior and providing the child with a structure for calming down, expressing feelings (e.g., "I am angry—I want a turn with the dump truck"), and deciding on a social problem-solving strategy. Time-out should not be used if the child is engaging in problem behavior to get out of an activity or to move away from adults or peers. If time-out follows problem behavior that serves the purpose of escaping activities or interactions that the child finds unpleasant or boring, providing the child with a time-out could serve to strengthen the problem behavior.

Planning for the Use of Time-Out

- ✓ As discussed above, before using time-out, there should be evidence that the challenging behaviors have not improved even when high-quality preventive and proactive practices have been implemented. In these cases, teachers, in collaboration with families and mental health consultants, should carefully observe and document that the challenging behaviors are a serious concern. The child's aggressive or disruptive behaviors should be recorded in a way that documents when, where, and with whom they occur (e.g., at transition or unstructured times). Observational data also should be used to document that time-out is leading to intended outcomes (reductions in challenging behaviors).

Consider the following example:

Jeremy is a child who is prone to aggression. His teacher describes him as having a short fuse and lacking play skills, particularly how to join and play with peers. The teacher has developed a strategy for teaching Jeremy friendship skills and is working with him on a daily basis to promote his skill development. However, sometimes Jeremy still has incidents that are harmful to other children. For example, Jeremy was playing alone with blocks. He saw three children having a great time playing with the train set across the classroom. He walked over to them and grabbed a train. When the children objected and called for the teacher's assistance, Jeremy kicked the train track and hit one of the children. The teacher moved over quickly and said, "What is the problem over here?" Jeremy continued to hit and kick the other children. While the teaching assistant attended to the hurt child, the teacher guided Jeremy to the time-out area to calm down. Once he was calm, she asked him whether he was ready to join the other children. Next she modeled and practiced with Jeremy how he could ask to join the other children in their play and provided support and encouragement when he used his words to join the other children in their play.

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- ✓ Teachers should have extensive training in this procedure and should be given opportunities to practice how, when, and where they will use time-out. Every teacher should have a choreographed, well-understood sequence of events. Time-out should occur within the classroom environment and should be closely monitored.
 - ✓ Teachers should involve the support of a mental health consultant, behavioral consultant, or an administrator to help with determining when time-out will be used, how it fits with the overall behavior support plan for the individual child, and how its use will be monitored.
 - ✓ It is important for teachers to provide guidance on the best way for children to help their friends when they are in time-out. The teacher could say, *“The best way we can help our friends calm down when in time-out is to leave them alone and get on with our play. As soon as our friends come back to playing, we can have fun with them.”*

When it is agreed that time-out should be used, the following steps should be followed:

1. Describe the challenging behaviors so that all staff know exactly what behaviors should result in time-out. Young and preverbal children frequently engage in mild pushing or aggressive behaviors. These mild aggressive behaviors can usually be handled with a redirect or a prompt by the teacher for the children to use their words. Time-out should be reserved for the highly aggressive acts, and teachers should agree on what their threshold for these behaviors will be and when the behaviors will result in a time-out. In addition, alternative prosocial behaviors should be specified that can be taught and encouraged in place of the challenging behaviors. These alternative behaviors should be taught and encouraged throughout the day at times when the problem behavior is not occurring.
2. When the challenging behavior occurs, provide a very brief explanation (such as *“You cannot hit your friends, so you need to sit in time-out until you’re calm.”*) and immediately guide the child to sit in a chair. Do not interact with the child, either positively or negatively, while the child is in time-out. Time-out should be carried out by teachers in a calm, respectful, nonangry, nonstigmatizing way.
3. Time-out is brief, usually 3 to 4 minutes. However, some children will take longer to calm down than others, and individual differences should be respected. Time-out needs to be monitored carefully and ended by the teacher once the child has calmed down. Children quickly learn that time-out will be over as soon as they

calm down and are ready to re-join the ongoing classroom activity. This practice can help children develop self-calming behaviors.

4. Time-out provides the child with a chance to try again. That is, children are given an opportunity to reengage in the activity from which they were removed and thus learn a more adaptive, prosocial method of dealing with the difficulty or conflict they were experiencing.
5. Remember that time-out is only effective if it is used infrequently. Alternatives to time-out should be used whenever possible. For instance, when a serious challenging behavior occurs, teachers might interrupt the behavior and redirect the child to a more appropriate way of interacting or to another activity.
6. If a classroom activity is not rewarding to the child or if a lesson is too difficult, the child may display disruptive behavior that leads to time-out. Remember, it is “time-out from positive reinforcement,” and some children may behave in ways to avoid certain activities and go to time-out instead. If the challenging behavior persists, particularly around certain activities or settings, the child may be avoiding those activities by going to time-out.
7. If the challenging behaviors persist despite considerable encouragement for prosocial behaviors and use of time-out, observe the child again to determine what is maintaining the aggressive or disruptive behavior. Evaluate the plan to be sure the child is not getting attention from other adults or peers for misbehavior and determine whether a more meaningful reinforcement system is needed to motivate the child to use more appropriate behaviors.

Example: Kara is a 4-year-old child enrolled in a community preschool program. She has difficulty when playing with peers that includes knocking over block structures, grabbing dress-up clothes from peers, hitting children who are in centers with her, and hitting children on the playground. When an adult intervenes, she hits and pinches the adult and becomes even more aggressive. The classroom team members have talked with the family, and they all think that Kara engages in these behaviors to get the attention of the adults in the classroom or to gain a preferred toy. They are trying to give Kara more attention when she is behaving appropriately and are teaching her to ask to play with a toy, to wait her turn for an item, or to ask an adult for help. Meanwhile, there are occasions when Kara continues to engage in the behavior, and the adults feel that Kara needs to be removed from the situation to calm down and remember the expectations of the classroom. The classroom team members, in consultation with their director and mental health consultant as well as Kara's family, have decided to use time-out to guide Kara to a chair to calm down when she is aggressive. Kara's teacher reminds Kara each morning that she should ask for toys or ask an adult to help her. Kara has also been told that when she hits or kicks, she will have to go to the thinking chair to calm down and remember the classroom rules.

