

Time Out From Reinforcement

Jim's Hints for Using...Time Out

Use Time-Out as a Classwide Strategy. A well-crafted time-out program can be taught to an entire class, not just to one or several students. A classwide use of time-out avoids singling out (and possibly stigmatizing) specific children as time-out targets.

Pair Off With Colleagues as Time-Out Buddies. Instructors may want to enlist other teachers as 'time-out' partners, so that either teacher can use the other's classroom as a safe, supervised time-out location for their students when needed. Teachers who collaborate in this way might even agree to create a single, uniform time-out program, teaching the procedures and expectations to all students in both classrooms.

Time-Out Options

- **Non-Exclusionary Time Out.** The student remains in the instructional setting but is temporarily prevented from taking part in reinforcing activities.
- **Contingent Observation.** The student is relocated to another part of the classroom. The student continues to watch the instructional activities but is not otherwise allowed to participate.
- **Exclusion.** The student is removed to another part of the room and cannot watch or otherwise take part in group activities.
- **Isolation/Seclusion.** The student is removed entirely from the instructional setting to a separate time-out room.

[View Time-Out Planning Sheet](#)

Time-out from reinforcement ("time-out") is a procedure in which a child is placed in a different, less-rewarding situation or setting whenever he or she engages in undesirable or inappropriate behaviors.

Typically, time-out is used in tandem with positive discipline techniques. For example, time-out might be employed to reduce the frequency of a student's negative behaviors (e.g., loud confrontations with teaching staff) while an individualized reward system might be put in place to increase the frequency of appropriate student behaviors (e.g., quickly and courteously complying with teacher requests).

Teachers should keep in mind important ethical considerations when using time-out. Because one consequence of time-out is that children may be excluded—even if briefly—from their instructional settings, the approach should be used only when less intrusive behavioral interventions have been tried and found to be unsuccessful. Also, students obviously cannot be deprived of lunch, bathroom breaks, or extended periods of classroom instruction just because they are placed in time-out.

Because time-out is intended to reduce the frequency of a target behavior, it is classified (in the technical sense) as a punishment procedure. As with other types of punishment, the use of time-out can result in unintended negative effects on the student. Therefore, students should be carefully monitored when time-out is being used. All incidents in which the student is timed out should be recorded in writing. Consider discontinuing any behavior management strategy if the student shows a strong, sustained negative reaction to it. (Refer to What Every Teacher Should Know About...Punishment Techniques and Student Behavior Plans for a review of aversive approaches to discipline and their possible unintended effects.)

Preparation: Because use of time-out in the classroom can impact a student's inclusion with peers and access to instruction, Yell (1994) advises that teachers take the following precautionary steps in preparing for and using time-out:

- Verify that the state and school district permit the use of student time-out as a behavior management strategy.
- Get signed parent permission to use time-out with students (particularly if using either the exclusion or isolation/seclusion forms of time-out).
- Log all incidents in which time-out is used as a behavioral consequence. Note key information about time-outs, including the date and time of each time-out incident, the student who was timed out, and the location and the duration of the time-out.

Steps in Implementing This Intervention:

Step 1: Decide whether a particular student would benefit from time-out. While time-out generally is effective in reducing problem behaviors, some children will not respond well to a time-out procedure. If your assess of a student's behavioral difficulties suggests that the child is using negative behaviors to escape an unpleasant situation, the use of time-out may actually increase that child's problem behaviors (because by giving the student time-out as a behavioral consequence, you are unintentionally helping him or her to achieve the goal of escape). Keep in mind, too, that some students have skill deficits that contribute to their disruptive behavior and interfere with their learning more positive behavioral strategies. (For example, a student who does not know how to ask politely to join a game may get into trouble because he simply pushes his way into the group.) If you suspect a skill deficit, you should first be sure that the student has learned the appropriate skill(s) before you select time-out as a behavioral consequence.

Step 2: Select the type of time-out to be used. Teachers can choose from several time-out options that differ in the degree to which they exclude children from the instructional and/or social setting (Yell, 1994).

- 1. Non-Exclusionary Time Out. The child remains in the instructional setting but is temporarily prevented from engaging in reinforcing activities. Examples include planned ignoring, and removal of reinforcing objects or activities.
- 2. Exclusionary Time Out: Contingent Observation. The student is removed from the instructional setting to another part of the classroom. The student is instructed to continue to watch the instructional activities but cannot otherwise participate in them.
- 3. Exclusionary Time Out: Exclusion. The student is removed from the instructional setting to another part of the classroom. The student is prevented from watching or otherwise participating in group activities. (NOTE: An adult must supervise the student at all times during exclusion time out).
- 4. Exclusionary Time Out: Isolation/Seclusion. The student is removed from the instructional setting to a separate time-out room. (NOTE: An adult must supervise the student at all times during isolation/seclusion time out).

