

Increasing Structure, Giving Instructions, and Using Time Out

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Increased structure and consistency at home, frequently reinforcing appropriate behavior, giving clear instructions to children, and using a mildly punitive consequence such as time out when family rules are violated, are parenting strategies that are associated with improved behavioral regulation in children. Here are some suggestions about how to implement these strategies in your own home.

1. It is recommended that parents develop consistent rules and expectations, a regular daily schedule, and structured routines. A structured routine represents a series of activities that a child is expected to complete at a specific time of day. An example of a morning routine might include steps such as get up, get dressed, put pajamas away, eat breakfast, wash face and hands, brush teeth, make bed and gather school materials together, before engaging in a high-interest activity such as playing a video game. Children commonly have two or three routines which are usually associated with a specific time of day or transition (for example, when a child gets home from school, immediately after supper, before bedtime). A daily routine should be appropriate to the age and developmental level of the child, very consistent from day to day, and should be clearly posted, for example, with a written list and picture symbols, if helpful. A child's participation in high-interest activities, such as use of toys should be contingent upon first completing routines at the expected time.
2. As much as possible, emphasize reinforcement of appropriate behavior. Ideally, a child should receive three or four reinforcing interactions for every correction or discipline. Care should be taken to recognize and praise your child for everyday appropriate behavior such as when he or she follows a request, is helpful, or plays well with others. Actively look for opportunities to praise your child, and create daily opportunities for your child to be helpful, for example, following a simple request or assisting with a minor chore, and praise him or her. Praise can also be supplemented with tangible rewards such as an allowance, special activity or access to preferred activities or objects. As many children find any social attention from adults to be reinforcing, minor disruptive behavior that does not violate established household rules should be ignored.
3. When giving instructions to a child, ensure that you have your child's attention. Make sure to reduce distractions, for example, by turning off the television or radio before speaking with your child. When possible, avoid giving instructions to your child while they are engaged in an activity, e.g., when they are completing their homework or watching a favorite program. When giving instructions, approach within a few feet of your child and gain their attention by calling his or her name, putting your hand on their shoulder, or moving into their visual field. Establish eye contact. Instructions should be clear, specific, and brief. Make sure to phrase instructions as instructions, not requests or suggestions. For example, say "John, please pick up your legos and put them in the play box," rather than "Don't you think it's about time to put those things away?" Care should be taken to give instructions that are appropriate to the developmental level of the child and can be completed by the child. Keep your language short and simple! Be careful not to overwhelm children with multiple instructions at once – give one or two instructions at a time. Many times, children will have greater success with complex or lengthy tasks if a parent models and assists them. If it is necessary to give more instructions to the child, for example, several chores that need to be completed, it is better for parents to write down a list or have the child check back in after the first one or two tasks are complete. Parents are cautioned to

limit the amount of negotiation they permit from children (e.g., the child lobbying to change or delay the assigned task), although some negotiation is appropriate in some circumstances. Negotiation may often be used to delay or avoid completing a task if used excessively. If the child complies with instructions, parents are encouraged to praise the child's effort.

4. When a child fails to follow clear instructions or exhibits violation of established rules, it is recommended that a mildly punitive consequence be imposed. This may include a logical or naturally occurring consequence (e.g., if a child doesn't pick up his or her toys, these are put away so the child does not have access to them for a period of time). In many cases, time out serves as a very effective consequence for rule violations or noncompliance. Time out represents a systematic, short-duration period when the child does not have access to enjoyable activities and social attention that occur in his or her environment. In order for time out to be effective, it is very beneficial for the child to have high availability of preferred activities and social attention from parents, other caregivers, and peers. Thus, the child's environment should be a reinforcing one in which they have access to enjoyable interactions with others and fun activities. Time out should be implemented in a boring but not frightening location, such as sitting on the second step of a set of stairs, or in a chair placed in a hallway. Care should be taken to choose a location that is not inadvertently reinforcing. As such, the child should not be placed where they can watch television, or sent to their room where they can play with toys. When setting up a time out program, parents are encouraged to use time out only for one or two specific behaviors, and implement time out very consistently, that is, sending the child to time out each time those problem behaviors are displayed. Time out should be explained to the child before being used, but it is not necessary to insure the child understands or is even paying attention to the explanation. Behaviors which will result in time out should be operationally defined, so that it is clear when time out is appropriate. For example, a child may be timed out for striking any other person with hand, foot, or other body part or object, or failing to follow an instruction or discuss it within 7 seconds of the instruction being given. However, a child should not be timed out for "having a bad attitude", as it is very difficult to agree when this is occurring. When a child exhibits a rule violation or disruptive behavior that will result in time out, the child should be directed to the time out area with a minimum of attention. The child should be given a brief verbal instruction, ideally 10 words or less, such as, "Haley, no hitting. Time out." Avoid the desire to reason, cajole, lecture, or discuss with the child! Depending on the age and cooperation of the child, they may be accompanied to the time out area and directed to sit. Again, social attention such as looking at or talking with the child should be minimized. Time out is most effective when it is implemented in an emotionally neutral fashion, that is, by caregivers who are not visibly angry or upset. The duration of time out should be consistent over time, but should be individually determined for the child. As a general rule of thumb, a child should remain in time out for one minute duration for each year of age, up to a maximum of five minutes. In some cases, it is not appropriate to expect a child to remain in time out for this duration, for example, if a child is hyperactive, in which case a shorter time out (for example, two or three minutes maximum) can be used. Care should be taken not to start timing the time out until the child exhibits reasonably appropriate behavior. In this regard, begin timing if the child is sitting in time out, mumbling under their breath or fidgeting. However, timing should not begin if the child is yelling, swearing, making verbal threats, or refusing to remain in time out – begin timing only if the child is reasonably appropriate. Do not provide repeated instructions to the child that timing will not begin until they sit in the chair, etc.! Instead, by your physical presence, try to limit the child to remain near the time out area, and prevent them from engaging in enjoyable activities until time out has been served. If a child repeatedly fails to remain in time out, it is recommended that they be placed in their bedroom, which would previously have been stripped of preferred activities such as games and toys. The child should be expected to remain in their bedroom for approximately ten minutes once they have calmed down. However, once their time in their bedroom is up, they should be directed to return to the time out area and serve the original time out. The final point in the time out sequence should be for the child to remain in time out appropriately. After time out, parents may wish to remind the child why they were sent to time out, although this is not

necessary. The child should again have access to opportunities to engage in enjoyable activities once time out is over. The exception to this rule occurs when a child is sent to time out for failing to follow an instruction or complete a task. In those cases, the child can resume enjoyable activities only after they have completed the original instruction or task. It is recommended that parents or caregivers observe for opportunities to reinforce appropriate behavior after time out, for example, praise the child for following an instruction or showing good behavior.