Using Time-Out Effectively in the Classroom

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Teachers of students with disabilities frequently use time-out as a behavior management strategy. When implemented properly, time-out procedures can be effective in reducing maladaptive behaviors across a wide range of student populations. Time-outs, however, are subject to abuse when educators fail to understand and apply the behavioral principles that make the procedures effective in reducing problem behaviors. Some teachers continue to use time-outs even when they are not effective in reducing a student’s inappropriate behavior. Moreover, the inappropriate use of time-out may lead to legal problems; recent court cases have ruled that extreme use of time-out procedures may violate students’ individual rights (Yell, 2006).

What does “time-out” mean, in practice? What are the major types of time-outs, and what is their efficacy in schools? What common practices lead to the ineffective use of time-out? In this article, we examine these questions, and provide recommendations for using time-out in an appropriate and effective manner.

Evaluators who work with students with emotional and behavioral disorders (E/BD) frequently face the challenge of striving to increase desirable behaviors of their students while simultaneously decreasing antisocial behaviors. Research has demonstrated that consistently and systematically reinforcing a desirable behavior maintains or increases it (Alberto & Troutman, 2006; Wolery, Bailey, & Sugai, 1988). However, when teachers encounter student problem behaviors that need to be decreased, they may need to use behavior reduction procedures such as time-out. Time-out has been used by teachers to address a broad range of maladaptive behaviors across a variety of educational placements (Costenbader & Reading-Brown, 1995). A survey of teachers of students with E/BD in the Midwest found that nearly three quarters (70%) used time-out in their classrooms at some time (Zabel, 1986).

What Is “Time-Out”?

To identify articles related to time-out, we searched the Educational Resources Information Center database, LEGALTRAC, psychINFO and FindArticles using relevant keywords (time-out, seclusion, exclusion, inclusion, think time, contingent observation, and cool down). Second, we completed a hand search of studies published between 1970 to 2005 in peer-reviewed journals (Journal of Special Education, American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, Behavioral Disorders, and Exceptional Children). Finally, we conducted an ancestral search by checking the citations from relevant studies to determine if any of the articles cited would qualify for inclusion in this review. We did not review literature related to time-out if it pertained to procedures conducted outside the educational environment (e.g., home settings, parent training).

From a behaviorist perspective, time-out is defined as a behavior reduction procedure or form of punishment in which students are denied access to all opportunities for reinforcement, contingent upon their displaying inappropriate behavior (Nelson & Rutherford, 1983). However, teachers often think of time-out as a procedure to allow a student to calm down, typically by being quiet and disengaging from current stressors (Ryan, Peterson, Tetreault & van der Hagen, in press a). Regardless of these popular definitions, a wide range of variations of this procedure is currently implemented in schools across the United States.

Types of Time-Out

“Time-out” is not a single strategy, but rather refers to a number of related procedures designed to reduce inappropriate student behavior by removing a student from a reinforcing environment.
There are four primary types of time-out, which range from the least intrusive to the most restrictive: inclusion time-out, exclusion time-out, seclusion time-out, and restrained time-out. In each of these procedures, when a student exhibits the target behavior, the student's teacher reduces the student's access to reinforcement for a period of time.

**Inclusion Time-Out**

Inclusion time-out (sometimes called nonexclusionary time-out) is the least intrusive form of time-out; it generally involves removing reinforcement from a student rather than removing the student from the reinforcing environment (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 1987; Harris, 1985; Wolery et al., 1988). The student continues to observe classroom instruction, but is denied an opportunity to participate in activities or receive reinforcement from either peers or the teacher (Ryan, Peterson, Tetreault & van der Hagen, in press b). A number of variations of inclusion time-out have been defined in the literature, including: (a) planned ignoring, (b) withdrawal of materials, (c) contingent observation, and (d) time-out ribbon.

**Planned Ignoring.** This procedure involves the “systematic withdrawal of social attention for a predetermined time period upon the onset of mild levels of problem behavior” (Knoster, Wells, & McDowell, 2003, p. 12). Nelson and Rutherford (1983) described planned ignoring as in-seat time-out. In planned ignoring time-out a teacher—contingent on the occurrence of inappropriate behavior—removes his or her attention from a student for a brief period of time (Wolery et al., 1988). At the end of the time-out interval, the teacher returns attention to the student.

When using planned ignoring time-out, it is important to focus on praising a student’s appropriate behaviors while ignoring those that are inappropriate. Research conducted on planned ignoring has shown mixed results regarding its efficacy. For example, although the procedure was shown to be effective in increasing a preschool student’s prosocial behaviors in general education (Allen, Hart, Buell, Harris, & Wolf, 1964), it was unsuccessful in reducing the inappropriate behaviors of a preschool student with E/BD (Plummer, Baer, & LeBlanc, 1977).

