

It's all about relationships: Time In and Time Out within the NES Parenting Offers

Time out can have a reputation as an outdated technique. So why is it recommended in current parenting approaches?

Parenting and the understanding of children's emotional experience in a family has changed significantly over recent years. At NES Parenting it is our job to ensure that the emotional and developmental needs of a child remain first and foremost across the approaches we recommend. In recognition of the lifelong impact of the early years and the crucial role of our earliest relationships, our work here at NES Parenting is underpinned by the principle aim of promoting healthy positive parent*-child relationships.

Below we outline how both Time In (as used the Circle of Security offer) and Time Out (as used in our Triple P and Incredible Years parenting groups) are recommended to be used within a family, to promote positive relationships and healthy child development. Let's begin with highlighting that across our parenting offers, families are supported to select and use the strategies that will fit best for their family. The fundamental core of all the parenting programmes is establishing positive parent-child relationships. Time out is not a core strategy, rather it is an option for parents to draw upon, in the context of these primary strategies. It is not a default response, nor is it appropriate to use in every situation, with every child. Rather, it is an option for parents¹ to draw upon, in the context of a wide range of primary strategies which are attachment-based. However, if it is a strategy parents decide to use, it is helpful to know when and how to use it.

Behaviours that prompt the use of time-in or time-out can happen in the context of powerful emotions for both the child and the parent, and children will benefit from help from the parent in managing or regulating these emotions. The aim of any parenting approach is to support the child in developing their growing capacity to manage or regulate strong emotions, while keeping the child safe. A parent's presence when a child is experiencing a strong emotion such as shame, anger, fear or sadness supports the child in regulating these emotions. This is known as co-regulation and involves the parent helping the child with the identification, containment and expression of the emotion. Experience of co-regulation is needed before a child can regulate emotions on their own. Neurodivergent children and young people will likely need caregiver support to co-regulate for longer.

Time in is an approach outlined in The Circle of Security Parenting programme (COSP):

- Begins with the recognition that time-out for the parent can be needed before a time-in and that the function of this is to provide the parent with an opportunity to calm and regulate their own emotions before joining with their child.

¹ The term 'parent' is taken to describe all adults who have parenting responsibilities, while 'family' refers to biological, kinship, adoptive, foster families and others.

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- If the child is still upset and the parent is calm, the child and parent go together to a neutral place ('time-in spot') and together wait for the feelings to begin to change.
- When both are calm, this is followed by a repair, whereby the parent supports the child's understanding of what happened, responsibility on both parts is acknowledged, without blame, and both talk about how things could be different in future.

This is different from the time in referred to in other programmes such as Incredible Years, which talks about time in as all of the relationship building time at the beginning of the programme. It can be helpful to know this to help supports parents to understand the different ways this language is used.

Time out is a well-known concept, familiar to most parents and practitioners working with families, there are a wide range of opinions and experiences about its use, applicability, and impact. Many parents have found it a useful and effective approach. However, it's misrepresentation, and overuse across television/media has understandably led to concerns that it does not fit within a loving and sensitive/reciprocal parent-child relationship. If misapplied, it may be seen as a punitive, isolating approach that may unintentionally cause harm, especially for those children who have experienced trauma.

Responding to concerns regarding this approach can be a challenge for practitioners delivering evidence-based parenting supports that include time out. The Psychology of Parenting Programme (PoPP) support the training and delivery of the evidence-based parenting groups Incredible Years and Triple P, both of which include time out as an approach that parents can use with their child. Within these programmes, time out is used as a strategy to build self-regulatory skills in a child and **not as a punishment**. In order for parents to feel confident in using time out, practitioners need to feel confident about its benefits and also when it is appropriate to introduce as an approach. Parents may already be using time out in some form, potentially drawing upon how it has been portrayed in media. Therefore, it is important to explore this with them and offer support to ensure that, if parents are going to use time out, it is aligned to the evidence-based approaches promoting emotional regulatory development in a way that does not cause harm.

Incredible Years and Triple P groups introduce parents to a variety of strategies, all of which aim to support parents to build positive, loving, encouraging relationships with their child. The programmes support parents to develop their child's social, emotional, and behavioural skills, especially in those families where the child is displaying behaviours adults find particularly challenging, at times are hard to understand and which cause difficulties for the child. In the groups, time out, often referred to as 'time out to calm down' is just one among many strategies discussed and should never be used in isolation. The teaching of time out always comes towards the end of the programme and relies on core relationship strengthening elements of the intervention and parent-child interactions being in place.

