



Australian Association for  
Infant Mental Health Inc.

## Time out

---

### Position paper 3

July 2009; reviewed July 2016

The Australian Association for Infant Mental Health Inc. (AAIMHI) aims to improve professional and public recognition that infancy is a critical period in psycho-social development, and to work for the improvement of the mental health and development of all infants and families.

#### Definitions

Time out involves time away from a rewarding or positive environment as a consequence of some form of misbehaviour, usually for 1 to 5 minutes. The definition used by AAIMHI for this statement is where the child is also removed from the presence of and/or interaction with the parent or carer.

#### Key messages

AAIMHI recommends:

- That time out not be used for children under three years of age
- That parents and carers use relationship time (time in) to help young children with problems or stress
- That the focus is on responding to children's feelings and when appropriate helping them to learn what to do, rather than what not to do

#### Background to AAIMHI's position

AAIMHI's concern is that some parents and others caring for children in the community understand time out as *exclusionary* time out, that is, as separation from the parent or caregiver as well as from the activity in which the child had been involved. This statement refers in particular to the use of time out with children in the first three years. However, some of the issues raised will also be relevant to older children.

While there is research that supports using time out to control behaviour, especially for older children, this research does not address the emotional impact on the child. Developmentally, children less than three years cannot be expected to be able to self-regulate emotionally. Therefore they still need the presence of a caregiver to assist them with this process, not separation from them. Separation may increase a child's insecurity and distress.

Time out is usually seen by children as punishment, but is described as being used to teach. This teaching is usually negative – what not to do – rather than how to achieve what the adult sees as desirable behaviour.

Australian Association for Infant Mental Health

PO Box 39, Double Bay NSW 1360, Australia | ABN 93 045 030 281 | [info@aaimhi.org](mailto:info@aaimhi.org)

Affiliated with the



WORLD ASSOCIATION FOR  
INFANT MENTAL HEALTH

Neuroscience research shows that the brain bases of and responses to social pain (social exclusion) are similar to those of physical pain. The long-term effects of this on the brain are not yet fully understood (Eisenberger, 2003).

Many older children have never had emotional regulation modelled to them by their caregivers in ways that enable them to learn self-regulation. They therefore also need the presence of a caregiver to assist them with the management of their feelings.

Children under three years may not have the developmental capacity to keep in mind the connection between their behaviour and the response of the caregiver, especially if there is any time delay.

Unregulated feelings are the cause of 'out of control' behaviour; responding to this behaviour needs to be about responding to the underlying emotional need of the child. The most effective, long-lasting way to respond to this behaviour is for caregivers to understand how the child is feeling and thinking. Then the parent or carer can anticipate when problems will arise and plan to prevent them. When they do happen the parent can show that strong feelings can be understood and managed. Sometimes therapy may be needed for persistent 'out of control' behaviour.

### **Statement of AAIMHI's position on time out**

The AAIMHI position on responding to children's behaviour is informed by an attachment theory model of relationships which is now backed by a very significant body of research. It is also informed by research into brain development.

The use of time out (where the child is removed from contact with the parent or carer) with children *under three years* is inappropriate. The use of time out with children *over three years* needs to be carefully considered in relation to the individual child's experience and needs.

AAIMHI concerns in relation to use of exclusionary (where the child is separated from the parent or caregiver) time out for children less than three years are:

- It does not teach constructive ways to deal with problems; instead it teaches separation as a way to deal with problems.
- It does not take into consideration the developmental capacities of young children under three. From an attachment and development-based point of view, children this age are experimenting and do not yet have the necessary skills to control impulses and emotion, i.e. their behaviour is not *misbehaviour*.
- It deliberately cuts off the child from the relationship with parent or carer so that the child feels powerless to connect with the adult; this cutting off from relationship is an intended consequence for the child's behaviour and is seen by the child as a punishment.
- Cutting the child off from the relationship with the person whom they see as their safe base, to turn to for comfort and help when in trouble, is confusing and disorganising for the child.
- Infants and young children have a great fear of abandonment which can be triggered by separation when they most need help.
- It does not address the message (cause) behind the behaviour.
- It fails to recognise that young children do not learn self-regulation of emotions by themselves; they need the support of a parent or carer.

