

Time-In and Time-Out



Young children act up a lot. When your child does something you don't want them to do, it's your job to set a limit (see [Limit Setting](#) article). Limits show your child what you expect. Your toddler may get upset, but that is typical. What helps some accept a limit won't work for others. Try different strategies and talk to your HealthySteps Specialist to find what works best for *your* child.



IS TIME-OUT HELPFUL FOR YOUNG CHILDREN?

A typical time-out asks a child to sit and stay put while they “think about” their behavior. For this approach to help, a child must be able to stay calm and sit still. They also need to reflect and remember so they can apply the lesson in the future. This means time-out is not the best choice for young toddlers. Children this age are still working on these complex thinking and social skills. In fact, research shows that self-control and self-regulation *start* developing between 3.5 and 4 years old. These skills take many more years to be used on a regular basis.

WHAT ABOUT TIME-IN?

A “time-in” is when you stay close to your child to help them follow the limit and get calm. Toddlers plug in to their caregivers’ emotions. They can “catch your calm.” This means your child can get calm and “regulate” much more easily when you’re nearby and soothing them. Time-in only works well when *you* aren’t upset or frustrated, so you can be there for your child and their big emotions.

WHEN TIME-IN DOESN'T WORK

There may be times when your child is out of control. They may throw objects, kick, hit, and bite. They may get so upset they reject your comfort. Sometimes when you try to soothe your child, they get more upset! When children are overwhelmed, primary caregivers can get frustrated and pushed to *their* emotional limits. Sometimes a break for you and your child can be a healthy and helpful choice.

Taking a break can be a positive parenting strategy *if the break is taken for calming down*. With a typical time-out, a young child is asked to behave in a manner they're not ready for. When a break is taken for calming down, it can reduce conflict.

THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO DO THIS:

- **Create a special, safe space.** It can be their go-to calm down spot.
- **Talk with your child about what the space is for.** Explain that it's where people in your family go when they are upset and need a break. It's powerful role modeling when you show your child how to use this spot to take a break.
- **Let your child help set up the space.** It might be a pile of pillows and stuffed animals in a corner. Or it might be a large moving box with one side cut out so your child can crawl inside.
- **When needed, guide your child there.** Say, "It's time for a short break." They may walk, or they may need help. Even if you are holding your child at arm's length to avoid their kicks, stay as calm as possible while you help them.

SOME ADDITIONAL WAYS TO RESPOND TO UNWANTED BEHAVIOR:

- **Ignore the behavior, but not the child.** If your child is upset but not hurting anyone, you can try ignoring the behavior. You might let them know you are going to make dinner and would love a helper. Or start reading a favorite book out loud. Maybe they will join you? Pay attention to them, but not the fact that they are yelling.
- **Tailor your break to your child's temperament** (see [Temperament](#) article). You might end the break when your child is calm. Or you might set a timer for a few minutes and then check in. They may be still upset, but willing to accept your support. If so, you can help them move on.
- **Keep everyone safe from harm.** If your child is banging their head or hurting themselves or others, they may need your help. Calmly hold them in your lap to protect them and yourself. Find ideas for preventing unwanted behavior in our [Temper Tantrums](#) article.

SCAN FOR MORE INFO



REMEMBER THE REASON FOR THE BREAK: CALMING DOWN

Toddlers are not yet able to think about and reflect on their actions and behavior. They don't think, "I wonder why I let my anger get the best of me? I really shouldn't have thrown that train." A break lets both you and your child regroup. Depending on your child's state of mind, you might talk about what happened. Any thoughts on how to do things differently next time should happen once everyone is calm. No learning can take place when children (or adults!) are still feeling upset.