



TENNESSEE  
**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**  
DIVISION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION  
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**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Superintendents/Directors  
Special Education Directors

**FROM:** Joseph Fisher, Assistant Commissioner  
Division of Special Education

**RE:** Time Out Policies/Procedures

**DATE:** August 20, 2008

As a result of many questions concerning the use of time out, the Tennessee Department of Education has developed the following guidelines:

The purpose of time out is to remove a child from an environment that is reinforcing and place him/her in an environment that is not reinforcing when the targeted behavior occurs. Used properly, time out can decrease specific unwanted or inappropriate behavior. Time out is only **part** of a comprehensive behavior management plan, which should include high rates of positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior. It includes a wide variety of techniques, but generally requires that a child takes a 'break' from a desired activity, or is separated from a situation until he/she is calm.

Used properly, time out procedures are free of ridicule and humiliation. They do not subject children to bodily harm, and also preserve the dignity and integrity of the adult using them. Time out is **not** a punishment, and does not work with **all** behaviors. The goals of time out usually include: 1) helping the child calm down, 2) allowing the child to reconsider behavior choices he/she has made, and 3) enforcing the rules of the class so the group can learn.

## Types of Time Out

Teachers and staff using time out always need to begin with the **least restrictive** time out method that works for a specific child, unless the child's behavior is dangerous to him/herself, property, or others. If the less restrictive time out is not effective, then the next restrictive method should be tried.

Common types of time out include (in the order of least-to-most restrictive):

- a. planned ignoring (assuming the teacher's attention is reinforcing)
- b. withdrawing materials
- c. time out of a favorite object
- d. removal to a viewing-only place within the class
- e. removal to a non-viewing place within the class
- f. head down at the child's desk (this should never be forced)
- g. time out in the hall (generally not effective and may be problematic)
- h. time out to another class (needs to be pre-arranged)
- i. time out in a time out room (isolation)

## Procedures

Time out procedures should be thoroughly explained to the child before they are used. Generally, one minute per year of age is recommended; longer periods for time out are ineffective. Using a timer is a good way to let both the adult and the child know when time out is over.

### *Non-seclusionary time out:*

When the targeted behavior occurs, the adult calmly and briefly tells the child why he/she is going to time out, and for how long ("You threw your backpack at a classmate. Go to time out for ten minutes."). On the way to time out the adult does not talk with the child, ignoring excuses or comments.

If the child does not proceed immediately to time out, light manual assistance can be used, but no physical struggles should occur unless the adult has been trained. It may be helpful to add a minute to the time out period if the child refuses to comply. However, if up to 30 minutes for time out has accumulated, a back-up plan is necessary (for instance, loss of a significant privilege or tangible). Back-up plans must be devised in advance.

While the student is in time out, the adult does not talk to or argue with him/her. Before leaving time out, the student should be quiet for at least 30 seconds.

The adult may give the student a brief directive as he/she leaves time out ("Now I need you to pick up your backpack and go to your seat."). Any mess the child has made while in time out needs to be cleaned up before leaving. If the child refuses to leave time out, he/she should be ignored, as most children will leave when given no attention.

It is important that the child be calm and quiet before leaving time out. The adult should not try to extract confessions or apologies from the student.

***Seclusionary time out (isolation/use of time out room):***

Procedures for the use of seclusionary time out should be thoroughly explained to both student and staff before they are used. All staff members should practice them and take a test on time out procedures, and the tests kept on file. The list of procedures should be posted on the door of the time out room.

Written parental permission must be obtained before seclusionary time out is used. Both parents and child need to see the time out room, and receive a description of time out procedures. Those procedures should be written in the child's IEP, with the target behaviors specified.

A time out log needs to be maintained, listing the student name, adult responsible, date, in and out times, behavior, and comments. If this log is not maintained, there is no way to determine whether or not time out has been effective.

The student is directed to and released from time out following the non-seclusionary procedures.

**The Time Out Room**

The time out room itself should be clean, well lighted, not scary, and not a danger to the student. It should not be used for any other purpose than time out, and should not contain any reinforcing activities or objects. A viewing window or peephole is necessary so that the student can be observed by an adult, who is present at all times. Video camera surveillance is not sufficient.

Ideally, the door should open from the outside only, the handle on the outside of the door being the kind that an adult must hold in a locked position, allowing the door to open if the adult leaves.

## DOs and DON'Ts for Using Time Out

### ***DON'T***

- Over-explain time out. Do it once thoroughly.
- Talk to the student on the way to time out, or while in time out
- Let the student determine the length of time out-“Come out when you can behave.”
- Let the student leave time out if not quiet
- Require a confession or apology
- Threaten the student with future time out for misbehavior

### ***DO***

- Explain the procedure ahead of time
- Prepare a time out room, or a less reinforcing place for time out
- Use precise verbal requests for directing a student to time out
- Remain calm
- Require the student be quiet for at least 30 seconds before exiting time out
- Use shorter times (one minute per each year of age) for time out
- Require the student to complete work missed while in time out, or complete the request that led to time out
- Have a person responsible for the student during the time out procedure
- Ignore claims of “I like time out”, or refusing to exit time out
- Make the student clean up any mess made while in time out
- Add time for refusal to go to time out
- **KEEP DATA** on the use of time out
- Post procedures in school and on time out door after staff instruction
- Get parents’ written permission before using seclusionary time out
- Include the time out procedure, along with positive behavior supports, in the child’s IEP
- Change the time out procedure if it isn’t working
- Reinforce the student frequently for good behavior

Complete understanding of the procedures ahead of time by the student will help prevent the use of time out.

## References

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