When choosing a form of time-out, you should try to pick the option that is least restrictive (i.e., keeps the child within the classroom and engaged in learning) whenever possible (Yell, 1994).

Step 3: Decide on other elements of the time-out program. When putting together a time-out plan, you must decide:

- how long each time-out period will last. Generally, a short (3-5 minute) time-out period is a good interval to start with, as there is no research to suggest that longer time-outs are any more effective than shorter ones.
- if the student is to receive a single warning before being sent to time-out. A teacher-delivered warning allows the child an opportunity to improve his or her behaviors and thus avoid being timed out. Warnings can take the form of verbal statements or non-verbal signals (e.g., eye contact with the student, a checkmark on the blackboard, etc.).
- what activities the student will engage in while in time-out. While you have considerable latitude in selecting what the student will do in time-out, in mind that time-out activities should never be more rewarding than what is going on in the classroom. Appropriate time-out activities might include completing class assignments, copying classroom rules, or writing a brief account of both the problem behavior that resulted in the time-out and more appropriate behaviors that would have helped the student to avoid time-out.
- how to judge that the student is ready to rejoin the class after time-out. In most cases, the child will behave appropriately in time-out and simply return to the classroom activity when the time-out period is over. However, if the student continues to be disruptive during time-out, you can simply reset the timer to zero and tell the student that he or she must act appropriately for a set interval of time (e.g., 5 minutes) before the student can return to the class activity. The timer is reset at each additional outburst--until the child complies.

Step 4: Train the student in the time-out procedures. Prior to putting the time-out program into effect, sit down with the student and review the time-out procedures. The student should:

- know what type(s) of inappropriate behaviors will earn him or her a time-out;
- have a clear understanding of the steps in the time-out process, including the use of a teacher warning (if selected), the agreed-upon signal that the student must go to time-out, the location of the time-out site, appropriate student behavior expected during time-out, and the length of time that time-out will last.
- understand how to reenter the classroom appropriately after time-out.

You will probably also want to walk the student through a typical time-out sequence to ensure that the child clearly understands the process.

Troubleshooting:

The student fails to comply when sent to time-out. It would be impossible to offer a single, one-size-fits-all prescription to use when a child fails to comply with a teacher directive to go to time-out. A student may resist for one of several reasons: for example, to challenge the teacher's authority or as a reaction to the student's own embarrassment at being given a behavioral consequence in front of peers, or simply because the child forgot the time-out procedures. As a teacher, your response to a child's non-compliance will depend also on such factors as the child's age, the presence of other staff in the room, any special needs that the child may have, and so forth.

No matter what the explanation may be for a student's failure to comply, however, you should prepare in advance for any problems that you think might arise. First and foremost, try to avoid confronting the student in such a way that you both become locked in a combative test of wills. When sending a student to time-out, use a neutral, matter-of-fact tone of voice. Briefly state the reason that the student is being timed out and direct the child to go to time-out. Avoid long, wordy explanations or justifications.

Be sure that the student understands, and can follow all the steps of, the time-out plan before assuming that the child is deliberately failing to comply.

Use of a single warning before sending a child to time-out can be useful, as it alerts a child to his or her misbehavior and allows the opportunity for the student to act more appropriately rather than being sent to time-out. (Avoid giving multiple warnings, though, as a student may then come to believe that you will not back your warnings up with prompt consequences.)

If the student delays in following your directive to go to time-out, approach the student and repeat the request. If the student still does not comply, you may decide to physically assist the child to the time-out location. (This option is usually used with younger children.) This option should be selected only if (a) the instructor and other teaching staff working with the student are trained in the use of safe techniques of physical restraint, and (b) both the child's parent(s) and your school administration have been informed about, and approve of, this response. For older students, you might instead plan a negative consequence for non-compliance and present it to the student as a behavioral choice. For example, a teacher may tell a student, "Jane, you can choose to spend 5 minutes in time-out now or lose 10 minutes from your end-of-the-day free period. It's your choice." If the student still refuses to go to time-out, the teacher implements the back-up consequence.

The student's classroom behaviors fail to improve -- despite the use of time-out. Over the short term, it is not unusual for a child to test the limits of the time-out consequence, either by being non-compliant or showing other inappropriate behaviors. If time-out is enforced in a fair, consistent, and neutral manner, though, the student is likely in most instances to show improvements in classroom behavior fairly quickly, to begin to comply with time-out procedures, and to be sent to time-out less often. If, despite your best efforts, the student's classroom behaviors do not improve, you should investigate these possibilities:

- time-out is more rewarding than the classroom setting. In some cases, teachers discover that time-out is in fact more diverting and rewarding for a student than is the classroom. For example, a student who is timed out in a neighboring classroom may enjoy the social opportunities available in that room and continue to act out to return to it as often as possible. If the time-out situation appears to be too reinforcing, take steps to move the location or change the activities to make it less inviting.
- the student lacks the skills to engage in the appropriate behavior. Time-out should be stopped and the student should be taught the needed behavior skill(s).
- the student is actually using misbehavior to escape the classroom setting. Time-out should be replaced with other behavior management strategies that do not allow the child to flee the classroom. If possible, you should also take steps to make the classroom more inviting for the student.