**Withdrawal of Materials.** As the name implies, this time-out procedure involves removing reinforcing materials from a student for a specified period of time when the student exhibits inappropriate behavior. For example, if a student throws a crayon at a peer during class, the teacher would remove the student’s crayons for a predetermined time frame. Usually, the withdrawal of materials is accomplished by the removal of adult attention (Wolery et al., 1988). In earlier studies, withdrawal of materials (i.e., loss of tokens) was shown to be as effective at reducing noncompliance as using an inclusion time-out procedure (Contingent Observation) with students with mental retardation (MR; Burchard & Barerra, 1972; Gresham, 1979).

**Time-Out Ribbon.** The time-out ribbon is another example of inclusion time-out; the student wears a ribbon or other object as long as he or she behaves appropriately. When a student exhibits inappropriate behavior, the ribbon is removed for a brief period of time. When the ribbon is removed, so is access to reinforcement (Salend & Gordon, 1987). There are four primary advantages to using the time-out ribbon procedure: (a) a teacher does not have to remove a student from instruction; (b) when in time-out, students can observe other students behaving appropriately; (c) the teacher and other adults in a classroom can clearly see who is eligible for reinforcement; and (d) the ribbon clearly signals students when reinforcement is available and when they are in time-out.

Earlier research has shown the use of the time-out ribbon to be effective in reducing talking out of turn and out of seat behavior in four general education elementary school classrooms (Fee, Matson, & Manikam, 1990); elementary special education classrooms (Salend & Gordon, 1987; Salend & Maragula, 1983); and for students with MR (Foxx & Shapiro, 1978; Huguenin & Mulick, 1981; Solnick, Rincover, & Peterson, 1977; Spitalnik & Drabman, 1976).

**Exclusion Time-Out**

Often when teachers use time-out, they remove the student who exhibited the inappropriate behavior from the reinforcing setting. This is referred to as exclusion time-out. In exclusion time-out, a student is excluded from the reinforcing area, usually repositioned away from his or her peers. Wolery and col-
and established policy guidelines due to use by staff without specific training. We recommend that seclusion time-out be used by staff without specific training for students with E/BD or MR. We do not believe seclusion time-out decreases in aggressive behaviors. However, the second study (Smith, 1981) showed seclusion time-outs had no effect on maladaptive behaviors for students with E/BD. The efficacy of exclusion time-out has not been researched as thoroughly as inclusion time-out. In one of the first studies exploring exclusion time-out, it was shown to be effective in reducing disruptive behaviors in a general education elementary school classroom (Nau, Van Houten, & O’Neil, 1981). A decade later, exclusion time-out proved to be more effective at reducing noncompliance than a guided compliance technique in which the teacher helped preschool children complete a requested task using guided hand-over-hand movement (Handen, Parrish, McClung, Kerwin, & Evans, 1992).

**Seclusion Time-Out**

Seclusion time-out, sometimes called isolation time-out, is a very restrictive form of time-out. In seclusion time-out a student is removed from the classroom and placed in a room or area in which s/he is prohibited from leaving until the time-out period is served (Busch & Shore, 2000). The procedure typically involves placing a student in a (a) comfort room, (b) quiet room, (c) cool-down room, or (d) time-out room. The efficacy of seclusion time-out has only been investigated twice in an educational setting, with mixed results. The first study (Webster, 1976) was conducted with only a single student with E/BD, and demonstrated a significant decrease in aggressive behaviors. However, the second study (Smith, 1981) showed seclusion time-outs had no effect on maladaptive behaviors for students with E/BD or MR. We do not recommend that seclusion time-out be used by staff without specific training and established policy guidelines due to the inherent risk of injury and potential abuses commonly associated with its use.

**Restraint Time-Out**

Restraint time-out, sometimes referred to as physical time-out or movement suppression, is the most restrictive form of time-out. This procedure combines both a restraint and time-out procedure. Its use is typically limited to younger children (e.g., preschool) who refuse to comply with a teacher-directed time-out. The adult places the student into a time-out position and maintains the student in time-out through the use of physical (ambulatory) restraint. This restraint is typically accomplished by the teacher using a basket-hold technique. Restrainted time-out, also called movement suppression, was effective in reducing aggressive behaviors for a student with E/BD (Noll & Simpson, 1979), and another with MR (Luiselli, Suskin, & Slocumb, 1984). It was also effective in reducing self-injurious behaviors for a student with E/BD (Rolider & Van Houten, 1985). Again, we do not recommend that seclusion time-out be used by staff without specific training and established policy guidelines due to the inherent risk of injury and potential abuses commonly associated with its use.

