

TIME OUT GUIDELINES AND TRAINING

**Kevin Plummer, Ph.D.
School Clinical & Consulting Services**

Time Out

Introduction

Time out refers to the practice of excluding the student from ongoing classroom activities for a brief period of time. Time out may be used as a consequence step in a sequence of intervention steps that starts with systematic recognition of other behavior and recognition of incompatible behavior, followed by more ignoring of the negative behavior while reinforcing other students, leading to the complete ignoring of the target student until an approximation of the target positive behavior is demonstrated.

- 1) Ignore the inappropriate behavior and reinforce the student for any other behavior that is appropriate
- 2) Ignore the inappropriate behavior and reinforce the student for behavior that is incompatible with the unwanted behavior
- 3) Ignore the student while recognizing other students for demonstrating the target positive behavior
- 4) Continue ignoring the inappropriate behavior while waiting for the first opportunity to reinforce an approximation of the target positive behavior

Appropriate Opportunities For Using Time Out

Time out is used if the level of negative attention that the student is receiving cannot be effectively controlled (e.g., other students cannot refrain from paying substantial attention to the student) and this level of negative attention is making it difficult for the target student to change behavior. Time out is also employed if strategic ignoring is not effective (see steps 1-4 above) *and* the behavior can no longer be ignored because it is triggering other students or it has become unsafe to people or property. Time out is also used as an immediate penalty for significant behavior violations (e.g., threatening others, throwing an object with the intent to harm, etc.).

- 1) Ignoring is not possible to accomplish because other students are providing substantial attention and that level of attention is making it too difficult for the target student to change behavior
- 2) Ignoring along with differential reinforcement is not effective and
 - a) the behavior is triggering other students, or
 - b) the behavior is interfering significantly with the other students who are trying to do their work, or
 - c) the behavior is becoming unsafe to people or property
- 3) Immediate penalty for serious behavior violation

Inappropriate Application Of Time Out

Time out is rendered ineffective if it is over used as a quick and frustrated response to all types of misbehavior. The most common over use of time out is in response to work refusal and other variations of noncompliance (e.g., “Pick up your pencil off the floor and get back to work” . . . “No, I’m not doing it” . . . “Okay, you’re going to time out”).

Time out is also ineffective if it is not implemented in a consistent and therapeutic manner (see some examples of therapeutic and antagonistic scripts later in this article). If time outs occur as the result of power struggles between the student and the teacher, if the teacher shows loss of control similar to the student (raised voices and threats), and if the time out is arbitrarily implemented when the teacher loses patience, it is very difficult for students to develop responsibility for their behavior. A true opportunity to accept more responsibility for behavior and develop greater self-control occurs when the time out is something the student can predict because it follows a systematic plan, and the learning experience is uncontaminated by the personal feelings of the other party.

Finally, time out is ineffective if positive behavior supports have not been employed. For example, if a student with a language processing problem is frustrated by having to listen to long periods of verbal explanation, or a restless child is required to sit still for long periods of time, or a sensory defensive student has to work in a noisy environment, it is inappropriate to use time out as a strategy for their disruptive attention seeking behavior without first identifying and removing the obstacles to learning and providing the necessary supports. In addition, if the class does not have a strong recognition program with abundant and regularly occurring reinforcement for students who demonstrate appropriate behavior and values, time out is almost always an ineffective intervention. It is often the case that time out frequencies are high in programs that lack recognition, and when time out fails to solve the problem, inevitably it is used with greater frequency in these programs and for longer periods of time (because it seems that when it is used more sparingly it is not working well enough). That is a common mistake with human behavior. If something doesn’t work (e.g., yelling at a child) it seems that we often believe we should do more of it to make it work better, rather abandoning the strategy and doing something different.

