

## Why an ECDC Bulletin?

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Welcome to the kick-off issue of the *CNY Early Childhood Direction Center Bulletin*. We have developed this publication with an important purpose in mind: providing a resource for people who parent and work with young children. This issue is devoted to “time out”—a popular and familiar strategy, yet one that often doesn’t produce the desired result. Future ECDC Bulletins will address inclusion—how to successfully integrate children with special needs into environments with typically developing children—and how to effectively use praise with young children.

Our decision to focus our first issue on children’s behavior stems from the concerns we hear from parents and others who care for young children. Almost every day we hear from people

trying to cope with behaviors like temper tantrums, hitting, or aggression. Often they find a lack of community resources to work with them as they address these challenges. Our hope is that this bulletin, and those to come, will provide both parents and providers with research-based information, practical strategies, and suggestions for resources related to the challenging issues in caring for young children. It is our desire to be a partner with you as you identify these challenges, consider options, make adaptations, and evaluate progress.

We hope you find this information useful, and we encourage you to call our office (315-443-4444) with questions, feedback, or suggestions for future topics.



### The Low Down on “Time Out”

Imagine: Your toddler has just nestled up to the kitchen table to eat her breakfast. She asks for orange juice, but you only have apple juice. In an angry fit, she throws her cereal—bowl, spoon, milk, and all—across the kitchen floor. “Time out!” you say, as you lead her, kicking and screaming, away from the table.

Imagine: Your preschooler is playing with friends in the living room. You hear some shuffling and banging, then sobbing, and finally, your child’s voice screaming, “No, mine. Get away! That’s mine!” You stop in your tracks and yell into the room, “Time out!”

“Time out” came into our vocabulary about thirty years ago as a research-based strategy for teaching children limits and as a promising alternative to spanking. People have recently begun to question the effectiveness of time out—and their own effectiveness as parents or caregivers—when the strategy doesn’t deliver the expected results.

If we understand that time out is often used for several different purposes (and not always appropriately), it’s easier to understand why it might work better in some situations than in others. When used appropriately, time out gives children an opportunity to move away from stressful situations and sets the stage for teaching appropriate alternatives.

People often use time out inappropriately, however, as a punishment when children break rules. Putting children in time out, in this case, is mostly about giving adults a break from the stress that results when children behave in a way that they see as undesirable.

Whatever the case may be, it’s important to remember that time out is but one discipline strategy among many. It’s one tool for dealing with children’s unacceptable behaviors. With this in mind, it’s absolutely essential to understand the terms *discipline* and *behavior* and how our perceptions of these terms shape our actions toward children.

**People question their own effectiveness as parents or caregivers when “time out” doesn’t work.**

**“All behavior is communication.”**

## Rethinking Discipline and Behavior

***"Our goal is to prevent the need to punish."***



When talking about discipline, people often refer to children being obedient, following the rules, doing what they're told, and respecting authority. The understanding is that when children *don't* do these things, then they need discipline. Discipline, in this case, is closely tied to punishment.

But we can, and should, think about discipline differently. If we understand *discipline as teaching* (the word "discipline" actually means "to teach"), then it's not simply about the consequences we impose when children misbehave. *With a "discipline as teaching" approach, we seek out ways to help children learn about and practice the behaviors we want to see.* Our goal is to *prevent* the need to punish.

Just as discipline is often reduced to "punishment," children's misbehavior is often thought of as the "crime." When talking about children's misbehavior, people often think of children as "being bad": Children take toys away from other children. They hit, scream, and throw things. They act defiant, clingy, or whiny. As adults, we want these behaviors to stop—and we want them to stop *now!*

Again, we can and should think about behavior a bit differently—as something much more complex than "good" or "bad." Adults often see misbehavior and then react only to what they see as wrong. For example, when a toddler throws her breakfast across the table, Mom wants her to stop throwing food. Mom

says, "Stop that right now!" and might even grab her arm mid-throw. When Mom steps away, the child throws food again, and the entire process repeats itself.

If we understand that all behavior is *COMMUNICATION*, then we have better options for responding to children's undesirable behaviors. In whatever way children are behaving—for better or worse—they are telling us something: that they're tired, bored, overwhelmed, hungry, excited, etc. If we can figure out what children are telling us through their behavior, we can teach them how to get their needs met using behaviors and language that are appropriate, and we can also set up an environment that supports their use of the appropriate behaviors and language. Using the example above, Mom might have said, "If you're done eating, you can say 'All done.' You can pass me your bowl like this." She could then reinforce the meaning of "all done" by putting the child's food and dishes away.

Remember that *children are always "behaving" in some way, and they behave in particular ways to get what they want or need*, whether it's food, rest, stimulation, affection, or solitude. If we consider a "communication and teaching" approach to managing children's behaviors (rather than a "crime and punishment" approach), then we are in a better position to see when and how discipline strategies like time out are appropriate.

