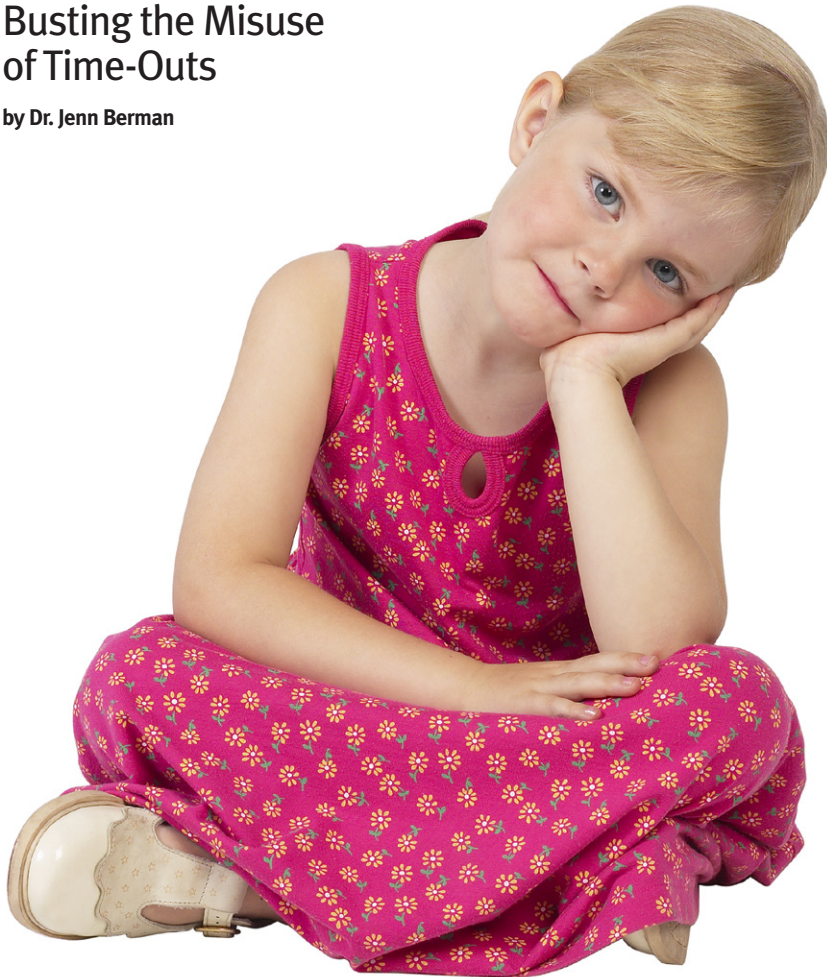


# Time-Out on Time Outs!

## Busting the Misuse of Time-Outs

by Dr. Jenn Berman



The time-out is probably one of the most utilized yet misunderstood discipline techniques for children. What is meant to be an opportunity for a youngster to calm down and learn to self-soothe has morphed into a routine and often counterproductive punishment. The notion of a Time Out as a punitive measure has only been exacerbated by pop-culture shows like *Super Nanny* in which parents are taught to put their children in “the naughty chair” when they misbehave, wrongly teaching children the damaging lesson that they, themselves, are naughty. When applied correctly, however, a time out has the ability to teach kids how

to regulate their emotions, calm themselves down, and develop the ability to make good choices through self motivation, all skills children need to become healthy adults.

### What is Discipline Anyways?

The word “discipline” comes from the Latin *discipulus*, which translates to “disciple” or “pupil.” That makes sense since proper discipline is about utilizing those teachable moments. Children, especially young children need help learning how to handle strong emotions and upsetting conditions. Punishing them for not having the tools to deal with life’s difficult situations

does not help them learn how to master these skills. But in addition to those opportunities to transmit useful information, children also need boundaries and limits to help them feel safe. What they do not need is to be labeled (i.e. “naughty boy”) or to receive a punitive punishment.

### Baby’s First Time Out

One of the biggest mistakes parents make is giving children time-outs when they are too young. Many parents of toddlers rationalize that because their child is now capable of following some directions that they are developmentally ready for time outs. That is not the case. According to Dr. Jane Nelsen, author of *Positive Time-Out*, children should not be given time-outs until they are at “the age of reason,” in other words until they have the cognitive ability to understand cause and effect as well as the capability to distinguish wrong from right. The ability to distinguish wrong from right does not mean the ability to understand that Mommy says “no” to jumping off the chair. It is the ability to understand the reasoning behind why Mommy doesn’t want her baby to jump off the couch. This cognitive ability does not usually take place until the age of three.

