

Time Out and Consequences: Discipline Power Tools

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When parents hear the word “discipline” they often jump to thinking about punishment for bad behavior. There’s a lot more to discipline than that! Discipline is all the things we do that help our kids learn how to be good people, and follow rules – skills they need to succeed in school, work, and life. We teach discipline through: role modeling, making sure they know what’s expected of them, praising good behavior, setting clear limits, and many other skills. (Learn more at GoodDaysWithKids.com.) But, there is a time for punishment for bad behavior, or what I call the “Discipline Power Tools.”

When to Use These Tools

If your child is hurting someone or something, or if they are at risk of being hurt, we jump straight to these tools, without needing to warn in advance. (Because one of the rules you will have established in advance is that “it’s never OK to hurt anyone – if you do, there will be consequences.”)

If they’re actively misbehaving, but not hurting anyone, you *might* first try positive guidance to re-direct their energy in a positive direction, or you might decide their actions warrant a bigger response. If so, give an “If / Then” warning that if the behavior continues then there will be one of these outcomes.

Natural Consequences

A natural consequence is what will happen if the child keeps doing what they are doing, and an adult does not intervene. Often, we give a command to stop the behavior and prevent the consequence. But, sometimes the parent might let it play out and let the child live with the consequences of their actions.

Note: To be fair, always warn the child about the possible problem with an If / Then. We, as adults, might be able to foresee natural consequences. But a child may not *realize* these things could happen.

- “If you pull the cat’s tail, the cat is likely to scratch you.”
- “If you play with that toy so roughly, the toy may break, and I won’t buy you a new one.”
- “If you don’t eat any lunch, you will be hungry during the movie.”
- “If you don’t bring your comic book inside, it may get ruined by rain.”
- “If you do that, you might spill. Then you’d have to clean it up, and I won’t give you more juice.”

Natural consequences are best used when the results of the mistake will be a *little* painful so a lesson is learned, but not *too* painful. For example, if the child might break a \$5 toy, you might not intervene, but if they’re about to break your laptop, you should stop them! If they might get a bump or a bruise, you might let that play through, but if they’re risking a broken bone, you will stop them.

When they experience a natural consequence, they are likely to be sad or mad. You can sympathize with the emotion without fixing the situation. “I know you’re sad about your toy. I’m sad that it’s broken too.”

Time Out from Positive Attention – for ages 3 and up

Time Out is spending time in a boring place, for a prescribed time, getting no attention. Time Out is a chance for your child to calm down (and for you to calm down), then return to better behavior. Time Out is not jail... it’s not intended to make your child suffer for their crimes.

Use it sparingly. It’s best used for aggression – when your child is hurting (or threatening to hurt), or for non-compliance – when you’ve tried other discipline tools and the continue to disobey.

Time out is not something you invent in the heat of the moment. It's something that you make a clear plan for in advance, and teach your child about in advance, when things are calm, so they understand the procedure and the purpose. Components of effective time out:

- Location: Boring – no toys, screens or entertainment. Out of the way of the flow of traffic. Safe for your child without supervision. You may have a few calm down tools in this place.
- Duration: For a 3 year old, 3 minutes, for a 4 year old, 4 minutes. For older children, start at 5 but increase up to 9 if needed. (See below.) Longer Time Outs are not effective and may just make the child resentful and resistant to future Time Outs. When they've reached the minimum time requirement *and* they've had a calm voice and body for a couple minutes, then you can declare that Time Out is over. (They don't decide... you do.)
- Process:
 - If / Then warning: A brief clear description of: "You are doing _____. You need to do _____. If you don't, there will be a time out." (Skip the warning if there's imminent risk of harm.)
 - If the misbehavior continues, impose Time Out. Give a clear command, including the reason. Keep it short and simple. "You did _____. Go to Time Out now."
 - What they should do in Time Out: The goal is that they calm themselves down. They won't initially know how to do that! Self-calming skills are something we need to teach at other times when they're calm so they'll be able to use them in Time Out eventually. At first, expect that they will stomp, kick, yell and whine a lot in Time Out. Over time, they will learn that this behavior doesn't gain them anything, and they'll give up on it.
 - What you do when they're in Time Out: Give them as little attention as possible.
 - Once the time requirement has been met, if the child has been calm for two minutes, release them. If not, say "Please work on calming yourself down. When you have been calm for two minutes, then you can come out of Time Out."
- What if they resist? If they're 3 – 6 years, say "You can go to Time Out on your own or I can take you there." If they don't go, calmly take them. For a 6 – 10 year old, say "I'm going to add an extra minute. That's 6 minutes." Wait ten seconds. If they don't go, add another minute, up to 9. After that, add a consequence: "That's 10 minutes, and if you don't go to Time Out right now, you lose screen time privileges." If they go to Time Out, then in 10 minutes they're done.
- If they won't go to Time Out, or go but won't calm down there, or they escape, drop the power struggle over Time Out and impose a logical consequence instead. In the long run, we want them to view Time Out as a good option for calming themselves and avoiding consequences.

