

The Use of Time Out: A Behaviour- Modification Practice

Chapter 15 – Insights into the Modern Classroom

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Sending the student from class is an age-old technique used by teachers. There is some benefit from sending students out; it removes their disruptive behaviour, takes away their audience, and gives the teacher a break. Removal from class also threatens that student's social security. The use of time out can be beneficial, but it must be done properly to avoid abusing the student. This essay presents the practical approach to the use of all levels of time out.

Time out is an interventional strategy that is commonly used by classroom teachers to eliminate inappropriate behaviour in primary and secondary schools. Time out may appear to simply be the removal of an offending student from activities for a period of time and then bringing them back. However, it is a process that is designed to exclude the student from the opportunity to integrate his or her sense of self with the immediate cohort and to meet basic social needs including the need to belong. It is a process that involves placing the student in an environment that has a reduced opportunity for interaction with other members of the class or cohorts in the playground. These interactions include all activities with educational or social-skills learning as their goal. It is crucial that the student know beforehand the behaviours that will result in removal to time out. There should be no surprises based on the whim of the teacher.

Purpose of Time Outs

The purpose of time out is twofold. For the class members it is the removal of a student whose behaviour is disrupting all students' learning. With the removal of the agitation, all class members are able to resume paying appropriate attention to the lesson, and learning is facilitated.

For the student subjected to time out, there is the benefit of learning that there is a logical consequence in society for inappropriate behaviour. The message for the student is that society will not want you around if you are going to act that way. However, for the time out to be a real negative consequence, the removal must be to an environment that meets the student's needs less; it is less interactive. There must be a meaningful difference between time out of class and time in class.

There is also a therapeutic purpose to time outs. For many students, removal from a stressful situation allows them time to bring their emotions under control and allows them to access alternative behavioural strategies that they can use to succeed in class.

The Use of Warnings

There is no evidence that time outs when they are implemented without prior warnings are any more effective than those that are preceded by a short series of warnings. However, it is

logical that if time out without warnings is invoked, there will be an increase in the number of time out visits.

For many of the students, the inappropriate behaviour is habitual and is the result of inappropriate social-skills learning. For these students the behaviour is just as effectively extinguished through a system of warnings as it is with immediate time outs. This, of course, assumes the student has a commitment to changing the behaviour. If there is no commitment, then the students will soon move through the warning system and find themselves in time out. In a sense, nothing is lost if you use a warning before resorting to time out.

The best type of warning is non-verbal; that is, there is some signal given by the teacher that indicates to students that they have been warned about their behaviour. These non-verbal warnings may be public—everyone in the class knows—or they may be private, and the warning signal is a private transaction only understood by the teacher and one student.

If the warning is to be verbal, then it should be delivered in an assertive, brief, and businesslike manner. If the delivery indicates the frustration and the anger of the teacher, many children will observe this reaction as a type of reward for their behaviour.

Types of Withdrawal

Stage 1

This level of time out is non-exclusionary. The teacher makes the decision to remove positive stimulation from the student while he or she remains in class. It may be that the teacher chooses to ignore the student's efforts to participate effectively or ineffectively in the class. If the teacher does ignore the behaviour, the child in question should be given no clue that their behaviour has been noticed. If the child is attention-seeking and knows he or she is annoying the class, the behaviour will be reinforced.

The teacher could remove objects that are significant to the student to get rid of a needs-meeting device. This level of time out is difficult for the student. It requires a subtle level of sophisticated understanding on the student's part.

Stage 2

At this level the student is physically removed to another location in the classroom and instructed to watch but not participate in the lesson. This is a more overt reminder to the student that he or she is being excluded from the normal classroom activity.

Stage 3

The student is removed from the instructional activity and is not allowed to watch the lesson. He or she is removed to an isolated area within the bounds of the classroom, say behind a screen.

