



BEHAVIORAL DEVELOPMENT & EDUCATIONAL SERVICES LLC

LADDERS CLINIC

65 Walnut Street

WELLESLEY, MA 02481

(781) 431-2478

GENERAL TIME-OUT GUIDELINES

The following discussion concerns the general procedures of time-out in a school setting with behaviorally challenging children. It should be modified and adapted as individual cases warrant. First of all, some background: "Time Out" is really a shortened form of the original expression: "time-out from the opportunity for positive reinforcement." It is contrasted with "Time-In" which is that period of time when reinforcement MAY occur. Time-out, in the ideal, is the total absence of the possibility of reinforcement. Time-out is NOT a place, it is an event. This event may correlate with a space but do not think of time-out as a place. In real-life there are no true "time-outs." All time-outs are approximations. The more they approximate the ideal, the more effective they will be. So, for time-out to be effective, it is imperative that they be as devoid as possible of reinforcing events. Any reinforcer during time-out simply "dilutes" the value of time-out. Almost always, "talk" (especially with powerful adults) is reinforcing.

Therefore we recommend that when a time-out (and preceding escort) is called for, staff should transform themselves into "Time-Out Zombies" (like from the movie, "The Night of the Living Dead"). Say NOTHING. Escort and place the child in the time-out room without explanation and without any discussion (the talking comes later "outside of time-out" - in fact during "time-in"). NO attention should be paid to the child in time-out. Attention "dilutes" the potential value of time-out. While time-out may not work or be effective for a particular behavior, we need to maximize its potential to reduce the likelihood of behaviors. To the extent that attention is reinforcing to a child (and it almost always is), obvious visual monitoring and commenting and talking about the child are sources of reinforcement to a child. These behaviors on the part of staff therefore weaken the potential effectiveness of time-out. Obviously, staff need to monitor the safety of any child in time-out. The more this monitoring is done surreptitiously, the more effective the time-out will be.

Very, very occasionally a child placed in time-out will exhibit behavior that is or potentially is dangerous for the child or for the staff that is with the child. In these rare instances and only if good judgment dictates, the child may need to be restrained to protect him or her or staff. If such a situation presents itself, then the restraint needs to be directed to keeping the child safe and released as quickly as is feasible. Proper restraints should, of course, never hurt and should be brief - usually a minute or less and in no case longer than 2 minutes. At 2 minutes, the restraint should be slowly released and reapplied only if the child shows evidence of dangerous behavior. Staff would then apply a second restraint. This process continues until the child is in control. If the child cannot control himself within approximately 30 minutes (decided on a case-by-case basis), then emergency procedures (described elsewhere) should be implemented (principal must be contacted, we should be paged, etc.). We might then decide to transport the child to the Crisis Center, call the police or the parents.

During restraint, NO talking or discussions with the child should take place. The only talking should be between staff, and should specifically EXCLUDE the child (and the current situation) as a topic. There is absolutely no reason to tell the child what you are doing or why you are doing it - during the time-out or restraint. The children already know the rules. When they are calm, and you determine that it is time to return to class, then you can talk or "process" with the child about his/her behavior. Be careful however, that this event does not become the "reinforcer" for the behavior that prompted the time-out. We do not want children to act out just to get the valuable one-on-one counseling time.

Once the child is visibly calming down and less agitated, staff should enter the time-out room. Do not compliment the child. Simply deliver a condition such as: "when you can sit in the center of the room for a minute, time out will be over." If the child re-escalates, swears, or does not sit, then say, "You're in time-out again, I'll ask you again in 2 minutes (this number can be variable). Once the child is compliant, offer support and then have child clean up any mess that they might have made.

Upon exiting the time-out room, the child should be given a brief work-assignment and then escorted back to the classroom. Upon entering the classroom, the teacher should welcome the child, summarize the loss in "stars" or points and then offer the child the opportunity to "earn back" some of the lost stars if he/she can practice what s/he should have done in the situation that prompted the initial decision to send him/her to time-out.

This leads us to the final point: time-out should normally not be used for "escape behavior." That is, if a child wants to escape a situation (a spelling test, integration, etc.), time-out will not normally be effective in reducing the likelihood of the escape behavior (because it is reinforcing to escape unpleasant things). Time-out may be necessary but it will not - by itself - make the escape less likely. This leads us to talking about Reinforcement - which is of course the real focus of your classrooms. But that is another memo.

Also, please review the emergency procedures and state regulations regarding time-out.

SUMMARY OF TIME-OUT PROCEDURES:

Do not talk to the child and minimize looking at him/her in time-out.

Minimize the use of restraint. Do not get "pulled-in" by superficially dangerous behavior.

Ignore almost all behavior in the time-out room. The only exceptions are truly destructive or dangerous behaviors which result in restraint.

Offer a condition to exit the time-out location. If it is not met, reapply the time-out.

Require some academic work near the time-out area before returning to class.

Upon return to class, go over with the child the cost to him of his behavior with respect to the token economy and emphasize that while he is in time-out, he is not "earning" anything. The only place he can earn stars or points is in the classroom. Allow the child to recover some of what he lost if he "practices" what he should have done.

-Sheldon Wagner

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