

# Time-In, Not Time-Out

Tired of holding the bedroom door closed to make your child stay in time-out? Frustrated because your child isn't using his time-out to calm down and think about restitution? Perhaps it's time to re-think the use of time-out.

Some parents use a time-out for punishment, and a power struggle is often the result. Other parents use time-out as a "calm-down" period for the child to regain emotional control. In both cases, the child is usually forcibly isolated in a boring place away from parents. Children do often need to be removed from a situation that has got out of hand, for example when siblings start to hit each other. But they also need help to calm down. Instead of being a punishment, time-out can be a calming strategy for an upset child. Many parents call this a time-in.

## The trouble with time-out

Here are five of the many concerns with time-out as it is usually practised:

- Children in time-out often don't really know why they are there. Most adults hope the child is thinking about what they did and how to make amends. However, younger children may simply be confused and overwhelmed by their strong emotions. Very often older children are thinking how unfair the situation is and how they'll get revenge.
- Time-outs often lead to power struggles. Anger escalates if the child won't stay in the designated place and parents have to repeatedly force her back in.
- As children get bigger and acquire more "attitude," parents can no longer force them to go to or stay in time-out. Children with a spirited temperament strongly oppose time-outs.
- Giving children a time-out models power, not peace. They learn that when someone is bothering them, it's better to make that person go away, rather than learning the more realistic strategy of removing themselves when things get intolerable.
- Time-outs only deal with the behaviour, which is often a symptom of underlying needs or feelings. Many children get sent repeatedly to time-out because their underlying feelings have not been recognized and addressed. The real problem has not been solved.

## Adults take time-out

You may already take restorative time-outs yourself when you are angry and frustrated. Maybe you go for a walk or blow off steam playing sports. Perhaps you prefer to listen to soothing music in your room. You can teach this useful skill to your children, but they need to think of time-out as a great idea, not a dreaded punishment. You can help calm your children and focus them on their

emotions, actions and restitution, while building your parent-child relationship in the process. Here are some hints for trying child-directed time-in.

## Child-directed time-in

**WHEN:** When a child can't stop misbehaving, suggest she take a time-in, removing herself from the situation either physically or emotionally. The child decides when she's calm enough to return to the situation.

**WHY:** This strategy is not a punishment. It is designed to teach your children appropriate ways to calm down when they have strong feelings that they're expressing in unacceptable ways. Once calm, they can start thinking clearly about the situation and find a better way to behave.

**WHERE and WHAT:** The child chooses the location (a bedroom, a hallway, etc.) and the calming activity (going for a walk, patting the dog, shooting hoops, etc.).

**WHO:** An extraverted child may need someone to talk to, whereas an introverted child may need to be alone.

**HOW:** The time to talk about how time-in will work is when you are both in a good mood, not in the heat of conflict. Observe how your child usually calms himself, remind him what works and ask for his input. Does he want company or solitude? Does he want to listen to music, watch an aquarium or skip rope? Everyone benefits from taking some slow, deep breaths. If your child needs you to hold or rock him, don't think of this as reinforcing misbehaviour. In fact, your calming touch can help him regain enough control to move his brain from emotional overload back to logical thinking and learning.

How could you use *parent* time-out to help you control your own strong emotions and stay calm? Plan on how you'll step back from a power struggle. Stepping back doesn't mean the child "wins." It means you are mature enough to take a self-imposed time-out and calm down. In the end, isn't that what you want to teach your children?

**RESULTS:** When both of you are calm, then you can return to the trigger situation. Now your child can hear you when you demonstrate problem solving. For example, after time-in has brought down the level of distress, you can teach siblings different ways to handle their fights, other than hitting. And you can welcome the stronger connection in your relationship.

This resource sheet is adapted from the original written by **Judy Arnall**, a professional international award-winning parenting speaker, and trainer, mom of five children, and author of the best-selling, *Discipline Without Distress: 135 tools for raising caring, responsible children without time-out, spanking, punishment or bribery*. She specializes in "Parenting the Digital Generation." See also her article on the advantages and disadvantages of time-out at [www.professionalparenting.ca](http://www.professionalparenting.ca).