Monitoring The Use Of Time Out

Time out should not be a regular part of a student’s treatment plan. It is important to remember that time out effectiveness is measured by the *reduction* in its frequency or *reduction in the level of restriction* required. It should be used as a short-term intervention to help a student learn and employ more effective self-control strategies. If it is used regularly and at a consistently high level of restriction (e.g., every day for prolonged periods or several times a day for more than a week), it is not working, it is not having a good effect and it should be reevaluated (see Time Out Analysis form). All programs that employ time out should maintain a time out log that monitors (for every student) length of time out, date and time, as well as reason for time out. Additional data should also be recorded every time there is a problematic time out (e.g., excessive time

out length, excessive number of time out episodes in a short period of time, and excessive time out intensity, such as self-abusive behavior, sexual behavior, prolonged screaming, heightened anxiety or panic in the time out space, etc.). All programs that employ time out should review effectiveness on a regular basis and all students who experience excessive problematic time outs should have their time out program analyzed using the Time Out Analysis form. This analysis is triggered by the following criteria:

Excessive number of time out episodes in a five-day period (e.g., 10).

Excessive time out length of two episodes in a five-day period (e.g., longer than 30 minutes).

Excessive time out intensity in two episodes in a five-day period (e.g., self-abusive behavior, sexual behavior, prolonged screaming, heightened anxiety or panic, etc.)

Proactive Stress Management

Many students need time away to help settle themselves. There is nothing wrong with this. But they should not be using time out for that purpose. These students should be taught settling strategies and they should have an established settling routine and a settling area that they can use when they need it. If a student does not have a settling routine, if a student does not know how to settle, time out will be over used and this could be characterized as denying a student access to his/her education. Settling routines and time out are similar in that the student is away from the main activity in the room, but in all other ways they differ. Settling is proactive (before problems get worse) while time out is reactive (after a problem has become too serious). Time out is a disciplinary step and the student is not reinforced during the time out period. Settling is a self-control strategy and the student is reinforced for using it. The settling area is equipped with a variety of tools and supports that the student may use as part of a settling routine. The time out area has nothing in it other than a place to sit down. A staff member may help a student in the settling area (although students usually complete their routines in solitary fashion) while staff do not engage students in time out. It is not generally seen as a problem if a student has to make multiple trips to the settling area, but multiple trips to the time out area is seen as a serious problem. For more information about establishing settling routines, see the articles *Settling Routine* and *Restorative Breaks*.

In addition to established settling routines, many other stress management interventions should be employed. Students should be taught diaphragmatic breathing, guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation and meditation, and these interventions should be provided proactively, in the form of a coping diet throughout the day. Various movements and postures are known to restore calm and equilibrium. Such movement breaks should be inserted into the schedule as well. Other types of movement that help students deal with restlessness should also be provided proactively. Leisure breaks and Reset breaks (see separate article) can help students shift their mind, shift their thinking and relax. Every student needs an effective stress management plan and all staff need

to be aware of when to implement that plan. The best and most effective plan that is implemented at the *wrong* time instantly becomes an *ineffective* plan and leads to an exercise in frustration and futility for the student and the teacher.

The Continuum Of Restriction

Time out is a form of restriction (from privileges, from attention and recognition, from enjoyable activity, etc.), and therefore the various types of time out should be viewed as points along a continuum of restriction, from minimum restriction to maximum restriction. The goal is to help students recover from inappropriate behavior with interventions on the *minimum* end of the continuum. One example of a continuum of restriction is outlined below.

- Strategic ignoring
- Reduction in recognition/differential recognition
- Temporary restriction of privileges
- Isolation within the classroom
- Isolation outside the classroom
- Isolation outside the classroom in a strictly confined space
- Physical restraint

General Time Out Guidelines

Time out is sometimes accomplished at the student's desk (head down on the desk for a brief period), but it is usually done in an area in the classroom that is apart from the main activity. This is respectful of the student who should not be on display in front of peers and it also speeds recovery when thinking can be done away from the source of the problem. The area should be free from distraction, there should be nothing else to do in this area, it should be out of the way of the main traffic routes in the classroom (not near the pencil sharpener), it should be easy to supervise from across the room, and the area should not be used for anything else. Usually there is a chair in the time out area because we don't want children to have to sit on the floor, and the area is closed on two or three sides (e.g., a corner of the room with a bookshelf on one side).

While in a time out we do not usually intervene while a child is settling down. The student should be given a chance on his/her own, even if it is quite a distraction to the class at first. However, if the child is unsafe the child should not be left alone to settle down. It is not a time out until the situation is safe. If the situation is unsafe or the child is emotionally unstable the situation calls for crisis intervention, not time out.