For lots more information and tips for effective time outs, check out the [CDC's guide to Using Timeout](#), read [The Incredible Years](#) or participate in an [Incredible Years](#) program.

Logical consequences

Logical consequences are imposed by the parent. They are related to the misbehavior. Here are a few key categories of consequences, with examples of the If / Then warning that would precede them.

- Removing the child from the situation where there's an issue:
 - "If you run near the parking lot, then we'll have to leave the playground."
 - "If you knock the books off the library shelf, we'll go home instead of going to story time."
 - "If you are loud in the restaurant, then we won't be able to stay to have dessert."
- Removing the problem item from them:
 - "If you don't clean up your toys, I'll put them away and you won't be able to play with them."
 - "If you two can't share that toy nicely, then I will put it away for the rest of the play date."
 - "If you knock your plate on the ground, then lunch is over. No more food till after nap time."
- Requiring the child to do something to repair a situation.
 - "If you splash the water out of the tub, you will have to clean it up."
 - "If you break that, you'll have to use your allowance to buy a new one."

- Removing a privilege
 - "If you don't finish your homework tonight, then no screen time tomorrow."
 - "Since you hurt your friend, I can't let you play tag anymore today."
 - "If you don't put all your laundry in the basket, then no candy today."

When imposing consequences, be sure that:

- The consequence is developmentally appropriate
 - For a toddler, it has to be immediate and short term – if they start throwing blocks, immediately pick them up and take them away from the blocks. Then you help them find a new activity to do. A few minutes later, they might wander back to the blocks and play with them appropriately.
 - For a preschooler, the consequence should still follow closely after the behavior but can last a little longer. If they are playing in a way that could break a toy, you take it away right away, and say "I'll keep this safe till tomorrow, then we can try again."
 - For an older child, consequences can be more delayed and last longer. For a teenager: "if you don't do well on winter semester grades, then I won't let you do soccer in the spring."
- The consequence is in proportion to how bad the behavior was
 - If a child spilled juice, you wouldn't say "no drinks at the next five meals." But you could say "no more juice today. If you are thirsty, you can have water."
 - If a child failed to put away toys one time, you wouldn't throw away all the toys. But the toys could "take a break" for a day or two.
- You choose a consequence you can *and will* follow through on enforcing
 - Kids need to know they can trust their parents to keep promises. That includes being consistent with consequences. Don't go easy and back down. if you do it once, they'll test you every time.
 - No empty threats, like "if you don't come right now, I'm leaving you at the store and not coming back." They know that's not true. (And if they thought it was true, that would be very scary!)
- You carry it out calmly, without anger and shaming – consequences are not about making your child "really regret" their choices – they're about learning that their choices have impact and learning the importance of making better choices in the future.

Moving on:

Once time out is over, or a consequence is complete, move on, don't rehash. We all make mistakes, and need to come back in and try again. Don't nag at them, let this be a clean slate moment. Give them positive attention and praise any positive behavior you see.

Important note: If they got Time Out or a Consequence for not doing a chore, you do need to make sure they complete that chore – don't let them choose Time Out to escape chores. Be matter of fact about this, giving positive feedback as they return to the work.

Following Up:

At a family meeting, when all is calmed down, *briefly* discuss what happened (without shaming or nagging – they've "done their time for the crime"). *Briefly* remind them of what the rules are, and what behavior you consider unacceptable. Then move on, and talk about other things.

Continue to teach other skills

Time Out and Consequences do not teach your child what to do better. They can't be used as your only discipline tools. Be sure to also be using positive attention, praise, guidance in what TO DO, teaching ways to understand and manage their big emotions, role modeling, and more to help your child learn how to behave better. Your long-term goal is self-discipline – raising a child who knows what it means to be a good person and behaves that way most of the time. Using a wide variety of these tools will help to teach them how to do this.