## Time Out: What Is It?

***Time out lets children practice self-calming behaviors so that problems can be dealt with more effectively.***

"Time out" is simply a short break in a child's interactions with adults and other children. It's intended to give the child a break from an environment or situation in which the child is overwhelmed. The purpose is to let the child settle down and regain control. We can help children do this by saying something like, "When you're feeling this angry, you can go over here to calm down." The child learns, "When I feel like this, there's a safe place I can go to feel better." (Time out can give adults time to regroup and consider teaching responses as well.) All around, it provides time to restore order so that problems can be dealt with effectively.

Given this definition of time out, it's easy to see why some common approaches to time out miss the mark: Time out is not simply isolation for the child or relief for the adult. Time out is not a chair, a corner, or a separate room. It is not punishment or a threat, as in, "Do that again and you're going to time out!" Time out is not a length of time, for example, one minute for each year of the child's age. (Any time formula is too simplistic.) In each of these cases, the focus is the "crime and punishment" routine rather than helping children learn to control their emotions, communicate their needs, and behave in an acceptable way.

*When the child rejoins others, be positive and acknowledge the accomplishment.*



## Using Time Out Appropriately

First, make sure you have an understanding about the behaviors for which time out is appropriate. A common mistake is using time out for any and all inappropriate, annoying, or bothersome behaviors. Check your perspective: Most of the time you can simply ignore inconsequential, annoying behaviors.

Generally, time out is used for behaviors that cannot be ignored, and if left ignored, would “take over” the environment for others. Importantly, time out is used when the behavior threatens the safety of the child and/or other children, and other efforts to bring the child’s behavior in line have failed. Save time out for occasions when the child has truly lost his or her ability to function in a situation. The strategy loses its effect if it’s overused on minor things.

When you determine that time out is an appropriate response, be gentle but firm. Remember to *be in control of your own emotions* when addressing inappropriate behavior. (You are much better equipped to do this than a child!) Shouting and screaming (while tempting) are very rarely, if ever, effective.

Gently direct the child away from the center of activity with a simple statement that names the behavior, such as, “I can’t let you hit people. Let’s move away to calm down.” Talking too much only muddies the message.

Place the child in a location away from the chaos, but within sight. Never use a time out chair; this only serves to shame the child. Remember the purpose of the time out: to allow the child time and space to calm down so that appropriate behaviors can be taught.

After the child has regained composure, the time out is over. Use good judgment and be willing to accept that time out may not work. If a toddler doesn’t calm down after a few minutes, it’s time to try something else. Some children may need to “get their anger out”: Join the child in “pushing” walls, squeezing pillows, or

stamping feet. You might also try calming strategies like going for a walk, deep breathing, getting a drink of water, washing the child’s face, or holding and rocking the child.

In any case, help children name their feelings, and let them know there are appropriate ways to act when they’re feeling that way. You can say, for example, “You are feeling really angry (frustrated, upset, etc.) right now. When you feel this way, here’s what you can do.” This helps children associate the emotion with an acceptable way of working through it.

When the child rejoins others *be positive and acknowledge the accomplishment*, as in, “I’m so happy you’re back to play with us.” Resist the urge to dwell on the previous negative behaviors with statements like, “Are you ready to be nice now?” Later on, you can spend time with children teaching and practicing the language and behaviors for effectively working through the previous conflict.

Finally, be realistic: Time out alone won’t make behavior problems go away. It won’t work for all kids. Be prepared to try a different strategy if time out does not produce the desired results. Read on for more ideas.

### *Ain't Misbehavin'*

I took my 5-year-old nephew, Todd, to his first football game. As we watched, he asked, “Why aren't the men playing right now?” I told him there was a time out. He said, “What did they do wrong? Are they all in trouble?”

*Ginny Kasch  
Harrisonburg, VA  
originally published in  
Parents Magazine, February 2004*

## Why Doesn't This Work?

Aside from common misunderstandings about time out, it's important to know the fundamental limitations of this practice. Used in isolation, time out does not teach or support children, and it can even be counterproductive.

Time out can easily work against the "discipline as teaching" concept we strive for. Time out encourages children to simply conform to adult rules, regardless of whether or not they understand those rules. By itself, time out does not encourage children to think of alternatives or more acceptable ways to accomplish their goals. Good opportunities for children to learn are wasted if they are given a time out when an explanation might reduce the unwanted behavior just as well.

When (mis)used as a form of punishment, time out can threaten children's exploration and initiative. When children are punished for behaviors they don't yet understand as wrong, they may learn that the only way to avoid punishment is to avoid new situations altogether. Time out can lead children to develop feelings of rejection and be a blow to their self-esteem. After the time out period, these feelings can make the child's reentry into the group activity awkward for others and painful for the child. When time out becomes a specific place, like a chair or a corner, the simple existence of that place can cause anxiety for all children.

When misused or overused, time out can contribute to a counter-productive cycle in which children, because they are continually punished, think badly of themselves and expect to be treated badly. In such a situation, children may act out to get the negative reaction they expect. Strategies like time out can also be counter-productive because they can actually reinforce negative behaviors. Children may act out to get all the attention that surrounds a time out, or they may use a time out to get out of doing something they dislike.