Stage 4

At this level, the student is removed from the room and is sent to a designated area for a brief duration of time. This is the most restrictive level of in-school time out. It requires the school to designate a specific space or location and to organize a level of supervision for the students. The need for supportive supervision is to satisfy the school's duty of care responsibilities and to ensure that the students do not damage themselves, each other, or school property.

Using Stage 4 time out involves a high risk that teachers will use the process to reduce their own immediate stress levels. To the teacher who is struggling with a difficult class, it may appear an easy way to solve the problem. However, this only provides a short-term solution if it is used without other less-restrictive interventions having been tried beforehand.

Stage 5

If all forms of time outs in the school have failed, then it may be that the student is removed from the school altogether. This is school suspension. This is a dramatic step and should only been taken as a last resort. This at-home time out may, in some rare occasions, escalate to become an expulsion from the school.

It makes sense, and it is best practice, that classroom teachers use time outs in sequence, from least restrictive to most restrictive. However, for some instances of gross misbehaviour or when there is risk of injury or equipment damage, a later stage may appropriately be invoked immediately.

Length of Time Out

The appropriate duration of time out is hard to define in concrete terms. For instance, just ignoring a student, a Stage 1 time out that takes no more than a couple of seconds to invoke, may be successful. Or, at the other end of the scale, it could be that days at home are appropriate. In general, there is a balance that must be sought, the effective balance between time outs that are so short they are ineffective and those that are so long they produce negative outcomes for the student. It should be noted that the longer the time out lasts the more the teacher needs to address difficult practical, ethical, and legal issues.

Long time outs will interfere with the student's opportunities to learn, not only the academic lessons but also an appropriate style of behaviour to use in future. If the student is not particularly engaged at school, long periods of time out may increase the rate of self-withdrawal.

It is a fair rule of thumb that time out should be no more than five to ten minutes for young primary students and up to fifteen to twenty minutes for older students.

Returning from Time Out

The underlying purpose of time out is to motivate the student to act in an appropriate manner in class. A return to class is necessary to see whether this intervention has been successful. There are various criteria for conditions of release.

Fixed Duration

Some programs fix the length of time out at a predetermined level, and the student returns after that time is up. There is no extension of time out if the student is continuing to act in an inappropriate manner, either during the time out or at the time of return.

Minimum Duration plus Extension

This form requires the student to remain in time out for a predetermined length of time. After this time, the student's return is conditional on displaying appropriate behaviour. If the recovery of suitable behaviour does not occur, then the student should remain in time out for an extended time. This extension can be predetermined or can last until the appropriate behaviour is displayed.

Release Contingent on a Display of Appropriate Behaviour

At the time of invoking the intervention, the teacher decides the appropriate duration for the time out. However, there should be a guide to how long the time will be; for example, it may be after three minutes of continuous appropriate behaviour. If there is no predetermined condition for release, it will be easy for the teacher to just leave the student in time out.

Legal and Ethical Guidelines

All students have the right to an education. The use of time outs is, in fact, an interruption of our obligation to comply with this responsibility. Therefore it is imperative that this behaviour-management technique is done with regard to ethical and accompanying legal issues. Before the technique is used, the following guidelines should be followed:

- There must be conformity to the local education authority's guidelines on time out, suspension, exclusion, and expulsions.
- There should be the provision of written procedures, so that parents, students and relevant school community members understand the process. The legitimate educational function of time out is thus identified (i.e., reduction in dangerous or disruptive behaviour, protection of educational environment, etc.).

The application of time out should not be harsh or punitive and should not stem from the teacher's anger. Its application must be proportional to the age of the student, the student's physical condition, and the offence.

Records of time outs should be kept. These should include a description of the offending behaviour, the procedures used, the duration of the time out, the results, and the names of witnesses of the time out. For the higher stages of time outs, supervisors and parents/guardians should be notified.

Time out can be a most effective intervention for addressing inappropriate behaviours. However, there should be continual evaluation of the effectiveness of this technique for

your students. For some it may prove to be most powerful. For others alternate approaches may be desirable.