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Time-outs for Teens:

A high-impact disciplinary program for
parents of oppositional teenagers.

This electronic version of the Time-outs for Teens program has been hastily posted because the booklet is now out of print and my work on the new 2011 revision is not yet completed. Please excuse the minor errors you'll notice.

This is an introduction to using "time-outs" as a means of disciplining teenagers. The time-out procedure was developed primarily for use with much younger children. With appropriate modifications, however, this general procedure can be adapted for use with teenagers as old as 18 or 19, even those who have become grossly defiant or abusively disrespectful. Most of the modifications to the general program have to do with where to put the adolescent for time-out, how long to leave him or her there and what kind of back-up plans are necessary to get him or her to begin accepting the time-out as a routine disciplinary measure. The back-up plans are the key to this entire approach.

By the time a previously unruly teenager begins responding to the back-up plans by accepting time-outs as a matter of course, most of the serious behavior problems will already have been resolved. This plan is designed to get to that point as quickly as possible while minimizing the dangers of potentially explosive confrontations.

In promoting a time-out based approach to discipline I am not suggesting that other methods are ineffective or unreasonable. Grounding, lecturing and many other discipline plans have worked just fine in many families for generations. When they get good results they can all serve perfectly adequately and perhaps be used interchangeably with considerable flexibility. However, anyone who has more than one child knows all too well that each child is different in temperament beginning at birth and those fascinating differences that comprise the individual personality of each child tend to be magnified with each passing year. What worked well enough for one child may be much less effective with another. Also, what used to work reliably for a child at one age may stop working as the child grows older and becomes subject to a wider range of influences.

Once it has become clear that a particular approach is not working well with a particular child then it becomes necessary to take a different approach. Experience has shown that when consistently implemented with effective back-up plans the Time-outs for Teens program can be remarkably useful with a wide range of problem behaviors. It can't be overemphasized, however, that the effectiveness of any plan rests heavily on parents' or other care-givers' commitment to support each other in implementing the recommendations consistently.

In this booklet I address the general principles of a time-out approach as well as some specific fine points about how to implement one specifically designed for teenagers. These recommendations have been worked out over several years of experience and tailored for maximum effectiveness. Where discipline problems have not been long-standing or have not become serious, strictly attending to the fine points of these recommendations may not be necessary. For more challenging situations, however, consistent attention to detail will greatly increase

the chances of getting good results sooner rather than later. At the same time, closely following these recommendations will help to avoid the dangers of prolonged, escalating power-struggles between parent and child.

When working with parents directly to develop an individualized discipline program I hold myself to the following set of performance standards. My job is to offer specific recommendations that parents can feel comfortable with and confident about implementing. I expect that it will be obvious that my recommendations have begun working within the first week or two of implementation. Otherwise, we revise the plan. Finally, these recommendations must require no more time or emotional energy than what the parents were doing prior to seeking my help.

In most cases, the immediate benefit of switching to this new program of discipline is that there are far fewer arguments and less emotional upset between the parents and the children. To a large extent this comes about simply when the parents resolve to refrain from the ineffective but habitual approaches to discipline that they had previously been relying on.

Principles of safe and effective punishment:

- Punishments are best when they can be immediately implemented at the time of the misbehavior. The consequences to the teenager should be experienced right away. In contrast to time-outs, most alternative punishments have no consequence to the adolescent until hours or even days later. A good example of this is grounding a teenager on Wednesday night when there may be nowhere he is particularly interested in going until Friday.
- Punishments work best when they can be carried out and dispensed with quickly. This minimizes the problem of having to stack new punishments on top of old punishments. The adolescent can serve his time and get back in the action with a clean slate as soon as possible. The sentence is served while the memory of the offense is still fresh.

These are the principles underlying the widespread success in using time-outs with three to five year olds. These same principles apply just as well in the discipline of teenagers. What often stands in the way of using time-outs to capitalize on these principles with teens is simply the preconception on the part of parents that time-outs are for tikes.

