

Frequently Asked Questions about Time-outs



This document has been produced to support service providers who work with children from **birth to age six** and/or work with adults who care for children. The intent is to clarify terminology and to suggest appropriate ways to guide children's behaviour. Strategies have evolved over time and it is crucial that recommendations be based on the most current research.



Children See
Children Learn



Many caregiving challenges can be prevented when children are provided with a safe, engaging and positive learning environment. Caregivers need to have clear expectations that are developmentally appropriate for the children in their care. They also need to ensure their own needs are met, to be able to support the growth and development of the children. Even when all these conditions are met, difficulties can occur and caregivers need a range of strategies to guide children in a positive manner.

A majority of parents think putting a child in time-out is an effective way to discipline children and frequently use this practice.¹ Recent research is revealing concerns regarding time-outs, particularly in the absence of other positive parenting strategies, and this document seeks to answer typical questions on that topic. This resource defines and compares the evidence for time-ins and time-outs, and also discusses alternatives to time-outs.

Note: In this document, the word “caregiver” has been used to refer to anyone taking care of a child aged 0 to 6 (parent, formal or informal caregiver, educator, etc.). The term caregiver may include regulated professionals who will need to consider their ethical, professional standards and guidelines when supporting children and caregivers on this topic.

What is a time-out?

The word time-out is used to describe a variety of situations. For the purposes of this document, the following definition, commonly used by caregivers, is provided:

A time-out is a strategy that involves removing a child from their immediate environment for a short time, as a consequence of a behaviour perceived by the caregiver as a transgression. In this use of the term, the child is moved away from the caregiver, either in the same room or in a different room, and the caregiver stops interacting with the child until the time-out is over.

What are some of the concerns with using time-outs with young children?

1. Time-outs may stop the immediate misbehaviour, but the child may not learn about the appropriate behaviour.^{2,3,4,5,8}
2. The child may not understand the purpose of the time-out.^{3,5}
It may be difficult for a young child to understand the link between taking another child's toy and sitting on a time-out chair.
3. The opportunity to learn appropriate social behaviours may be missed.
Young children need caregivers to help them understand situations and the perspectives of others as they develop their independence.³ Children may not understand the impact of their behaviour on others and will not acquire this understanding by being removed from the social environment.¹⁰
4. Young children are just developing the capacity to self-regulate.⁷
Children benefit from the support and role modeling of adults while they develop self-regulation skills.
5. The child's needs are not addressed.^{2,3}
For example, a child may be hungry, upset or have difficulty doing what is expected and needs to have the opportunity to express such needs.
6. The child may suffer from social exclusion, which can be made worse by the caregiver also isolating the child.^{3,8,9,10}
7. The child may learn to relate to others through exclusion.¹⁰
The child may learn that isolating others if they do not comply is a good way to get needs met.
8. The child may be frightened by being isolated.

In response to these concerns, it is suggested that caregivers replace time-outs with time-ins.

What is a time-in?^{8,11,12}

In a time-in, a child who is having a difficult moment is invited to sit with a caregiver for comfort and calming. During the time-in, the caregiver helps the child express his or her feelings and point of view, listening to and empathizing with the child. The caregiver then explains why the behaviour was problematic and helps the child problem-solve the situation, discussing alternative ways of addressing the situation in an age-appropriate way. A time-in always involves a conversation where the caregiver is actively listening to what the child is saying and respecting the child's perspective and feelings.



What are the benefits of a time-in?⁶

A time-in helps children learn to self-regulate, provides an opportunity for them to explain their needs, helps them understand the effect of their behaviour on others, and offers problem-solving opportunities for current and future situations. Having a caregiver calmly deal with the situation also provides good modeling for the child.

During a time-in:

- Children feel that their needs are being considered.
- The connection between caregiver and child is strengthened.
- Children are given time to identify and process their feelings.
- Power struggles are avoided and escalation of force is prevented, as the caregiver and child co-regulate.
- Children don't feel isolated, shamed or scared.
- Caregivers and children can talk about the real issue at hand. The children have a chance to play an active role in finding a solution, which may help next time a similar situation arises.
- Children learn through the discussion and role modeling about problem solving in a calm, respectful, empathetic and thoughtful manner.



What are some of the challenges of a time-in?

