

Coping With Difficult Behaviour

All children need to learn to deal with frustration and accept limits. Difficult behaviour can be challenging for parents, but there are positive and effective ways to help teach children self-control. Children learn self-control when their parents use consequences for misbehaviour consistently, immediately and decisively. This fact sheet gives some suggestions to help you manage your child's difficult behaviour.

HOW TO SET LIMITS

▼ Establish Clear Ground Rules

Recommended Age Range: 3–12 Years

Children need limits to learn what is expected of them and how they should behave. A few basic house rules (four or five) can help. Rules work best when they are fair, easy to follow and you can back them up. Try to involve your child in deciding on the rules. Rules should tell your child what they can do, rather than what not to do. *Walk in the house, Speak in a pleasant voice and Keep your hands and feet to yourself* are better rules than *Don't run, Don't shout and Don't fight*.

HOW TO DEAL WITH DIFFICULT BEHAVIOUR

▼ Use Directed Discussion to Deal With Rule Breaking

Recommended Age Range: 3–12 Years

Directed discussion is best used when a child occasionally forgets a basic house rule. It involves telling your child the problem, explaining briefly why it is a problem and describing or getting your child to suggest the correct behaviour. The correct behaviour can then be practised.

For example, *Carl, don't run in the house, you might break something. How should you move in the house?... Now you show me the right way to move in the house.* Go back to the door and start again. To make directed discussion even better, get your child to practise the correct behaviour twice. If your child fails to follow this instruction, use quiet time (see overleaf).

▼ Use Planned Ignoring to Deal With Minor Problem Behaviour

Recommended Age Range: 1–7 Years

Planned ignoring involves planning to deliberately pay no attention to a child when a minor problem behaviour occurs.

Minor problems include whining, using a silly voice and saying rude words. When you ignore a problem behaviour, do not look at or talk to your child. Your child may become quite noisy at first to try to get your attention. If necessary, turn and walk away. Keep ignoring as long as the problem behaviour continues. As soon as your child stops the problem behaviour and behaves appropriately, praise them. Do not ignore more severe problems such as when your child hurts someone or damages property. Take action quickly and decisively (see overleaf).

▼ Give Clear, Calm Instructions

Recommended Age Range: 2–12 Years

It is important to give children instructions that are clear and direct. When you want your child to do something, be prepared to back up your instruction. However, it is not reasonable to always insist on instant obedience. Where possible, let your child finish what they are doing or wait for a break in their activity before giving an instruction. When you want your child to do something, follow these steps:

▼ Get Close and Tell Your Child What to Do

Stop what you are doing and move to within an arm's length of your child. Bend down to their eye level and use your child's name. Be specific and tell your child exactly what you want them to do — *Heidi, it's time for dinner. Come to the table now, please.*

▼ Give Your Child Time to Cooperate

Pause briefly to give your child time to do what you have asked. About five seconds is enough. Stay close and watch your child until they make a start on the request.

▼ Praise Cooperation

Praise your child for cooperating — *Matt, thank you for doing as I asked.*

▼ Back Up Your Instruction

Only repeat your instruction once. If your child still does not cooperate, back up your request with a consequence (see below for some options). If you have asked your child to stop doing something, it is best not to repeat the instruction. Follow immediately with a consequence if your child does not cooperate straight away.

For example, if your child was throwing sand in the sand pit, you might say — *Jemma, stop throwing the sand. The sand stays on the ground.* After five seconds if your child has not done as you asked, say — *Jemma, you have not done as I asked. You need to stay out of the sand pit now for 10 minutes.*

▼ Back Up Your Instructions With Logical Consequences

Recommended Age Range: 2–12 Years

If your child does not follow a rule or a clear instruction, choose a consequence that fits the situation. Logical consequences are best used for mild problem behaviours that do not occur too often. When a problem occurs, follow these steps:

▼ Withdraw the Activity

If possible, remove the activity or toy that is at the centre of the problem, and explain why you are doing it — *You are not sharing the toy, I'm putting it away for five minutes,* or *You won't wear your helmet, so put your bike away for 30 minutes,* or *You are still arguing over the television — TV is off for 10 minutes.* Don't debate or argue the point with your child. Act as soon as the problem occurs.

▼ Keep to the Conditions

Remember to keep to the agreement. When the time is up, return the activity so

your child can practise how to behave appropriately.

▼ Be Reasonable

Logical consequences work best if they are brief — five to 30 minutes is usually long enough the first time. Try to prevent further difficulties by helping your child solve the problem — such as helping to work out who should have the first turn. If a problem happens again after returning the activity to your child, follow up by removing the activity for a longer period, such as the rest of the day, or use quiet time (see below).

▼ Use Quiet Time to Deal With Difficult Behaviour

Recommended Age Range:
18 Months–10 Years

Quiet time is a brief and effective way of helping children learn more acceptable behaviour. Use quiet time if your child does not do as you have asked. Quiet time involves having your child sit quietly on the edge of the activity in which a problem has occurred. Quiet time is usually in the same room in which the problem occurred. Older children can sit on the floor or in a chair. A toddler's cot or play pen can be used as a quiet area for children as young as 18 months.

▼ When a Problem Occurs, Tell Your Child What to Do

Act quickly when you see a problem behaviour occurring. Get close to your child, gain their attention and tell them what to do. Say something like — *James, stop pushing your sister now, play gently with her.* If the problem behaviour stops, praise your child for doing as you asked.