**Common Problems That Make Time-Out Ineffective**

Many educators successfully incorporate some form of time-out procedures into their approaches to reducing a student’s inappropriate behavior. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of this procedure may be compromised if any of several common mistakes are made by teachers when using time-out. Typical pitfalls include classroom environments that are insufficiently reinforcing to the students, and time-out procedures that lose their punishing qualities and take on reinforcing qualities for both the student and teacher.

**Insufficiently Reinforcing Classrooms**

Perhaps the most important concept for teachers to recognize is that for time-out to be effective, students must want to participate in ongoing classroom activities. The term “time-out” implies that the “time-in” environment (i.e., the classroom) is reinforcing, and that a student would prefer to remain in that setting. Therefore, there must be a meaningful difference between the level of reinforcement during time-in and time-out (Harris, 1985); too often, however, the “time-in” environment is not sufficiently reinforcing to make time-out a punishment, thereby effectively reducing the level of inappropriate behaviors. In fact, in classrooms that are not sufficiently reinforcing, students may find the time-in environment to be more aversive than rewarding (Plummer et al., 1977).

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**Reinforcing Aspects of Time-Out**

A second reason time-out may be ineffective in reducing maladaptive behavior is that both the teacher and student are often inadvertently being reinforced by the implementation of time-outs within the classroom. For example, most teachers have experienced a student whose levels of misbehavior escalate whenever s/he is assigned a difficult task. As a result of the student’s disturbance, the teacher responds by using a time-out procedure such as exclusion, sending the student outside the classroom to sit in the hallway. In such cases, the time-out serves as an opportunity for the student to escape (at least temporarily) from performing an assignment. In effect, this time-out has inadvertently reinforced the student for misbehaving, by removing an aversive task. As a result, the child is more likely to repeat the inappropriate behavior the next time a similar task is assigned.

To make matters worse, teachers might also find themselves being rein-
forced because the student’s absence
from the classroom eliminates the stu-
dent’s disruption, thus allowing the
teacher to escape the aversive behavior.
The teacher is also allowed to continue
teaching unimpeded by the student’s
maladaptive behavior. As a result, the
teacher often has little or no incentive to
call the student back into the classroom.
This inadvertent negative reinforcement
or removal of aversive stimuli for both
the teacher and student alike may result
in time-out procedures losing their pun-
ishing qualities in reducing inappropriate
behaviors. In such cases, research
has shown the frequency and duration
of time-out may even increase with each
recurring incidence as the procedure
itself becomes a reinforcer for maladap-
tive behavior (Nelson & Rutherford,
1983). How can a teacher ensure time-
outs are effective in reducing maladap-
tive behaviors without violating a stu-
dent’s inherent rights to safety and his
or her access to the educational envi-
nronment?

Recommendations

Make the Classroom Reinforcing

Time-out procedures are only effective
in reducing maladaptive behaviors
when the student is removed from an
environment that s/he finds reinforcing.
If the student does not have a desire to
be included or to participate in the
classroom or activity, it is unlikely that
implementing a time-out will have the
desired effect. For example, when a
child is removed from a recess activity
(e.g., playing tag) due to unsportsman-
like conduct, s/he will typically comply
with a teacher’s request to sit quietly on
the sidelines for a few minutes to gath-
er composure and think about their
transgressions. The child willingly com-
plies with the teacher directed time-out
because of a desire to participate in the
recess activity. The likelihood of compli-
ance decreases, however, when stu-
dents are placed in an unrewarding
environment in which they do not per-
ceive they are receiving sufficient pos-
tive reinforcement. In this instance, the
time-out does not serve as a time-out
from reinforcement, but rather as a
means of escape from or avoidance of
an unpleasant task or activity.

To ensure time-out procedures are an
effective behavior management strat-
agy, teachers can make their classrooms
more reinforcing for their students, by
increasing the ratio of positive to nega-
tive comments, and use effective teach-
ing strategies.