- It may be difficult for some caregivers to effectively use a time-in strategy if they are unable to regulate themselves (see item *"What should caregivers do if they are having difficulty calming themselves?"*).
- It may be difficult for a caregiver to spend time with one child while caring for a number of children (see item *"How can a time-in be used when the caregiver is responsible for several children at the same time?"*).
- The child and the caregiver need to develop the ability to do time-ins. It may take some time for both to get used to this method if other approaches have been used in the past.
- If a child has a number of caregivers (parents, childcare provider, teacher) who use different strategies, the child may initially be uncertain of the outcomes of a time-in and reluctant to cooperate.
- When children are having a tantrum, they may resist any comforting contact. Giving children a nearby space to calm down may be the best solution (see item 3 under *"Alternative strategies"*). This should be done calmly and not punitively.
- It is possible that a child continues to have difficulty calming down, even with a calm caregiver. If that is the case, if another adult is present, it may be helpful to have them try to approach the child to offer a time-in.



What should caregivers do if they are having difficulty calming themselves?^{6,15}

Caregivers need to be calm in order to help children regulate their feelings and resolve problems. Caregivers can sometimes feel overwhelmed and have difficulty calming themselves. For safety reasons, it may be better for caregivers to step away from the situation for a short period of time to regain composure, rather than escalate the conflict. It is important for caregivers to explain to children that they need a short break and that they will talk about it after. If the children are very young, the caregivers should stay in the same room. In all cases,

the caregivers need to make sure the children are safe. The children need to know that the caregivers will be available shortly. Following this, a time-in between the caregiver and child can take place.

Some parenting programs support the use of “stepping away” for caregivers having difficulty calming down.

Note that this strategy should be reserved for parents in a home setting, as a child protection strategy. It should not be used by educators in a centre-based childcare or educational setting. Educators should reach out to other staff or their supervisor if they have difficulty handling a situation.

How can a time-in be used when the caregiver needs to take care of a number of children at the same time?³

Ideally, caregivers have the experience and ability to provide a positive and supportive environment for multiple children and know how to prevent issues from escalating. In some cases, if a caregiver has several children to care for, it may be necessary to temporarily remove a child who had an inappropriate behaviour from an activity, provide a brief explanation and ask them to wait until the caregiver can have a time-in with them. This should not be framed as a punishment and the child should stay near the caregiver.

Alternative strategies

If problems develop, the following methods can also be considered:

- 1. Ensure the child’s basic needs are met.**

Ensure the child’s physical needs are met: is the child hungry, tired or needing an opportunity to be physically active? Ensure the child’s emotional needs are met: is the child bored or had a difficult time and simply needs a hug and an understanding caregiver?

- 2. Redirect the child to a more appropriate activity, while providing a brief and clear explanation of why the change is being made.**

This strategy is most effective with infants and young toddlers who do not understand why their behaviour is unacceptable. Young children who are mobile need a safe environment to explore.

3. Offer the child a calming down period in a comforting space.¹⁰

This strategy is also called a “time-away” or “self-removal”. This may work best for children who have already developed the capacity to calm themselves down. Younger children may need to be helped through this at the beginning and may need the caregiver to stay with them until they are calm. For some children, soothing music may help. For others, watching something such as an aquarium or a kaleidoscope may help and for others, hugging a blanket or a stuffed toy will be useful. Children may have other suggestions about what might help them calm down. This calming down period should not be done in a punitive or humiliating fashion and the child should have the option to stay with the caregiver. The calming down period is ended by the child, when the child feels ready to reintegrate into the activity or group.

4. Offer a response connected to the behaviour.⁸

After explaining why the behaviour is inappropriate, help the child make things right. For example, help the child clean up after a making a mess or encourage the child to recognize the emotions of a child they have hurt.

5. Try giving the child another chance to learn.¹³

Young children may forget the rules as they get involved in activities. Repeat the expectations, model the behaviour if necessary, and allow the child time to do what is expected.

6. Provide a change in the environment.¹³

A child may become tired of an activity or a space may be too restricted. Address the inappropriate behaviour by telling the child what is expected of them and redirect their attention to something else. Change the activity, go outside, bring in new toys or suggest a new way of doing things.

Are there additional considerations in the choice of discipline techniques?

The caregiver’s responses should be based on the developmental stage and temperament of the child.

- It is important for caregivers to have expectations that are appropriate for the developmental stage of the child (age, milestones achieved, special needs of the child, etc.). Caregivers need to be able to recognize potential stages and get additional help when necessary. For more information on this, see *Comfort Play & Teach – Ages and Stages Milestones* from Infant Mental Health Promotion and The Phoenix Centre in Additional Resources.
- The temperament of the child and the “goodness of fit” between the caregiver’s temperament and that of the child can influence the style of discipline that is most effective. For more information on this, see *Temperament* from the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development in Additional Resources.