▼ Back Up Your Instruction with Quiet Time

If the problem behaviour continues or occurs again within the next hour, tell your child what they have done wrong — *You have not stopped pushing your sister.* Tell them the consequence — *now go to quiet time.* Take your child to quiet time, ignore all protests and do not argue or nag. Your child must remain quiet for a set time before they can rejoin the activity. Short periods in quiet time are more effective than longer ones. One minute of quiet for two-year-olds, two minutes for three to five-year-olds and a maximum of five minutes can be used for

children aged between five and 10 years. Once your child is in quiet time, do not give them any attention. This is a time for them to be quiet, not to talk or attract attention. If your child does not sit quietly in quiet time, take them to time-out (see below).

▼ After Quiet Time

When quiet time is over, do not mention the incident. Encourage your child to find something to do. Praise your child for desirable behaviour as soon as possible after quiet time.

▼ Use Time-Out to Deal With Serious Misbehaviour

Recommended Age Range: 2–10 Years

Time-out involves removing your child for a short time from the situation in which a problem occurred. You can use time-out when your child does not stay in quiet time, or as a consequence for temper outbursts or serious misbehaviour such as hurting others.

Time-out is a positive strategy to use instead of shouting at, threatening or smacking a child who has misbehaved. When it is used correctly it can be an extremely effective way of helping children learn self-control and how to behave appropriately. The main advantage of time-out is that it requires you, the parent, to stay calm. If you become angry, you risk losing your temper and hurting your child. Time-out gives everyone the chance to calm down.

Time-out works in much the same way as quiet time except your child is put into another room. If your child's bedroom is full of toys and other interesting activities you might need to consider using another room for time-out. Time-out should be in a room that is uninteresting, yet safe, with good lighting and ventilation (e.g., childproof your bathroom for time-out by putting away anything that might be dangerous). The guidelines for using time-out are similar to those for quiet time:

▼ Explain the Time-Out Routine

It is important that your child knows what to expect before you start using time-out. Sit down and explain what specific behaviours will earn time-out and show your child what will happen. Walk them through the steps of the time-out routine. Check that your child

understands they need to be quiet before they can come out of time-out.

▼ When a Problem Behaviour Occurs, Tell Your Child What to Do

Gain your child's attention. Tell them what to stop doing — *Anthony, stop screaming now* — and what to do instead — *Use your quiet voice.* Praise your child if they do as you ask.

▼ Back Up Your Instruction with Time-Out

If your child does not stop the misbehaviour, take them to time-out immediately. Say — *You have not done as I asked. Go to time-out now, please.* Be calm and firm. Do not talk about it, lecture, nag or argue the point. If necessary, carry your child to time-out.

▼ Remind Your Child of the Rules

As you put your child in time-out, remind them that they can come out when they have been quiet for a set time (see the guidelines for quiet time). Leave the door open, although you may need to close it if your child does not stay in the room.

▼ Ignore Misbehaviour in Time-Out

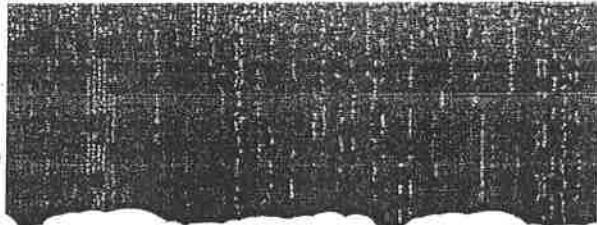
Some children may continue to misbehave in time-out, such as kicking, screaming or calling out. If you pay attention to this behaviour, time-out will not work. You must be prepared to persist with this technique. Do not talk to your child or give them any attention until they have been quiet for the set time.

▼ After Time-Out

When time-out is over, do not talk about the incident again. Encourage your child to get involved in an activity. Watch for your child behaving well and praise them. If the problem behaviour occurs again, repeat the time-out routine.

▼ Keep Track

You may find it helpful to write down each time you use time-out and how long it takes. As your child learns the time-out routine, they should become quiet more quickly and time-out should be needed less often. If problems occur when you use time-out, or things do not seem to be getting better by the end of the second week, it is important to seek professional advice.



▼ Common Problems with Time-Out

Parents who have tried a version of time-out may have found it has not worked for one of the following reasons:

- *The child has been allowed to decide when to come out* — for example, the parent might say — *Amanda, don't speak like that in this house. Go to your room and come out when you are ready to behave yourself.* The child may simply walk into the room and come straight out again.

FOR FURTHER HELP See the Positive Parenting booklet for more information on positive parenting strategies. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet or contact:

Triple P is a parenting program developed by Dr. Matthew R. Sanders and colleagues in the Parenting and Family Support Centre, School of Psychology at The University of Queensland with funding support from Queensland Health, Victorian Department of Human Services, Health Department of Western Australia, and National Health and Medical Research Council.

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- *Time-out has been used inconsistently* — time-out works best when parents use it every time a problem behaviour occurs, rather than threatening to use it.
- *The child comes out of time-out while they are still upset* — this is a major problem because the child learns that if they yell loud and long enough they will get out. Getting out of time-out should depend on the child actually being quiet rather than promising to be good or simply being there for a set time. Time-out starts when all noises and protesting stop.