The time out period should be of short duration. Usually two minutes is plenty of time to accomplish the objectives, once the tantrum has stopped and the student has become settled enough to appreciate the significance of the experience. The objectives are: a) the student regains reasonable self-control and b) the student realizes decreased attention, recognition and privilege (with full knowledge that the rest of the class continued to receive recognition for appropriate behavior).

Sometimes people require the student to maintain absolute calm and provide full admission of guilt before they allow the student to leave time out (this is usually emphasized with the more restrictive forms of time out). Not many people can achieve absolute calm under these circumstances, and those who do usually achieve it after a prolonged period of crying or acting out and we're trying to avoid this. The script for the erroneous exit often looks something like this:

“I want to get out of here, I want to go back to class”
 “You’re shouting, so I can see you’re not ready to leave”
 “I am ready, I just told you”
 “First you have to be completely calm and quiet, then I’ll know you’re ready”
 “You’re a ___ ___”
 “See what I mean?”
 . . . a little while later and after a major tantrum
 “I’m ready now”
 “Okay, you’re nice and calm, now why did you have to go through all that?”
 “I don’t know, I just wanted to leave and you wouldn’t let me go”
 “I was ready to let you leave, but you weren’t calm”
 “I’m calm now, so can I go back to class? I don’t want to miss gym”
 “Sure, you can go back, just tell me what you did wrong and why you did it”
 “I did — and I did —, but it wasn’t my fault (gives a few reasons)”
 “That isn’t all that happened. You know what you did; now you have to tell me. I can’t let you go back until you tell me what you did and you take responsibility for it.”
 “I already told you and that’s all I have to say”
 “You know there’s more to it”
 “I’m not saying anything else about it”
 “Then you’re not going back. I hate to see you miss gym”
 “You ___ ___, now you’re making me miss gym!”
 “I’m sorry, but now it looks like you’re definitely not ready to go back”

Achieving Calm

It is important for the student in time out to achieve calm and it is important for that student to accept responsibility and develop some better problem solutions, but the process is more efficient and more therapeutic if we break it down into stages and those stages progressively leave time out behind (rather than becoming part of time out). When the student is finished with the tantrum, the verbal assault, or the acting out and some relative calm has been achieved for a brief period, the student can take the next step toward leaving time out and getting back to class. That next step is to achieve a calm state suitable for the classroom and truly representative of a recovery from the initial problem. This is the relaxation step and it should consist of a simple relaxation exercise (taken from the student’s profile of effective relaxation exercises) that can be completed just outside the time out area (e.g., just outside the time out doorway or a step away from the time out desk). If the student completes the relaxation exercise and appears calm the student is allowed to return to class. If the exercise is completed and the student is not calm another exercise is conducted or the first one is repeated (the student is asked for input in selecting an exercise that will bring about more calm).

Examples of suitable exercises come from the classroom relaxation program (e.g., diaphragmatic breathing, guided imagery, counting slowly backwards from 10, progressive muscle relaxation, various movements and postures etc.). With this procedure, when the student asks to leave time out, the student is asking to restore calm. Eventually we want the students to request the calming step without needing to ask to leave time out. The script for this exit could look something like this:

“I want to get out of here, I want to go back to class”
 “Okay, let’s get started with the calm routine, let’s step over here and pick an exercise”
 . . . go through the exercise
 “Let’s see how that worked” (reflect on breathing, voice tone and content, body language, etc.)
 . . . if more calm is needed
 “Sometimes it’s hard work to get calm, let’s do that again” (or pick a different exercise)
 . . . if calm enough
 “You did a nice job getting calm, that wasn’t easy, now let’s go back to class and make a plan” (this is the step where accepting responsibility is achieved and a plan is developed to avoid a recurrence of the problem).

