

Time Out

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

Uncle Jim caught four-year-old Bradley hitting his sister one evening while babysitting. If it were up to him, he would have given Bradley a good spanking. After all, he and Bradley's father were spanked when they were kids, and they turned out fine. But the rules are different in Bradley's house.

For serious misbehavior, Bradley's parents give him a "time out," which can be just as effective as a spanking in discouraging bad behavior. A time out is the modern form of "sitting in a corner."

Time out works best for children three-six years of age. To start, only use time out for serious misbehaviors, such as hitting or deliberately doing something destructive, dangerous, or for extreme disobedience. Discuss the behaviors with your child. If the child is old enough, have him or her suggest some behaviors that deserve a time out.

Immediately after a serious misbehavior, have your child sit in an isolated place with no objects and nothing to do. It is best if you can see your child, so don't use a closet or someplace far from you.

Sit your child in a chair and set a timer. Give a time out for as many minutes as your child's. Four-year-old Bradley, for example, gets four minutes.

You can ignore a little wiggling or humming. But don't permit your child to talk, get out of the chair, play with toys, or be entertained in any way during a time out.

If your child won't cooperate, explain the rules and warn that you will add another minute to the time out if he or she doesn't follow them. With a young child, you may find that sitting with him or her the first time or two will help. But many parents – if they are firm and consistent – find that their children obey the time out rules.

But have many more "time-ins" than time-outs. A time-in is when you give your undivided attention, interest, praise, and encouragement, while playing and sharing with your child when he or she is behaving appropriately. Without time-ins, your child may get your attention most often when he or she is misbehaving.

Uncle Jim doubted that four-minutes of sitting in the corner would have any effect on Bradley. But Bradley clearly did not like being sentenced to the chair. And following his time out, he played without further incident.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.