

Time Out vs. Time In

“You Hit—You Sit.” It’s a quick phrase, it forms a simple visual, and it can give a teacher a quick response to a challenging behavior. But in practice, does this truly support a child’s social-emotional needs, and does it result in behavioral change?

It’s understandable that teachers may be looking for a quick response or a short-term solution. And in responding to challenging behavior, many teachers feel the need to punish or consequence their children as a way to modify or change their behavior. While “time out” can be an effective way to respond to challenging behavior, it can be difficult to have a successful time out. Indeed, many children will resist time out, which leads to power struggles.

A different approach, similar to time out, is to teach your child how to take a break. Learning to self-manage is a lifelong skill that can be used across settings, activities and situations. It’s common practice to think misbehavior must be punished. But punishment requires someone else (i.e., a parent, teacher, police officer) to impact behavior. This is one of the reasons that punishment doesn’t generalize to a variety of situations. However, social skills and self-management, including the ability to take a break and calm down, help children to learn the skills needed to interact with others and to engage in problem solving, both with support and independently.

When a child engages in a challenging behavior, including hitting, it is more effective in the long-term to give that child a practice opportunity in the moment, a chance to use a replacement skill to achieve the same function as the hitting behavior. Although this can seem counterintuitive, it is consistent with one of the basic tenets of learning: that repeated trials will result in the increased use of a skill. Decreasing challenging behavior requires the acquisition of new skills. This is done through teaching.

What is your goal? A child who is removed from a situation or activity doesn’t have an opportunity to learn or practice a replacement skill. A child who has learned how to take a break and self-manage is able to problem solve and engage in appropriate behavior. You may decide that time out serves a purpose, but keep in mind that the rest of your child’s day is filled with opportunities to play, practice social skills, learn new skills, and interact with you. And that’s Time In.

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