This step is important because it allows staff to grant the student’s request to leave time out before the student achieves perfection (otherwise known as a recipe for disaster), and while the student is highly motivated (to end the time out) (s)he is engaged further in an exercise designed to bring about the level of calm and rational behavior that is difficult to achieve in the time out itself. In addition, the student is practicing self-calming skills that could prove to be useful in the classroom and help eliminate the need for time outs. When students understand the procedure we can expect them to script their exit requests by stating, “I’m ready to relax now,” or “Can I do the relaxation exercise now?”

Problem solving And Accepting Responsibility

Once a better level of calm is achieved it is easier to engage in problem solving and accepting responsibility. Many children with chronic behavior problems have been shamed, humiliated, or punished severely for even minor misbehavior. This is important to keep in mind as we conduct problem solving. We want to avoid a process that could trigger just such an emotional over reaction. This is why we don’t demand, as the first step in the process, that students tell about what they did wrong when we already know what happened. Instead, we tell them what happened, all sides of the story (a highly condensed, matter-of-fact version) while they are expected to listen. If students want to give their account they are allowed, but in the end they will be asked to give an account of what happened from the view of the others involved (e.g., the teacher or another involved student) based on the brief summary already provided by the teacher. This is a perspective taking exercise that might help the next time the student is in a similar situation.

Sometimes students find this difficult to do, especially right after a time out. The issue is not forced, but until the matter is fully resolved there is a temporary restriction of privileges. If you refer back to the continuum of restriction earlier in this article you will see that your efforts are moving the student in the right direction, from the maximum range toward the minimum end. It is not usually possible to do this all at once as one step, and when a highly restricted time out is used to accomplish a complete resolution the time out becomes protracted and emotionally draining (eventually losing sight of the original problem and creating many other more important problems along the way). When a student leaves time out, goes through the relaxation step and then does not want to do the problem solving (or the staff suggest that it is wise to do the problem solving later) it must be understood that privileges will wait until that is done. Avoid the temptation to say, "Well then, you're going back to time out." Keep in mind; time out is not used for concerns with compliance, as mentioned earlier in this article. Also refrain from saying, "Well then, you're not getting any privileges until you do it." That's an ultimatum. It's antagonistic and likely to escalate the situation back to a time out level.

Instead, at this stage in the process the staff must rely heavily on the recognition program (where, for example, other students are earning privileges). Remember, a time out program's effectiveness will always be enhanced by the strength of the recognition program and the provision of proactive alternatives (various stress management tools).

Communication For De-escalation

Throughout the intervention process it is important to remember that our communication (verbal and nonverbal) is a critical factor in controlling and containing the situation. For more information about this see, *Communication For Better Classroom Management*. Listed below are some basic de-escalation guidelines.

- Avoid using threats ("If you don't do — I'm going to —")
 - they destroy the teacher-student relationship
 - they raise anxiety
 - they undermine trust
 - they create resentment
 - they create a coercive atmosphere
 - they make the teacher look desperate and out of control
 - they undermine the student's confidence in the teacher
 - they increase insecurity

Avoid ultimatums (you will, or else)

Describe objectively what is happening (see reflective listening below)

Use a calm, level voice

Identify choices

Provide space, walk away and allow the student time to think

Allow time, reduce the pressure of time constraints

Stay focused on the present and what is currently happening

Avoid physical contact with an agitated student

Keep it private

Change the scenery

Acknowledge feelings and validate those feelings

Draw distinction between feelings and behavior

Explain consequences without judgment (no advice)

Use reflective listening

- listen with patience
- nod your head
- do not interrupt
- do not over interpret or jump to conclusions
- tell back what you've heard ("Let me see if I've got this right.")

With reflective listening the other person feels "heard" and misconceptions are cleared up quickly. The telling back process creates a shared understanding between the teller and the listener and it prompts the teller to explain further until all the pertinent facts and feelings have been expressed. This is a crucial first step in effective problem solving and mediation.