Strive for a 5-to-1 Ratio of Positive
to Negative Comments. Although
teacher praise has been supported as an
empirically sound practice (Maag &
Katsiyannis, 1999; see also Lewis,
Hudson, Richter, & Johnson, 2004), in
actuality negative comments or repris-
als for inappropriate behavior exceed by far positive reinforcing
comments (Sutherland, 2000). In fact,
research indicates that classes in which
the teacher has a strongly positive rein-
forcing ratio often have fewer behav-
ior problems (Sugai & Horner, 2002).
When teachers use a 5-to-1 ratio of pos-
tive to negative comments, the class-
room will have a more reinforcing
atmosphere—an atmosphere from
which students will not want to be
removed. For example, when a student
enters the room in an appropriate man-
er or completes an assignment, the
teacher should reinforce these behaviors
by thanking the student for each specif-
ic behavior. Such focus on positive
attributes helps the student better under-
stand what behaviors are expect-
ed, increases on-task behaviors, and
creates a more positive atmosphere in
the classroom (see Sutherland, Wehby,
& Copeland, 2000).

Use Effective Teaching Strategies.
An essential ingredient for effective
classroom management is the overall
strength of instruction. This includes
good time management procedures,
such as quick pace and well-planned
transitions; good instructional imple-
mentation, such as guided practice and
planned review; and effective academic
monitoring. Engaging students in inter-
esting instructional activities minimizes
the likelihood of behavioral distur-
bances. When students experience
downtime and teachers are distracted
from instruction, however, misbehavior
is more likely to occur.

Additionally, there is a substantial
body of literature supporting the impor-
tance of high levels of correct on-level
academic responding by students (see
Gunter & Denny, 1998). When students
have more opportunities to respond and
accuracy of responses is increased, it is
likely that on-task behavior will
improve and inappropriate behavior
will decrease (Sutherland & Wehby,
2001).

Develop a Hierarchical Behavior
Management Plan

The Individuals With Disabilities Edu-
cation Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997
and 2004 require that if students with
disabilities exhibit behaviors that inter-
fere with their learning or the learning
of peers, that their IEP team must con-
sider the use of positive behavioral inter-
ventions as required by the law.

When the student is removed from an
activity, the likelihood of compli-
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2001).
a "gated" schoolwide behavior intervention plan requiring staff members to begin with less restrictive forms of interventions before moving to more restrictive procedures. Specifically, they recommend educators implement a hierarchical strategy that includes:

1. **Simple intervention techniques.** When a staff member notices inappropriate behavior, the first step is to talk to the student or redirect the student to another activity.

2. **Problem-solving strategies.** If simple intervention techniques prove ineffective, the next step entails problem solving in which the staff and student discuss the behavior, the consequence(s), and then evaluate the situation and develop an intervention plan as well as a follow up. This step teaches students coping skills and replacement behaviors.

3. **Reinforcement-based strategies and extinction of inappropriate behavior.** Early level behavioral strategies should focus on reinforcing appropriate behavior while working strategically toward extinguishing inappropriate behaviors. Rather than concentrating on an undesirable behavior, the teacher should look for a positive alternative that will result in reinforcement for the student. This involves identifying the specific activity the student is not presently doing, then teaching a replacement behavior and reinforcing it (Alberto & Troutman, 2006).

4. **Inclusion time-out (3 minutes).** Inclusion time-out, the least restrictive time-out procedure, is the next step if the previous strategies do not work. The student can sit and watch without being involved in the classroom activities. This step can last approximately 3 minutes, but we recommend it last no longer than the age of the student.

5. **Exclusion time-out (5 minutes).** If the student continues the inappropriate behaviors, the staff can then implement exclusion for 5 to 15 minutes.

6. **Seclusion time-out (15 minutes).** If these strategies are still not effective, the student could be moved to a seclusion time-out, perhaps in a time-out room with the door left open. The student is always provided with the opportunity to return to class after processing with a staff member or demonstrating 5 minutes of compliance. While the procedures for processing can vary, they typically entail (a) helping the student identify the situational and internal cues of the event, (b) giving meaning to those cues that led up to the event, (c) selecting or clarifying a student goal, (d) generating possible student responses, (e) evaluating the outcomes of various responses and selecting an appropriate response, and (f) agreement upon a specific behavioral enactment for future events (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Regardless of the behavior, the teacher should ask the student to rejoin the class after a 30-minute period. (Ryan et al., in press a).

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**Make Data-Based Decisions**

Since time-out is meant to be a behavior reducing strategy, a punishment, it is important that the staff collect and analyze data on the frequency of inappropriate behaviors that are followed by time-out to determine if it is accomplishing its intended goal of reducing the inappropriate behavior. If time-out is being used with a student and the inappropriate behavior is not decreasing, then time-out is not producing the desired outcome and another strategy should be implemented. However, it

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**Without an appropriate behavior plan that strategically handles minor offenses with less intensive behavior strategies, any intervention is a response or reaction instead of a preventive measure.**
may not always be obvious to the staff that the procedure is not accomplishing its desired effect. This is where data collection contributes to effective decision-making.