Research has found that including the use of time out has an additional impact on reducing aggressive and destructive behaviour. However, to have this positive impact it needs to be implemented by parents at the **right time** and in the **right way**.

How to use time out effectively:

- Time out should only be used for aggressive or destructive behaviours.
- Time out is only recommended for children, over the age of 3 and not for young people in secondary school.
- Time out should be explained to the child at a time when everyone is **calm**. Children should understand it, not as a punishment but as a way to help everyone calm down.

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- It is important that parents are clear what behaviours result in a time out and what a child can do when they are in time out to help them calm down, for example self-talk or using a sensory distraction.
- When it is used, it should be done so in a clear, calm way and the parent should give a brief explanation of why the child is going to time out.
- Time out does not need to be called time out and can be called anything, as long as it does not have negative connotations around it. The purpose of calming the child and avoiding reinforcement is the aim. It could be referred to as 'calm down time' or 'taking a break time'. Parents and children might come up with their own words that fit with their family.
- When using time out, the parent should stay in close proximity, so that the child is aware of the parents' presence, thereby preventing the child from experiencing any sense of abandonment.
- Time out should be short in duration and end once the child is calm. Parents should end time out in a loving and containing way.
- It is vital that following a time out that everyone moves on; parents should find an opportunity to re-engage with their child in a positive way, giving them a chance to reconnect. It is vital that the focus for parents is on coming back together with their child and having a positive interaction.

Discussions with parents about time out should focus on the difference between the positive versus punitive use of time out and how this strategy is meant to encourage emotional self-regulation. When time out is used thoughtfully, patiently, and calmly, it is an important skill for parents to learn as a non-violent, and respectful discipline approach. For parents to help their child feel calm, they too need to be able to regulate their emotions and remain calm themselves. This strategy should feel containing and safe to the child.

While Incredible Years and Triple P groups are not trauma interventions, they have been developed so that they are delivered in a trauma informed way. If there are concerns that children may have a trauma response to this approach, parents should be cautious about introducing time out and only do so if the child feels safe and secure. Similarly, practitioners should discuss with parents whether time out is appropriate if there have been any concerns or challenges with the earlier relationship-based strategies. When needed, time out should be used only once a more secure, predictable relationship has developed and parents have developed their own tools so they can use it in a calm controlled way.

Time out can be a helpful tool for parents to use, it gives both the parent and the child a chance to self-regulate and avoids reinforcing behaviours that parents would like to reduce, by placing appropriate boundaries for the child. When used as intended, time out means that children experience calm, predictable, and containing responses to their behaviour that they can bring into future interactions and relationships. By modelling a calm and predictable response parents demonstrate that difficulties can be negotiated, that ruptures in the relationship happen and can be repaired in a safe and predictable way. Ruptures and repairs are part of healthy relationships. In addition, time out helps reinforce to the child that certain behaviours are unacceptable, which again supports the child's understanding of how to be in relationships. Parenting is by nature an emotional experience, and responding to any destructive or aggressive behaviour often evokes heightened emotion for parents. We all have less capacity to think and learn when stressed. An emotionally driven response can result in distress for both parent and child and can reduce the likelihood of this being a helpful opportunity for learning. When parents are equipped with strategies that they can plan for, and use in a calm and confident manner, healthy social and emotional learning can occur.

Time out will only be effective in the context of safe and trusting relationships and is not a tool parents should need to use indefinitely. That is to say, by using it effectively, unwanted aggressive or destructive

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behaviours reduce and therefore, so does the need to use time out. Time out used correctly, is ended when the child has successfully self-regulated. This opportunity for autonomous regulation can help children develop these skills without relying on an adult and can help develop self-agency in the child. Time out has been shown to be useful for children, and adults to learn that when feeling strong emotions, it is a helpful life skill to take time out to calm down rather than acting on the strong feeling by lashing out, either verbally or physically and it is this skill which we hope can be supported by the use of time out.

One academic study explains that time out is, “a brief predictable response to a specific problem behavior; it is not about isolating and abandoning a child. It effectively says.....

“You are loved, you are my child, you are safe, this is not about you or us, it is just about this instance...”. Dadds & Tully (2019)

The study suggests that discipline should not threaten attachment security but can strengthen the parent-child bond, by successfully negotiating a separation and coming back together, as occurs in time out.

For further reading we have included the links below.

[You Said WHAT About Time-Outs?! - Dr. Dan Siegel \(drdansiegel.com\)](https://www.drdansiegel.com/you-said-what-about-time-outs/)

[Microsoft Word - Time out & Time In 11-1-14-16 copy 2 \(1\).docx \(incredibleyears.com\)](#)