How can a caregiver help children develop the skills to solve problems and conflicts?¹⁴

(Adapted with permission from the Manitoba Government – Best Practices for Guiding Children's Behaviour.)



It is more beneficial for children to be involved in resolving their own problems and conflicts, rather than having adults do it for them. Knowing how to react to problems and conflict will help children gain independence, confidence and the inner control to handle their own emotions. If the children are old enough to express themselves verbally, the caregiver can try the following strategy:

1. Approach quickly and calmly to stop hurtful or unsafe behaviour, or to help resolve the problem.
2. Acknowledge each child's feelings with a simple description.
3. Once they are calm, gather information from each child involved.
4. Identify and state the problem to the children.
5. Brainstorm solutions with the children.
6. Allow the children to develop a safe and appropriate solution and use it.
7. Follow up by checking back and offering assistance, if needed. Notice and comment when conflicts and problems are being resolved by the children.

What are some suggestions to prevent difficult behaviour situations from escalating?⁷

(Adapted with permission from Position Paper 3: Time Out. Australian Association for Infant Mental Health.)

1. The caregiver should make sure the environment meets children's basic needs for love, emotional and physical security, room to explore and encouragement. The emotional context should be one of caregiver-child partnership for growing and learning, not one of conflict and control.
2. The caregiver needs to be a mentor, as they have more experience than the young child. Children learn how to treat others from respectful, confident, kind caregivers.
3. Young children should be involved in helping with activities whenever possible. The more they practice their skills, the better they get and the more competent they feel.
4. The caregiver should ensure activities and expectations are age-appropriate and monitor the children's emotional states. They can watch for early signs of distress or difficulty and act then (divert, attend to needs, give a hug, change the activity) rather than waiting for the emotional response to escalate.
5. It is important to be aware of triggers such as fatigue, hunger and excitement, or family changes such as a new baby or parental illness.
6. The caregiver can establish calming routines before difficult situations (e.g., a quiet game, a bath, a walk outside, a story) to help children to relax and also give them life-long skills for dealing with stress.
7. Where possible, and within their capability, young children need the opportunity to be heard.
8. The caregiver should anticipate difficult situations and avoid them if possible. For example, they can take along some things to amuse the child if they may have a long wait. Talking to the child about the situation ahead of time and discussing the expectations can be helpful: *"Do you have ideas of things you would like to do while we are waiting?"* It is best to have a plan in case things don't go well.
9. The caregiver should look at the situation from the child's perspective and try to understand how they see it.
10. If a problem is occurring, it is best if the caregiver stops what he/she is doing, gets close to the child, crouches down to their level and gains their attention using their name. In a calm voice, they can tell the child what they want them to do.



11. If a caregiver sees an emotion rising in the child, it may be useful to note it and name it. For example: *"You are getting frustrated, I know", "I understand you would like ... but we can't because..."* The caregiver can give a short reason: *"We have to make sure you are (healthy, safe, kind to others, etc.)". "I can help you do (something else)." Or make a suggestion to the child: "Do you think you could ...?"*
12. If the child's emotions escalate, the caregiver can calmly take the child away from the situation but stay with the child. Staying as calm as possible, the caregiver should acknowledge the child's feelings and remain connected with the child. *"I know it's hard to leave. Let's think about what we are going to do next."*
13. It may be useful to remind the child that the situation will change. *"I know you can calm down. I am here if you need my help. Very soon we'll feel fine again."*
14. Caregivers who are very upset themselves need to take a break, breathe deeply, and reconnect to their rational selves. While they are self-regulating, they need to make sure that the child is safe.



The Best Start Resource Centre offers a number of resources for parents and service providers on attachment, self-regulation, resilience, child discipline, etc.

You can download and order these at **www.beststart.org**, under Resources.

For videos, tips and links to help parents guide their children in a positive way, visit **www.ChildrenSeeChildrenLearn.ca**.

Additional Resources

- Alberta Health Services. *Healthy Parents Healthy Children. Learning About Emotions.*
 - Toddlers: www.healthyparentshealthychildren.ca/toddlers-1-and-2-year-olds/growing-and-learning-with-your-toddler/learning-about-emotions
 - Preschoolers: www.healthyparentshealthychildren.ca/preschoolers-3-and-4-year-olds/growing-and-learning-with-your-preschooler/learning-about-emotions
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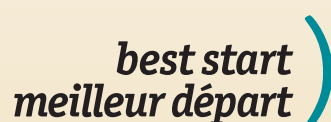
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