

How to do time out...

Time out is not enough...

I recently published an article on how to do time-out. I find that most parents know the term, but few really have learned how to apply time-out effectively. Time-out works as a punishment with virtually any child. If somebody tells you that they tried time-out and it didn't work, they probably did not understand how to do it correctly. Failure to get behavior change from time-out may also result because time-out is not enough.

Punishment, such as time-out does not teach or strengthen prosocial behaviors.

Punishment suppresses behavior in the presence of the punisher or punishing agent. A minimal, effective behavior change program should include reinforcement of other behavior. Behavior therapists call this *Differential Reinforcement of Other Behavior*.

Dealing with a resistant, oppositional, or "strong-willed" child can become such a daunting task that parents will dance around the problem behavior rather than confront it head on. Asking the noncompliant child to do a chore or transition away from an activity they like often becomes a drama. Confrontation increases stress for parent, child, and functions as a punishment for the parents. Punishment, by definition, decreases the frequency of behavior. We observe that parents decrease the frequency of seeking compliant behavior or making requests of their oppositional children because the parents receive punishment when the child throws a tantrum or becomes more resistant.

Functional assessment of noncompliant, tantrum, or other inappropriate behavior often suggests that negative parent attention may be acting as a reinforcer. This means that the problem behavior is actually strengthened or maintained by the parent's negative behavior (lecturing, criticizing, scolding, yelling, spanking, warning, threatening, etc.). The key issue here is that these parental behaviors are stimulating. It's not that the child likes negative attention and it's not that the child lacks positive attention. It's just that negative attention is stimulating. Attention is a powerful reinforcer for most children. This is why time-out should be used as a punishment. See the article on how to do time-out.

Differential reinforcement of other (DRO) behavior (generic term) focuses on actively providing "rewards" to strengthen prosocial behaviors (following parents' instructions, sharing, taking turns, treating others with respect). Decide what behaviors you want to strengthen. You could look for an *incompatible* behavior (DRI). Sharing toys is incompatible with hoarding toys. Compliance is incompatible with noncompliance. These are incompatible in that the target behavior and the inappropriate behavior cannot occur at the same time. A child cannot be complying with a parental request and not following the request at the same time. She can't share and hoard a toy at the same time.

Differential reinforcement of *alternative* behavior (DRA) could be just about any appropriate child behavior you want to increase in frequency or duration. Playing quietly in the playroom, watching or listening to a story, are examples. The idea here is to increase the frequency of any prosocial behavior by "catching" the child doing something good and providing a reward (parental attention or tangible reward).

Let's focus on DRA. A parent notices that four-year-old Jimmy becomes more unruly in the evening about two hours before bedtime. Jimmy chases after the family's aged pooch, Rocket, with a light saber. He jumps off the furniture, plays with his dad's cell phone,

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and changes channels with the remote as the family watches a program they enjoy. Jimmy knows these behaviors are against the rules and irritate his parents. It seems like he is just trying to get corrected. Finally, after multiple warnings his parents put him in "time-out" whereupon he throws a spectacular tantrum for the remainder of the television program the family was enjoying. Jimmy repeats a variety of irritating behaviors several times a week. In addition, he complies about 30% of the time with his parents' requests. Most of the time he requires several requests or cajoling by his parents and sometimes he ends up in time-out along with tantrum behavior. The parents conclude time-out does not work. Oddly enough, after he throws a tantrum and time out is over, he seems to behave pretty well the rest of the night.

Let's assume Jimmy's parents read the article on time-out on this website and learned that they had only approximated time-out. They also realize they did not have a consistent program to reinforce alternative behavior. They had tried smiley faces in the past but they had too many target behaviors with rules inconsistently enforced. They had difficulty remembering to give smiley faces to Jimmy or exchange them for rewards. They became cynical about rewarding Jimmy. Jimmy was a very bright boy and educators had told them that rewards do not work with bright kids. Jimmy lost interest in rewards quickly and they felt frustrated by his lack of response and their own lack of consistency. Jimmy was caught putting smiley faces on his chart that he hadn't earned. Nothing seemed to work.

Jimmy's parents decided to try DRA. Here are the steps they took. They made a chart to keep a record of Jimmy's noncompliant behavior. They kept a record for a week before they started their intervention. This gave them a way to judge whether their program was working.

During the week they were tracking Jimmy's noncompliance, they sat down together and came up with a list of about twenty activities and "prizes" for which Jimmy could exchange smiley faces he would earn in return for compliant behavior. They planned to provide a menu of about five for the first week, then "freshen" the list with a few more each week. This should help keep Jimmy interested in earning smiley faces. In previous attempts at behavior change programs, Jimmy had access to some of his activities even if he hadn't earned smiley faces. For example, his parents had let him watch a TV program because he had "been good." Therefore, Jimmy had learned his parents would eventually cave in and he really didn't need to earn a smiley face. Jimmy had not really made the connection between positive behavior and all the good things his parents provided for him. They also decided that they would review the program with Jimmy each night for the first week and then once a week afterward for three weeks. They reasoned this would help them stay on-task and help Jimmy see that behavior, and good and bad consequences connect.

In observing Jimmy's noncompliance, his parents noted that most of the problems occurred within two hours of bedtime. They also found Jimmy averaged about 15 minutes between episodes of seeking attention. They also noticed that because they were tired in the evening, they would ignore his positive bids for attention by saying, "Just a

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minute” or “Daddy’s tired. Let’s not do that right now.” They decided to focus the program on the two hours before bedtime. They set a timer for 15 minutes and when the timer sounded, they would go find Jimmy, and praise him for whatever prosocial alternative behavior they observed. They made a deal out of giving him a smiley face and reviewing the menu of activities and prizes. They encouraged him to trade in a smiley face as soon as he earned one or he could save a couple to exchange for something more valuable. One cool effect was that Jimmy earned a smiley face while he and his parents were playing *Chutes and Ladders*, a game that he had traded three smiley faces to play. This became a common occurrence. Jimmy earned smiley faces while watching a video he had earned by trading in smiley faces.

Instead of sending Jimmy to his room for time-out (not really time-out, but a place to play), they chose the bottom of the staircase. He had a place to sit and they could easily monitor his behavior. They even practiced short time-out for about 15 seconds and praised him for his calm behavior during time out. They had read that time out is more effective if it is short. It could even be a minute or two. If he threw a tantrum, they simply told Jimmy, “As soon as you’re quiet, time-out will start. Until then nothing good will happen for you. No privileges.” Then, they waited until he got quiet or they walked away. Once he stopped his tantrum, they would say to him, “Time-out starts now that you’re quiet.”

After time-out was over, Jimmy’s parents would start a 15-minute timer and wait to catch Jimmy doing something good (DRA). They decided to extend the length of the DRA time by five minutes each week as long as Jimmy was being successful. Their goal was to shape Jimmy’s good behavior to one-hour on average. A successful week was defined as any week with less than seven time-out sessions. When the DRA time reached 30 minutes, they tried to give Jimmy attention without smiley faces attached. They just gave him a hug or sat in the floor and chatted with him while he played with his toys. You can guess how this worked out. I can tell you that this is the way it works. Some children are tougher. Some have mental disorders, but this type of behavior therapy works well most all of the time. Parents benefit from the help of a mental health professional to help design a good program.

David L. Barnhart, EdD
Licensed Counselor
Board Certified Clinical Mental Health Counselor