References

Kazdin, A.E. (1989). Behavior modification in applied settings. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Yell, M.L. (1994). Timeout and students with behavior disorders: A legal analysis. Education and Treatment of Children, 17, 293-301.

Behavior Management Planning Sheet: Time Out

This Planning Sheet can help instructional staff to put together a well-constructed time-out program to meet a student's behavior needs. The Planning Sheet is built upon Kazdin's (1989) analysis of the effective components of time-out and incorporates guidelines from Yell (1994) for responsible implementation of time-out in a school setting.

1. Is there evidence to suggest that the student finds the present instructional/classroom setting sufficiently rewarding so that timing the student out for short periods will be an effective behavior management strategy? ___ YES ___ NO
2. Is the use of student time-out procedures permitted under the educational regulations of your state and the operating policies of your school district or agency? ___ YES ___ NO
3. State in specific, observable terms the behavior(s) that will cause the student to be sent to time-out:
 - A. _____
 - B. _____
 - C. _____
4. Define appropriate *replacement behavior(s)* that will help the student to avoid time-out (e.g., "raising hand to get permission to speak" as a replacement for "calling out without permission"). NOTE: Be sure to positively reinforce the student whenever he or she displays these replacement behaviors.
 - A. _____
 - B. _____
 - C. _____
5. What type of time-out are you planning to use? (NOTE: The choices below are ranked in ascending order of restrictiveness. Select the *least restrictive* option that you believe will be effective in reducing problem behaviors):
 - Non-Exclusionary Time Out. The child remains in the instructional setting but is temporarily prevented from engaging in reinforcing activities. Examples: planned ignoring, removal of reinforcing objects or activities.
 - Exclusionary Time Out: Contingent Observation. The student is removed from the instructional setting to another part of the classroom. The student is instructed to continue to watch the instructional activities but cannot otherwise participate in them.

Where will the student be sent in the classroom for contingent-observation time-

out?

- Exclusionary Time Out: Exclusion. The student is removed from the instructional setting to another part of the classroom. The student is prevented from watching or otherwise participating in them. (NOTE: An adult must supervise the student at all times during exclusion time out).

Where will the student be sent in the classroom for exclusion time-out?

Who will supervise the child during exclusion time-out? _____

- Exclusionary Time Out: Isolation/Seclusion. The student is removed from the instructional setting to a separate time-out room. (NOTE: An adult must supervise the student at all times during isolation/seclusion time out).

Where is the time-out room located? _____

Who will supervise the child during isolation/exclusion time-out?

6. How long will each time-out period last? (Suggestion: Start with short time-out periods of 5-10 minutes. Lengthen these periods gradually if not initially effective. As a rule of thumb, do not permit time-out periods to exceed 20 minutes.)

Length of Time-Out Interval: _____ minutes

7. Will a warning be issued to the student prior to sending that student to time-out (recommended)?

___ Yes ___ No

If Yes, who will be responsible for delivering that warning and under what conditions will the warning be given?

8. What *activities* will the student be expected to complete while in time-out? (e.g., independent seatwork, reflective writing task relating to the behavior infraction, etc.)

9. How will the student be notified that he or she can return to the classroom at the conclusion of time-out?

10. Is there a specific routine that the student must follow when reentering the classroom or instructional setting from time-out? ___ Yes ___ No

If Yes, describe the reentry routine: _____

11. Who will be responsible for informing the student of the time-out procedures and for training him or her in all steps of the time-out sequence?

12. Which classroom or school staff will be responsible for keeping a written record of student time-outs (i.e., student behaviors that led to each time-out; frequency, duration, and outcome of time-out episodes)?

13. Describe any *positive* behavior management strategies (e.g., use of rewards for appropriate student behaviors) that you plan to use in addition to the time-out procedure (Strongly recommended):

14. What is the estimated *start date* for the time-out procedure? ____/____/____
On what date will classroom staff review the student's response to time-out to evaluate this intervention's effectiveness? ____/____/____

15. Who will be responsible for reviewing this time-out plan with the student's parent(s)/guardian(s) and getting their signed permission to implement the plan? (NOTE: Signed parent permission is strongly recommended--particularly if either the *exclusion* or *isolation/seclusion* form of time-out is used.)

References

- Kazdin, A.E. (1989). *Behavior modification in applied settings*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing
Yell, M.L. (1994). Timeout and students with behavior disorders: A legal analysis. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 17, 293-301.

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