The next day, Kara kicked over a child's block construction. The teacher approached her, and Kara kicked the teacher and grabbed another child. The teacher stated firmly, "Kara, you may not kick. You need to sit in the thinking chair and calm down." Kara was guided to a chair in the classroom and told to sit down. The teacher then set a timer for 3 minutes, during which she minimized conversation and attention to Kara by moving away from Kara and not talking with her. When the timer rang, the teacher moved over to Kara and calmly said, "You are calm now. You may go play with your friends. Let's practice what you say to a friend when you want to play with them. You can say, 'Can I play with you?'" Kara's teacher then walks over with Kara and prompts her use of asking skills and praises her enthusiastically when she remembers to ask to play instead of grabbing.

Indications That There Is a Problem with the Use of Time-Out

It is important to recognize that time-out can be overused or used incorrectly. In such cases, it is very important that teachers and all other personnel be sensitive to the signs of trouble. The following are indications that time-out is not working and may be creating problems and a negative atmosphere in the classroom:

- ✓ Teachers are threatening children with "time-out" if they do not behave.
- ✓ Certain children are repeatedly in time-out, day after day for long periods of time. If the challenging behavior continues to persist, a new behavior support plan should be developed. Some children with persistent challenging behavior may require additional assessment and support services or mental health consultation to fully address their needs.
- ✓ Time-out is being used when the teacher wants a break from the child.
- ✓ Children are teasing the child when he or she is in time-out.
- ✓ Time-out is used as the only approach to dealing with problem behaviors, rather than as a strategy used in conjunction with many other classroom management strategies (e.g., praise, ignoring, redirection).
- ✓ Teachers engage in a physical struggle to guide the child to time-out or hold the child in the time-out chair.
- ✓ Placing a child in time-out is accompanied by scolding or berating the child.



We welcome your feedback on this What Works Brief. Please go to the CSEFEL Web site (<http://csefel.uiuc.edu>) or call us at (217) 333-4123 to offer suggestions.

Where Do I Find More Information on Implementing This Practice?

See the CSEFEL Web site (<http://csefel.uiuc.edu>) for additional resources including numerous other What Works Briefs on related topics.

Practical information on prevention strategies and strategies for addressing problem behavior can be found in journals such as *Young Children*. See the following articles and books for how and when to use time-out appropriately:

American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health. (1998). Guidance for effective discipline. *Pediatrics*, *101*(4), 723-728.

American Psychological Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2004). *Adults and children together against violence: Early violence prevention—Discipline at home, Discipline at childcare center & school*. Available: <http://www.actagainstviolence.org/discipline/index.html>

Howard, B. J. (2002). Time out. In M. Jellinek, B. P. Patel, & M. C. Froehle (Eds.), *Bright futures in practice: Mental health. Vol. II, tool kit*. Arlington, VA: National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health.

Kaiser, B., & Rasminsky, J. S. (2003). *Challenging behavior in young children: Understanding, preventing, and responding effectively*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Landy, S. (2002). *Pathways to competence: Encouraging healthy social and emotional development in young children*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

Schreiber, M. E. (1999). Time-outs for toddlers: Is our goal punishment or education? *Young Children*, *54*(4), 22-25.

Slaby, R. G., Roedell, W. C., Arezzo, D., & Hendrix, K. (1995). *Early violence prevention: Tools for teachers of young children*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Webster-Stratton, C. (1999). *How to promote children's social and emotional competence*. London: Paul Chapman.



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What Is the Scientific Basis for This Practice?

For those wishing to explore this topic further, the following researchers have studied time-out:

- Brestan, E. V., & Eyberg, S. M. (1998). Effective psychosocial treatments of conduct disordered children and adolescents: 29 years, 82 studies, and 5272 kids. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 27*(2), 180-189.
- Mace, F. C., Page, T. J., Ivancic, M. T., & O'Brien, S. (1986). Effectiveness of brief time-out with and without contingent delay: A comparative analysis. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 19*(1), 79-86.
- Porterfield, J. K., Herbert-Jackson, E., & Risley, T. R. (1976). Contingent observation: An effective and acceptable procedure for reducing disruptive behavior of young children in a group setting. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 9*(1), 55-64.
- Sherbourne, S., Utley, B., McConnell, S., & Gannon, J. (1988). Decreasing violent or aggressive theme play among preschool children with behavior disorders. *Exceptional Children, 55*(2), 166-172.
- Turner, S. T., & Watson, T. S. (1999). Consultant's guide for the use of time-out in the preschool and elementary classroom. *Psychology in the Schools, 36*(2), 135-148.
- Webster-Stratton, C., Reid, M. J., & Hammond, M. (2001). Preventing conduct problems, promoting social competence: A parent and teacher training partnership in Head Start. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 30*(3), 283-302.

This *What Works Brief* was developed by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning under the guidance of Glen Dunlap, Lise Fox, Mary Louise Hemmeter, and Phil Strain.

This material was developed by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (Cooperative Agreement N. PHS 90YD0119). The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, nor does mention of trade names, commercial projects, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. You may reproduce this material for training and information purposes.



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August 2004