## Recommendations

Siegel and Bryson (2014) and Weininger (2002) recommend *Time In* parenting. Both their books have detailed information on how to do this. Both recommend attending to the child's internal state (feelings) rather than just responding to the external representation (behaviour). This needs to be done in connection with, not separation from, a caring adult.

Siegel and Bryson (2014) recommend that in the context of discipline parents ask themselves what it is that they want to teach and what is the best way to teach it. By this they mean teach in the positive sense of what they want the child to learn to do, not what they want to stop the child from doing.

Reinsberg (1999) list five points to consider in responding to a child:

- Is this a developmental stage?
- Is this an individual or temperamental difference?
- Is the environment causing the behaviour?
- Does the child not know something but is ready to learn?
- Does the child have unmet emotional needs?

## Some practical suggestions

1. Make sure the child's environment provides for the basic needs of love, emotional and physical security, room to explore and encouragement. The emotional context should be with the parent and child in a partnership for growing and learning, not an oppositional one of controlling.
2. The parent needs to be the one in charge (in a guiding way), wiser than the young child. The child does better with a confident, kind caregiver.
3. Let young children be as much involved in helping with activities as is sensible. Show children how to do things that they can feel good about.
4. Monitor a young child's activities and emotional state. Watch for early signs of distress or difficulty and act then (divert, attend to needs, give a hug, change the activity) rather than waiting for the emotional response to develop.
5. Respond to precipitating factors such as a child's level of tiredness or excitement or family changes such as a new baby.
6. Calming routines before difficult situations are a good idea to get your child in calm, well balanced state, for example a quiet game, a bath, a walk outside, a story.
7. Give young children choices where possible and within their capability.
8. Anticipate difficult situations. Think about when they happen and plan to avoid them if possible. For example, take with you some things to amuse a young child. Watching adults is very boring for them. If not, talk to the child about the situation ahead of time. Challenge the child with how you would like things to go: "I wonder if you would be able to (be clever, strong etc.) and help me do this?" Have a plan in case things don't go well.
9. Think about the event from the child's perspective.
10. If you see an emotion rising in the child, note it and name it with them. Naming feelings helps children to manage them. For example:  
"You are getting cross I know"  
"I understand you would like ... but we can't because ..."

Give a short reason:

“We have to make sure you are (healthy, safe, kind to others etc.)”.

“I can help you do (something else).”

Or a challenge to the child of something acceptable to you:

“Do you think you could ...?”

11. If the above does not work, take the child away from the situation but keep the child with you (‘time in’). Remain as calm as you can and consistently restate your decision. Acknowledge the child’s feeling. Offer to connect with the child. “I know it is hard. Do you want a hug?”
12. Predict that this will be over soon. “I know we can calm you down. Very soon you will fine again”.
13. Importantly, parents who are very upset themselves need to take a break, as long as the child is safe. Helping parents to find support is important; there are always times in parenting when this is needed.

### **Specific resources for helping one- and two-year-olds (and older) with behaviour and feelings**

#### ***Time in***

The Circle of Security model lists a step by step process called *Time In* during which the adult helps the child ‘organise their feelings’. In their approach, *Time Out* is for the parent to calm down (emotionally re-regulate) in order to be in a good state to respond to the child. See: [www.circleofsecurity.com](http://www.circleofsecurity.com)

#### ***Time in Parenting***

This book by Otto Weininger is highly recommended for helping children to learn strategies for self-regulation. It states, “When children are upset, out of control, rude or angry, what they need most is to be with a safe and accepting adult. They need to be with someone who is calm and non-punitive, and can recognize that anyone can get very upset at one time or other. They also need someone who can help them express these strong feelings appropriately”. The context of responding to young children’s behaviour is to use the parental relationship with the child to assist the child with emotional regulation, i.e. young children learn emotional regulation in the context of the relationship and with the support of the parent. It is not something they learn alone.

Weininger makes the following points about exclusionary time out. “...it assumes that, at any age, we learn by ourselves and do not need others to help us. It assumes that we already somehow know the ‘right’ way to do things and can simply go to our room and ‘tune into’ the right way. Again, it appears to the child we do not need anyone to help us do this ... I do not believe that children of two, three, four, five or even six are able to perform such thinking tasks because they do not yet have the reflective skills to do so ... time out ... is a punishment that deprives a child of the very relationship that he needs at the time the punishment is given.”