**Document the Use of Time-Out**

Staff members can document time-outs in a time-out log (Figure 1) which includes information such as student name, date/time of the incident, location/academic subject, behavior, antecedent, and duration. This information can assist staff in determining if time-out is indeed effective in reducing the inappropriate behaviors, and also help identify the underlying causes and/or triggers of the behavior. Due to the severity and restrictiveness of seclusion time-outs, the Wisconsin Department of Education developed a more extensive reporting sheet (see Figure 2).

**Establish a Time-Out Policy**

To ensure that student rights are protected and to safeguard districts from lawsuits, many states and schools have begun developing policies concerning the use of time-out procedures. Currently 23 states (Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, and Wisconsin) have either established a policy or provide guidelines governing the use of time-out procedures. These policies or guidelines are critically important to ensure student safety, especially when schools incorporate seclusionary time-out practices. Ryan and Peterson’s (2005) review of these procedures identified important attributes of effective time-out policies.

- **Purpose.** Time-out procedures should be used only to reduce student maladaptive behavior; students should not be subjected to unreasonable use of increasingly restrictive interventions. The time-out room should provide students an opportunity to regain control.

- **Time-out rooms for seclusion.** A school's time-out room(s) should be free of objects and fixtures which might harm the student; should have adequate light, ventilation, and heat; should provide the staff opportunity to observe the student at all times; and should not be locked or secured to prevent the student from leaving the room. The room should also be an adequate size; no smaller than 6' x 6' with normal ceiling height.

- **Training.** School personnel should be well trained in all the time-out procedures as well as other less restrictive yet effective behavioral strategies (such as functional behavioral assessment and behavior intervention planning). Knowledge of other, less restrictive behavior management strategies provides options to the staff, and they will be less like-

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**Figure 2. Wisconsin Department of Education Seclusion Reporting Sheet**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher/class</td>
<td>Time in/time out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff person initiating seclusion; others present/involved:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe the behavior that led to seclusion, including time, location, activity, others present, other contributing factors:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures used to attempt to de-escalate the student prior to using seclusion:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student behavior during seclusion:</td>
<td>Student behavior after seclusion:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was there any injury or damage?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If yes, describe:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up with student after the seclusion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is other follow-up needed (e.g., IEP meeting, additional evaluation, discussion with others)?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If yes, specify:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent contact:</td>
<td>Administrative contact:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Wisconsin Department of Education.
ly to use time-out procedures for minor infractions.

- **Plan.** The staff should have a time-out plan, including the elements listed previously, and should be trained in its use.

- **Duration.** The time-out should be limited to the time necessary for the student to compose him/herself, but should not exceed 30 minutes, to help limit the impact on academic instruction time. An age appropriate guideline is 1 minute in time-out for every year of age of the student. Pendergrass (1971) found that time-out durations of 5 and 20 minutes were equally effective, although the effectiveness of short time-outs are diminished if a longer time-out has been previously used.

- **Documentation.** Each incident of seclusion and/or restraint time-out should be logged and should include information such as name, date, time, duration, setting, antecedent behavior, interventions attempted prior to seclusion, notification of parents, and so forth.

- **Analysis.** To determine if time-out procedures have been effective, the school should periodically analyze the time-out information log in order to identify patterns of behavior that could be used preventively (Ryan et al., in press a).

**Final Thoughts**

Time-out is an extremely common behavior reduction procedure used in schools across the United States. Unfortunately, time-out is sometimes used inappropriately and may even be used excessively with some students (Ryan, et al., in press a). In the two decades since nearly three quarters of E/BD teachers reported using time-out in their classrooms (Zabel, 1986), there has not been extensive research investigating its efficacy in classrooms (with the exception of inclusion time-outs). To help ensure time-outs are used effectively in reducing maladaptive behaviors without jeopardizing the individual rights of students, educators should (a) make their classrooms reinforcing, (b) develop a hierarchical behavior management plan, (c) make data-based decisions, and (d) establish a class or school policy for time-outs. The combination of effective training in the effective use of time-out procedures and an established policy on its use in classrooms will help ensure that time-outs are used safely and effectively in reducing inappropriate behaviors.

**References**


Pendergrass, V. E. (1971). Effects of length of time-out from positive reinforcement and schedule of application reinforcement and schedule of application in suppression of aggressive behavior. The Psychological Record, 21, 75-80.


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