Prior to the age of three, parents need to constantly supervise their young children, using distraction and redirection techniques. Carol came to my private practice at her wits end. Her 18-month-old twins were out of control. They were turning on the stove, climbing up and jumping off of a table, and playing with things around the house that could be dangerous. Her pediatrician had told her to start using time-outs but she was unable to get either of her boys to sit in the “bad boy” chair at all, let alone for any length of time. When we examined her situation more closely Carol realized that she had not done an adequate job of baby proofing her house, especially in the rooms that were okay for the babies to play in. After bringing in the baby-proofers to put safety knobs on the stove, moving the table out of the twin’s room and removing the dangerous toys from her sons’ reach, she was able to reduce the problem by 75%. For the remaining 25%, Carol had to learn to distract and redirect while remaining consistent with her limits.

### The Biology of a Tantrum

Scientists who once thought that brain development was complete by the age of four or five have now discovered that brain maturity is not complete until a child’s early 20s. The cerebral cortex, including the parietal lobes, which are in charge of logic and spatial reasoning, are still growing even in teenagers. In addition, the frontal lobes, or prefrontal cortex, which helps us resist impulses and plan ahead, is under-developed, even in teenagers. In fact, the part of the brain that gives people good judgment is one of the last

areas of the brain to develop, so especially in young kids, action thoughts tend to outrace judgment capacities.

While most adults have a hard time with rational thoughts when they are upset, children have an even more difficult time. This makes sense, since children have less experience coping with strong emotions and don't have the tools to modify the behavior. According to Nelsen, "When human beings are upset, they function from their primitive brain (the brain stem) where the only options are fight or flight. When adults send children to time-out, the adults are often functioning from their primitive brain, and resentment puts children in their primitive brain, perpetuating the vicious cycle of fight or flight. Positive time outs allows children (and adults) to calm down until they are again functioning from their rational brain (the cortex) so they can solve problems."

### Creating a Positive Time Out

Keeping in mind that misbehaving children are generally discouraged children and that making children feel worse does not make them act better, Nelson recommends the following steps in order to create a positive time-out:

1) The parent should be clear on the purpose of the time-out. There are three purposes to a time out. The first is to teach children self-control and self-discipline. The second is to show respect to your child by involving them in the process, therefore allowing them more autonomy and reducing the power struggle. The third purpose is to teach children that their brains don't work as well when they are upset. Teaching them to calm themselves when upset is an important life skill to have.

2) Discuss the purpose of time-outs with your children in advance of needing one. Explaining the importance of finding a time and space to calm yourself down when upset is an important concept for kids to understand. Let them know that everyone, even parents, need to take the time to calm down sometimes.

3) Let children create a soothing place and a name for their time-out spot. Help children to figure out what they might want to keep in their special time-out spot which will help them to calm themselves down. This might include a blanket, pillow, toy, music, books, or even pens and pencils they could use to draw their feelings. This place should be treated positively and seen as a respite from overwhelming feelings. Allow your child to name the place. The name should be positive and relate to the goals of time-out. For example: the Calm Down Corner, the Feel Better Spot, or the Happy Place.

4) Allow children to choose time-outs. When children have decorated and named their time-out place and it is truly theirs,

they are more likely to use it by their own free will. According to Nelsen, "Positive time-out is most effective if children choose to go there, which is likely if they have been involved in the creation process. Let children know that they can go to positive time-out whenever they feel the need."

5) Suggest, but don't demand that your child take a time-out if he seems to need it. In a moment of anger, frustration or any intense emotion, a child may not think of taking a time out. Nelsen suggests asking questions like, "Do you think it would help you to go to the positive time-out area now?" or if they are resistant, "Would it help you if I went to positive time-out with you?"

6) Let children decide how long they stay in time out. According to Nelsen, "Allowing children the choice to decide when they are ready to come out of time-out is extremely important for increasing their sense of accountability, responsibility, and autonomy." In the end, that is the true goal of time-out.

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