

Think Time Protocol and Guidelines

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Introduction

Think time is a form of time out, where the primary objective is to have students engage in a self-control exercise while experiencing a "no reward condition" for a prescribed period of time, while thinking about their behavior and about options that would be better for them. Time out refers to the practice of excluding the student from reward for a brief period of time. Reward could be social (participating with peers in ongoing classroom activities), personal approval from adults, attention (peer and staff), and tangible/concrete reinforcement (credits, tickets, stars, moving up in the Green Zone). Time out can be momentary and in place in the classroom (a brief look away/step away and a silent count to three), more deliberate (ignoring a behavior and immediately attending to and reinforcing another student for the target behavior), or more extensive, planned and structured, such as Think Time.

Prior to issuing a Think Time, there is usually an opportunity to systematically apply a series of de-escalation strategies in the form of positive behavior supports (see <http://kevinplummerphd.com/de-escalation-guidelines/>). One of these strategies is strategic ignoring, as outlined below.

- 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 targeted positive behavior
- 4) Continue ignoring the inappropriate behavior while waiting for the first opportunity to reinforce an approximation of the target positive behavior

Reasons for Employing Think Time

- 1) Think Time 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.
- 2) Think Time is used if the student has refused to take a restorative break (<http://kevinplummerphd.com/restorative-breaks/>) and the level of negative attention that the student is receiving in the classroom cannot be effectively controlled and this level of negative attention is further escalating the student.

We want to help students understand that a restorative break is a better option for them than a Think Time (they can take a break as a way avoid think time, stay in the green and earn credits), so following a successful Think Time, the student should then complete a restorative break.

- a) Students can earn credit for breaks, but not for Think Time.
 - b) Students can get help and staff attention for breaks, but not for Think Time.
 - c) The goal for breaks is to feel better, whereas the goal of Think Time is self-control. Think Time doesn't address the added benefit of feeling better.
 - d) Breaks may exclude the student from class, but Think Time involves more exclusion because it is always followed by a break.
- 3) Think Time is also employed if strategic ignoring is not effective (see steps 1-4 in the Introduction section of this article) *and* the behavior can no longer be ignored because it is triggering other students. Triggering other students can be experienced as a reward by some students, and that could serve to sustain their negative behavior, despite how effectively people ignore it. Removing the student to the Think Time location eliminates that problem.
- 4) Think time is employed if the student's behavior has become unsafe to people or property.
- 5) Think time is used as an immediate penalty for significant behavior violations (e.g., threatening others, throwing an object with the intent to harm, etc.).

Think Time Routine

The think time routine requires that the student leave the classroom and achieve self-control with a settled, quiet, and composed state (for a prescribed period of time) in a private location without engaging with staff. Staff attention and engagement can be reinforcing to the student, so it could serve to reinforce the inappropriate behavior that led to the Think Time. Staff engagement in an attempt to create better compliance with the Think Time routine could serve to reinforce student lack of compliance with the Think Time routine, thereby extending the length of Think Time.

Visual systems embedded in the Think Time routine (and posted in the Think Time area) enable staff to direct the student, when necessary, without engaging with the student, and they enable clear communication without direct contact communication between staff and student.

Staff should list the Think Time expectations visually. Typical expectations in the Think Time routine include:

- 1) sit in a designated spot (e.g., a chair)
- 2) remain quiet
- 3) show a calm body.

Staff should also use a visual progress indicator that can provide feedback to students about how close they are to meeting those expectations and how close they are to completing their think time routine (two examples of such a visual, combined with the expectations can be seen by searching the Think Time Visual at kevinplummerphd.com).

The Think Time 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 building, 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 Think Time area because we don't want children to have to sit on the floor.

The visual supports enable staff to point to the conditions and provide scripted verbal redirection or scripted approval for compliance with the expectations of the routine. The Think Time period should be of short duration. Once the outburst has subsided and the student has become settled enough to appreciate the significance of the experience (see the three expectations above), usually a few minutes is plenty of time to accomplish meaningful objectives.

The meaningful objectives are:

- a) the student regains reasonable self-control
- b) the student experiences decreased attention, recognition and privilege
- c) the student realizes that, in the meantime, the rest of the class has been well-rewarded.

Students achieve better comprehension of the routine, and at a quicker rate, when a visual support is used to monitor how much progress they have made through their Think Time. 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 Think Time) a 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 sometimes use a visual of a meter (semi-circle) with a movable arrow or Velcro tabs where a progress indicator can be placed and moved along (see the Think Time Visual at kevinplummerphd.com for an example of both). As soon as the student shows the first signs of calm and self-control (just a step in the right direction) the indicator is moved to the next spot and the student is told, "Now your think time is moving in the right direction." 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.

It may take quite a while to get to that first point, perhaps a lot of yelling has been ignored. In this instance, the progress meter visual is a form of communication for the student; it's a visual reminder that all that inappropriate behavior has not advanced their cause (the visual remains unchanged and no one is changing their mind as a result of the tantrum). This is contrasted by the first few seconds of calm when the marker is moved. 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, as soon as they end their outburst in the Think Time area, "I'm calm now, why can't I go back to class?" The staff should say, "Because now you have to do the Think Time." "But I've already been doing it," the student might add. "That wasn't Think Time," the teacher should say, "that was yelling and kicking around. Think Time is quiet and in control (point to the expectations). Yelling and kicking around doesn't count for Think Time, it's just a waste of your time." We try to help students realize that there is a great gain from calm and good self-control (the Think Time elapses, the visual moves), while there is no gain from the outburst.