See: Weininger, Otto (2002). *Time-in parenting: how to teach children emotional self-control, life skills, and problem solving by lending yourself and staying connected*. Toronto: L Rinascente Books. Available in Australia from Open Leaves Books, Phone: 07 38440169.

### ***No-drama Discipline: the Whole Brain Way to Calm the Chaos and Nurture Your child's Developing Mind***

Coming from a background of neuroscience these authors note the effect of social exclusion on the brain and recommend connection and empathy as the way to assist the child in learning to manage their feelings and take responsibility. When a child is in trouble is when they need the help and comfort of the adult, so their advice is to connect and then redirect, saying no to inappropriate behaviour, but yes to emotions. There is guidance in this book about how to do this in practice.

### ***The Emotional Life of the Toddler***

This book by Alicia Lieberman also has very helpful information about toddlers and how the way we respond to them helps them with important learning and development. It gives parents and carers a real insight into the world of the toddler and what is behind their actions and feelings.

### **References**

- Berlin LJ, Ziv Y, Amaya-Jackson L, Greenberg MT (Eds) (2005). *Enhancing Early Attachments*. Duke Series in Child Development and Public Policy. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Betz C (1994). Beyond time-out: Tips from a teacher. *Young Children* 49:3, 10-14.
- Cassidy J & Shaver PR (Eds) (2000) *Handbook of Attachment*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Eisenberger N *et al.* (2003). Does rejection hurt? An fMRI study of social exclusion. *Science* 302, 290.
- Elkind D (2001). Instructive discipline is built on understanding: Choosing time-in. *Child Care Information Exchange* 141, 7-8.
- Fonagy P (1996). *Prevention, the Appropriate Target of Infant Psychotherapy*. Plenary address at the sixth World Congress of the World Association for Infant Mental Health. Tampere, Finland. July.
- Gartrell D (2001). Replacing time-out. Part one – Using guidance to build an encouraging classroom. *Young Children* 56:6, 8-16.
- Gartrell, D (2002). Replacing time-out. Part two – Using guidance to maintain an encouraging classroom. *Young Children* 57:2, 36-43.
- Haiman PE (1998). 'Time out' to correct misbehavior may aggravate it instead. *Brown University Child & Adolescent Behavior Letter* 14:10, 1-4.
- Hannon J (2002). No time for time out. *Kappa Delta Pi Record* 38, 112-4.
- Lang L (1997). Too much time out. *Teacher Magazine* 8, 6-7.
- Lieberman A. (1993). *The Emotional Life of the Toddler*. USA: The Free Press.
- Readdick CA. & Chapman PL (2001). Young children's perceptions of time out. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 15, 81-87.
- Reinsberg J (1999). Understanding young children's behavior. *Young Children* 54:4, 54-57.
- Schore A (1994). *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self: the Neurobiology of Emotional Development*. Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Schreiber ME (1999). Time-outs for toddlers: Is our goal punishment or education? *Young Children* 54:4, 22-25.

Siegel D, Bryson TP (2014). *No-Drama Discipline: the Whole Brain Way to Calm the Chaos and Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind*. New York: Bantam.

Strauss MS, Paschall MJ (2009). Corporal punishment by mothers and the development of children's cognitive ability: a longitudinal study of two nationally representative age cohorts. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma* 18, 459-483.

Weininger O (2002). *Time-in parenting*. Canada: Caversham Publishers.

Wolf T et al. (2006). Time-out interventions and strategies: A brief review and recommendations. *International Journal of Special Education* 21:3.

### **Further resources**

<http://www.awareparenting.com/timeout.htm>

[www.betterkidcare.psu.edu/AngelUnits/OneHour/TimeOut/TimeOutLessonA.html](http://www.betterkidcare.psu.edu/AngelUnits/OneHour/TimeOut/TimeOutLessonA.html)

<http://www.circleofsecurity.org/publications.html>

<http://www.naeyc.org/resources/eyly/1996/15.htm> (NAEYC statement on Time Out)

[http://www.naturalchild.org/guest/peter\\_haiman.html](http://www.naturalchild.org/guest/peter_haiman.html)