

How to Make Classroom Timeouts More Effective

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Joe Ryan, VP CCBBD Executive Committee

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Teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) frequently use time-out as part of their behavior management plan. When implemented properly, time-out procedures can be effective in reducing maladaptive behaviors across a wide range of student populations. From a behaviorist perspective, time-out is defined as a behavior reduction procedure or form of punishment in which students are denied access to all opportunities for reinforcement, contingent upon their displaying inappropriate behavior (Alberto & Troutman, 2006). Teachers however more commonly think of time-out as a procedure to allow a student to calm down by being quiet and being separated from his or her peers. Regardless of these popular definitions, a wide range of variations of this procedure is currently implemented in schools across the United States. Two of the most popular types of timeout include inclusion and exclusion. In inclusion timeout, the student continues to observe classroom instruction, but is denied an opportunity to participate in activities or receive reinforcement from either peers or the teacher. In exclusion time-out, the student is repositioned away from his or her peers where s/he can no longer monitor academic instruction (e.g., seated in chair outside the classroom).

If you elect to use timeout as a behavioral intervention, it is important to understand the procedure will only be effective if the “time-in environment” is more reinforcing for the student than being placed in timeout (Ryan, Sanders, Katsiyannis & Yell, 2007). Therefore, if a student does not wish to be included or participate in a classroom activity, it is unlikely that using timeout will modify the student’s maladaptive behavior. Hence, teachers should strive to ensure there is a meaningful difference between the level of reinforcement a student receives during time-in and timeout. To help make a classroom more reinforcing teachers can: (a) increase the ratio of positive comments (e.g., “good try Johnny”) to negative comments (e.g., “stop talking”), and (b) incorporate effective teaching strategies. It’s recommend teachers *strive for a 5 to 1 ratio of positive to negative comments*. Research indicates that classes where teachers use a strongly positive reinforcement ratio often have fewer behavior problems. This focus on a student’s positive attributes helps the student better understand what behaviors are expected, increases on-task behaviors, and creates a more positive atmosphere in the classroom. Unfortunately, research has also shown that in many of today’s classrooms the number of negative comments or reprimands for inappropriate behaviors far exceed the number of positive reinforcing comments made by teachers. So in summary teachers should strive on making their classrooms more positively reinforcing, which in turn will benefit both the student and teacher.