## Too Old? Too Young?

Because their parents' and adult affection is extremely important to them, toddlers and preschoolers (2-5 years) are the primary target for the time out strategy. Discipline strategies that rely on reasoning or empathy (ex., "How would you like it if someone took your toy while you were playing with it?") are less effective at these ages because children lack the language and logic skills needed to understand them. By the time children are six or seven years old, they are probably able to over-think the time out and, rather than regrouping, may spend the time in other ways, like plotting revenge against the parents or siblings. At this age, it's better to think about logical consequences, such as withholding privileges.

## Resources

Becky Bailey, *There's Gotta Be a Better Way: Discipline that Works!* Published by Loving Guidance, Inc., 1997.

Susan Hart Bell, Victoria Carr, Dawn Denno, Lawrence J. Johnson & Louise R. Phillips, *Challenging Behaviors in Early Childhood Settings: Creating a Place for All Children*. Published by Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company, 2004.

Ann S. Clewett, "Guidance and Discipline: Teaching Young Children Appropriate Behavior," in *Young Children*, May 1988, pages 26-31.

Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes*. Published by Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993.



## An Ounce of Prevention...

Time out is a strategy to use once undesirable behaviors—like tantrums or hitting—have already occurred. There are a number of other ways, however, that we can nip these behaviors in the bud. These alternatives are based on discipline (teaching) and communication. They are focused on our choice of interactions with children and structuring environments to support the ways we want children to behave.

### Teach Alternatives

Children are not born knowing about appropriate behavior. Young children must learn about social behavior, and as adults, we are their teachers. One useful teaching strategy is the “Stop-Coach-Return-Reinforce” approach. This involves stopping the child as the inappropriate behavior emerges and teaching an appropriate alternative. You can explain, demonstrate, and script what the child should be doing instead. For example, if the issue is sharing a toy, you can script win-win responses for children, as in, “Sydney, you can tell Madison that she can have a turn when you are done.”

Return the child to social interaction, providing reinforcement when he or she uses the appropriate behaviors (ex., “Jenni, I see that you let Markus have a turn with the train, just like we talked about.”). Remember that children need time and practice—lots of practice—to really learn and use these behaviors. Suggestions of acceptable alternatives must be made for weeks before children begin to use the alternatives consistently themselves.

### Establish a Positive Reinforcing Environment (Also Known As “Time In”)

The most important assumption underlying the time out strategy is that children regularly receive positive reinforcement. It is so important that we pay attention to and recognize children’s appropriate behaviors; in other words, we catch children doing something right. Think about different ways to do

this; for example, say something like, “Wow, you sure helped me out when you put your clothes in the laundry basket,” or “Jake, that was a really nice way to ask for more juice.” And never underestimate the power of an unexpected hug.

A warning: It’s easy to go overboard with positive reinforcement, even though it’s well-intentioned. Avoid praise that is vague or that places judgment on the child and/or the behavior, as in “Good job, Shannon. You did such a good job! What a good girl you are!” (Note: Future issues of the ECDC Bulletin will explore reinforcement in more detail.)

### Other Ways to Prevent Behavior Problems

Model behavior you would like to see from children. As adults, we are always “on stage” with children. They will notice how we behave, even when our behavior is not what we expect from them. Be conscious of how you deal

with frustration or conflict and how well this conforms to the expectations you have for children.

Anticipate and intervene before disruptive behavior occurs. For example, you might cut short a trip to the grocery store when you know the child has already had a long day. If your child only wants to eat the cookies on the counter instead of dinner, take the cookies out of his sight.

Redirect. In other words, quickly interrupt a tantrum in progress with appealing distractions like “Look at that fire truck!” If a fight breaks out over a toy, intervene by offering an activity that both children can engage in, like drawing or playing with play dough.

Provide ample time each day for children to find fulfillment through experimenting and using creative materials: art materials, blocks, music, dramatic play WITH an adult who can help them with social skills as they play.

## Read On...

Reading stories about emotions and problem solving can help children learn how to deal with their feelings in acceptable ways. Here are some books to try reading aloud with children:

***Bad Mood Bear***  
by John Richardson  
Barron’s  
ISBN 0-8120-5871-2

***The Temper Tantrum Book***  
by Edna Mitchell Preston  
Puffin Books  
ISBN 0-14-050181-9

***When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry***  
by Molly Garrett Bang  
Scholastic  
ISBN 0590189794

Check out these books at your local library. You can also ask your librarian for other good books that help children talk about feelings, communication, and problem solving.



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### Workshops of Interest

The ECDC can provide information and workshops on a variety of topics tailored to the interests and needs of parents and early childhood professionals. Resources are available on such topics as general child development, developmental issues for children with special needs, coping strategies, and specific disabilities.

Listed here is a sample of some of the workshops we offer:

- The Mystery of Behavior and Temperament
- Early Childhood Development: The Meaning of Red Flags
- What Are Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education?
- Sensory Integration and the Environment
- Early Brain Development and the Importance of Relationships
- Literacy for Little Ones

### Who We Are

The Early Childhood Direction Center (ECDC) is a regional clearinghouse providing information, referral and support to families, professionals, and community agencies concerned with young children birth to five. We are located at Syracuse University's Center on Human Policy.

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