Time Out Training

Some students do not want to complete a time out; they don't want to let go of the attention (even negative attention). Others don't know how to complete a time out. Perhaps they're accustomed to engaging in temper tantrums when upset and they only know how to calm down by expending this energy. They may have had little experience in purposeful calming, the purposeful regaining of self-control. In addition, they may have had little practice enduring a period of being ignored. Some children are put in a time out when they are in the middle of a tantrum (or they negotiate their way out of a time out by escalating the tantrum) and they are promised a chance to return to play when they are calm. With this scenario there is no period of calm that is required. The requirement is that the tantrum stops. When they are in the best position to take notice of the lack of reinforcement that comes with a time out (not much notice is taken in the middle of a tantrum) they are allowed to return to the activity the instant they are calm. This type of time out experience brings very little benefit to the child's development of self-control and emotional stability. Some children have developmental delays that make it difficult for them to understand what is happening with a time out. In all of these cases we have to be more deliberate in teaching the time out process. We cannot assume that they will learn the time out process from experience (how much does

anyone learn when they are that upset?), so if it is not explicitly taught time out should not be used. Once again, time out would be over used (too many and time outs that would last too long), but the problem would be in the child's lack of understanding, not necessarily in the faulty application of the program.

Time out is usually explained to a student before the next problem occurs. Explanations vary with social stories and visual supports, but the explanation is usually brief, straightforward and without value judgment or personal feelings. It is important for students to understand that their behavior will tell the teacher whether or not they need a time out. In this way, time out is up to the student and the behavioral choices the student makes. The length of the time out is also up to the student (how long it takes to complete the two minutes of good self-control).

Some students are helped to understand the process when a visual support is used to monitor how much progress they have made through their time out. The visual should never be a clock. When a student is at the beginning of something they don't want to do (such as a time out) the clock will never move fast enough to encourage them. It will be an added source of frustration at a time of diminished tolerance. Instead we use a velcro strip and attach three chair pictures (see attached). As soon as the student shows the first signs of calm and self-control (just a step in the right direction) a chair is removed (perhaps after just 5 seconds). This is an attempt to build some momentum. Too often a student will achieve good self-control, wait a minute or so, and then act out in an attempt to regain some attention. We want to encourage them before that happens.

"I'm taking off a chair. You are doing a nice job settling down."

It may take quite a while to get to that first point, perhaps a restraint has been needed and a lot of yelling has been ignored. The chairs visual is a reminder that all that behavior has not advanced their cause (the chairs still remain, no one is changing their mind), and this is contrasted by the first few seconds of calm when a chair is removed. We want the student to think, that wasn't that hard, I can do that, what's the point of kicking up such a fuss? Sometimes a student will say, immediately at the end of a tantrum, "I'm calm now, why can't I go back to my seat?" The teacher should say, "Because now you have to do the time out." "But I've already been in time out," the student might add. "That wasn't time out," the teacher should say, "that was yelling and kicking around. Time out is quiet and in control. Yelling and kicking around doesn't count for a time out."

When the situation is calm and the child is exercising good self-control the time out starts. This is not when the time out ends, and this is why a two-minute (or less) time out can be very effective. The point is made quite emphatically at the time when the student is able to learn from the experience. What the student should learn from this experience can be learned quickly once the student is exercising good self-control.

We try to help students realize that there is a great gain from calm and good self-control (the time out elapses, the chairs come off), while there is no gain from the tantrum. While a student is in time out we don't want to be engaged in conversation

about all of this. It is okay to have a brief exchange at the start of time out (the tantrum is over and the student wants to leave time out at that point) because the time out hasn't started yet. The rest of what you need to say during time out can be said with the visual. If a chair comes off you are encouraging the student and if you want to tell the student to try harder or do a better job or quiet down, just leave a chair on.

After the first chair is removed quickly, the second chair should come off following a longer period of time (nearly a minute). If there is a disruption from the student during that time it should be ignored and the chair should stay on a little longer. Don't mention it, don't redirect the student, and never start the student over again at the beginning. Disruptive behavior should be ignored, if possible. If it can't be ignored the staff should act as if it is being ignored. Simply walk over to the time out area and reach toward the chair visual and say, "I was just coming over to take away another chair, but now I see you're making a lot of noise. I'll be back shortly to check again." If a short period of good self-control passes it is time to pull off the second chair. Follow a similar sequence for the final chair.

The only time a chair is added (either a fourth chair to the string of three or putting back a chair that was removed) is when there has been another incident while in time out. For example, the student may run out of the time out area and attempt to go after another student or attempt to destroy property.