Is time-out appropriate for children under 3 years old?

To implement time-out successfully, children need to understand their behavior was unacceptable, have the self-control to sit and be still (even when overwhelmed), and be able to remember and apply this learning to a future situation. For these reasons, time-out is not developmentally appropriate for young toddlers (18 months to 3 years old) because they are still working hard on developing all of these complex thinking and social skills. In fact, brain research shows that skills like self-control and self-regulation start developing between 3.5 and 4 years, and take many more years to be used consistently.

What about time-in?

An alternative to time-out is “time-in,” which is when a parent physically comforts a child to calm him. For some children, time-in works well because they have difficulty soothing themselves independently. In the early years, children’s ability to regulate their emotions is limited because the part of their brain responsible for this skill is still developing. This is why toddlers often need adult help and support to calm down when they are in a state of upset. Toddlers take their emotional cues from adults and are better able to “regulate” — or calm — when adults are soothing: Holding them, rubbing their backs, talking softly, or whatever works for your child. Time-in also works well when the parent isn’t extremely upset or frustrated and is able to focus on being there emotionally for the child.

When time-in doesn’t work

Parents may find that there are times when children are so out of control — throwing objects, kicking, hitting, biting — that they reject comfort. Sometimes, the more the parent tries to soothe the child, the more out of control she gets! When children are this overloaded, parents get frustrated and are pushed to their emotional limits, too. When emotions are sky-high, a break for both parent and child can be a healthy, helpful choice for all.

In this situation, taking a break can actually be a positive parenting strategy. The critical factor is the way this break is implemented. When done calmly and lovingly, taking a break can prevent the tantrum from escalating further.

There are a range of ways to do this. Families can try to:

- Create a special, safe space to help children calm down. Establish a “cozy corner” or “peaceful place” as a child’s go-to calm-down spot.
- Talk with the child in advance about the purpose of this safe space — explain that it is where people in the family go when they are losing control and need a break. (Parents should model how to use it to take a break themselves, which can serve as very powerful role modeling.)
- Include children in designing the space, giving them choices of acceptable items that can be included. One family put a small nylon teepee in their child’s
re-group and then come back together to talk about what the child could do the next time this situation arises. No learning takes place when children are in an agitated, overwhelmed state.

**Avoid firm rules about how long breaks should last.** One approach is to have the break end when the child is calm. Another option is to set a timer for a few minutes and then go back to your child and check in. At this point, she may still be upset, but if she is willing to accept being comforted, you can help her move on. **Remember, the point of the break is to help her learn to calm herself and to accept whatever rule or limit caused the tantrum (for example, she is ready to read a book together instead of playing on the tablet when screen time is over.)**

**Ignore the behavior but not the child.** If a child is out of control but not harming herself or others, it can be very effective to just ignore the behavior. You might let her know you are going to make dinner and would love a helper when she is calm and ready. Or start reading one of her favorite books aloud. This communicates that you still love your child and are there for her, but that you’re not going to participate in her tantrum.

**Wrapping Up**

Using breaks as a tool to help young children learn to cope with their strong emotions is all about the way it’s done. Breakdowns tell us that children are overwhelmed and have maxed out their ability for self-control. They are not purposefully misbehaving. Their developing brains are on “overload.”

In these situations, taking a break isn’t always harmful to young children. When breaks are used calmly and lovingly—not angrily or as a way to shame the child—they can really help children (and parents!) calm down and move on.

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When a parent sees that a break is needed, it should be done calmly and lovingly. Even if you are holding your child out at arm’s length to avoid his kicks, say as calmly as possible, “I think we need a break,” and take him to the cozy corner. Let your child know that you want to be with him when he’s calm so that the two of you can play again.

**Remember the purpose of the break: Calming down.** Toddlers are not yet able to think about and reflect on their actions and behavior. No 2-year-old will wonder, “Gee, I wonder why I let my emotions get the best of me—I really shouldn’t have thrown that train.”

The purpose of a break is to provide a quiet place where children can move from a state of upset to a sense of calm. The break offers space for both parent and child to