

Getting the Most Out Of Time Outs

What is a Time-Out?

A time-out is a brief break from a stressful situation that is becoming, or has become overwhelming. It can be chosen by the person who feels overwhelmed (a self time-out), or given by a parent to a child who is escalating out of control. “Taking a break” can be helpful whenever anger is interfering with a person’s self-control, such as during a marital argument when voices become raised.

A time-out is different from a punishment, in that it is used to calm down and prevent further escalation, rather than as a negative consequence for misbehavior.

How Do I Use A Self Time-Out?

When you want to take a self time-out, you can:

1. First, physically leave the stressful area (some go into the bathroom to get privacy),
2. Use techniques to calm yourself, such as taking slow deep breaths, visualizing being in a relaxing situation, or repeating to yourself “If I stay calm I can handle this”,
3. When calm, choose an action that has the best chance of resolving your concern,
4. Afterwards, evaluate the results of your choice to learn from your experience.

How Do I Give My Child A Time-Out?

1. Bring the child to a quiet, pre-established area where they won’t be interrupted,
2. Have the child remain quiet there for 1 minute for each year of the child’s age,
3. Talk with the child to clarify- What behavior led to the time-out, What stressor led to the misbehavior, What the child is expected to do differently the next time.

What Else Can I Try To De-Escalate My Child

1. Redirect the child to another activity to distract them from their frustration,
2. Teach the child to use their words instead of actions- to make requests of others, to express anger or frustration, to refuse another’s request respectfully,
3. Teach the child to seek adult help if they are unable to resolve a conflict on their own,
4. Remind the child of the consequences of escalation and the rewards of staying calm.

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