When the situation is calm and the child is exercising good self-control; that is when the Think Time starts. This is not when Think Time ends, as many believe, and this is why a few minutes (or less) of Think Time can be very effective. The Think Time point (the objectives listed earlier) is made quite emphatically at the precise 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.

While a student is in a Think Time we don't want to be engaged in conversation about all of this. It's okay to have a brief exchange at the start of Think Time (the outburst is over and the student wants to discuss the problem or leave to go back to class), because the Think Time hasn't actually started yet. The rest of what you need to say during Think Time can be said with the visual and with scripted comments about the visual and the expectations.

If there is a disruption from the student after achieving some progress (a move ahead on the visual), it should be ignored and the visual should remain frozen in place a little longer. Don't mention it, don't redirect the student, and don't start the student over again from 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. Staff could show that they are occupied with writing something down or reading something, then look up and reach for the visual and say, "I was just coming over to move this along, but now I see you're making a lot of noise. I'll go back to my writing and check again shortly." If a short period of good self-control passes it's time to move the indicator. Follow a similar sequence for the rest of the Think Time.

The only time Think Time is started over is when there has been another incident while in Think Time. For example, the student may run out of the area, or attempt to destroy property, or go after staff.

When There are Problems with Think Time

Some students take a long time to complete Think Time, or they refuse to complete the routine. Some students try to run out of the area or do other unsafe things. Some students escalate during Think Time and further lose their ability to maintain any self-control.

The student may need to be physically guided to the Think Time area, and once there, may try to get up and run around the school or outside the building. Physical guidance and physically preventing a student from running away from the supervision they need (given the state they're in) is a form of physical restraint. Prolonged and repeated physical restraint is more intrusive and more restrictive than a safe room, so advancing the student to the next stage of de-escalation, the safe room, may be necessary. Ideally, the Think Time area should be nearby the safe room. For more information about using a safe room, see Safe Room Guidelines at kevinplummerphd.com.

If the student is not unsafe, just uncooperative, repeated attempts to start the Think time routine should be made and staff should be prepared to ignore as much as possible, redirect using the scripts and visuals, and remind the student that this is a "no reinforcement" condition, that credits and privileges and advancing up in the Green Zone happen only after Think Time has been completed.

It is also important, with an extended uncooperative Think Time, to periodically switch staff. This is so that the student can experience a concrete removal of attention and think about where that attention is going. A typical staff script for that switch (the arriving staff speak only to the leaving staff) is as follows:

"Can you go back to class? David has earned top tier for his credit check and he really wants to play a game with you."

Think Time is a "no reward" condition, but it can be rewarding for students to believe that they're occupying the resources of staff who can't now pay attention to anyone else. The staff switch addresses that. The staff switch is also important because it allows students to see the consistency across staff, to see that there's no way to alter the routine by working out an individual arrangement with different staff.

A Think Time routine that is particularly problematic (although not necessarily unsafe) may have to be reviewed and practiced later, and it may involve the student making a repair (making amends). See the practice and repair programs at (kevinplummerphd.com). Whenever Think Time is needed, the student should also be moved down significantly in the Green Zone Program.

Following Think Time, students should complete a restorative break. We want to help students understand that a restorative break is a better option for them than a Think Time (they can take a break as a way avoid think time, stay in the green and earn

credits, and they can return to class faster by just taking a break and avoiding Think Time).

Inappropriate Application of Think Time

1) Noncompliance. Think Time 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 Think Time is in response to refusal behavior 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 Think Time”).

2) Power struggles. Think Time is also ineffective if it is not implemented in a consistent and therapeutic manner. If Think Time occurs as the result of a power struggle 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 own behavior. A true opportunity to accept more responsibility for behavior and develop greater self-control occurs when the Think Time 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.

3) Inadequate positive behavior supports. Think Time is ineffective if positive behavior supports have not been employed prior to issuing it. For example, if a restless student 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 Think Time as a strategy for their disruptive attention seeking behavior without first identifying and removing the obstacles to learning and providing the necessary supports.

4) Inadequate recognition and reinforcement. If the class does not have a strong recognition program with abundant and regularly occurring reinforcement for students who demonstrate appropriate behavior and values, Think Time 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. Time out has to be time out from reinforcement. If the student is not missing abundant reinforcement, it may actually be rewarding to be away from class.

Monitoring the Use of Various Forms 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, including Think Time, 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 <http://kevinplummerphd.com/wp-content/uploads/Time-Out-Analysis.pdf>).

All programs that employ any form of time out should maintain a time out log that monitors (for every student) length of time out, date and time, as well as the reason for the 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, sexualized 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 (<http://kevinplummerphd.com/wp-content/uploads/Time-Out-Analysis.pdf>). 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, sexualized behavior, prolonged screaming, heightened anxiety or panic, etc.)

For more information about time out see,
<http://kevinplummerphd.com/time-out-guidelines-and-training/>.