Time-outs and self-discipline: When time-outs are used routinely, the teenager gets regular practice at submitting to parental authority and exercising the self-discipline involved in doing something he would rather not do, that is, sitting in time-out. Most other punishments are imposed on the teenager. He passively suffers through lectures, angry reprimands or the loss of privileges exercising only the minimum of self-control necessary to refrain from outright rebellion. The use of groundings or revoking privileges, like any other effective punishment, may to some extent deter future offenses. It is only punishments which involve a significant degree of cooperative acceptance, like the time-out, that provide the crucial element of giving the teenager opportunities to practice self-discipline.

What to punish: The first thing to decide on is what to discipline. The idea is to begin by exercising relatively good control over a few troubling behaviors. Attempting to apply a new program of discipline to all inappropriate behavior is to risk that no effective control will be achieved over anything. In most cases it is best to start by focusing on just the worst of the offenses, letting other problems go unaddressed for a while.

Review your child's recent behavior and make a list of all the problems which you eventually want to bring under control. Think about this as if you were having a teacher's conference with yourself. Be as specific as possible in itemizing the problems. Concrete descriptions of behavior work as better starting points than

observations about a child's attitude or personality. Then choose three or four items to focus on initially. Moving other problems onto the target list can wait until the first items have been brought under better control.

Examples of problems which are common with teenagers include:

Interrupting others' conversation,
Nagging when he doesn't get his way,
Arguing about everything,
Not admitting errors and refusing to apologize,
Procrastinating about doing what he is told to do,
Not going to bed on time,
Neglecting routine chores or homework,
Teasing other children or pets,
Failing to come home on time,
Demanding that things be bought for him,
Refusing to comply with phone restrictions,
Refusing to accept punishments, e.g., groundings,
Smoking in the house,
Saying disrespectful things or using profanity,
Lying,
Acting out violently or threatening others,
Throwing tantrums, slamming doors, etc., or
Defiantly leaving home when told to stay.

How to punish: One punishment does all. Many discipline programs advocate developing a list of consequences (punishments) so that there is a specific punishment designated for each of the common offenses. While this allows for making the punishment fit the crime, it can become inordinately complicated to maintain such a program. Consistency is very important to effective discipline. For the sake of simplicity, which allows for greater consistency, I recommend at the outset that one punishment be used for all problem behaviors.

Homework: The most common exception. Bear in mind that the problem of getting an adolescent to do his homework may not make it in the top three or four items on the target list of what to address. In that case the concern about homework should be put on hold until the more urgent problems are brought under control. If homework is a prime concern then the simplest approach is to use the time-out program with that problem just like with any other problem that might need correcting.

It is often the case, however, that time-outs don't work well with academic motivational problems. For this reason, the Study Table Plan was developed. This is described beginning on page 23 of this booklet.

Getting the Plan up and running: The change over to a new approach to discipline can be a difficult transition point. While the business of disciplining children is supposed to be about getting kids to change their behavior, parents often find that it can be quite difficult to change their own. Parents often find themselves lapsing back into the old, well-established patterns of discipline despite having determined that those approaches have not been effective. For this reason, I strongly recommend that time-outs be initiated in a very rote, mechanical manner. You will find that you begin being consistent and efficient more quickly if you **memorize your lines and stick to the script.** Teenagers can be very good at changing the subject and controlling the agenda of parent-child interactions. They will have more success at this if you allow yourself to improvise. Having figured out what you want to say to initiate a time-out, **pretend that you are a broken record!**

- For example, you could initiate time-outs by saying, **"Go sit on the back steps. I'll let you know when you can come back in."**
- Don't tell him why he is being punished before you send him to time-out.
- Don't tell him how long he'll be in time-out.
- Even if you are feeling angry or frustrated try to sound calm and matter of fact when you send him to time-out.
- Don't repeat yourself. Tell him once. If he doesn't go immediately keep your mouth closed and point to the door. Saying nothing will probably get his attention a lot better than saying it **louder** and it will certainly work better than repeating yourself. *If this strategy works the first time with your teenager then you really don't have much of a problem.* If pointing to the door doesn't work within 20 to 30 seconds then you will have to rely on the back-up plans. These are discussed beginning on page 9.

The same principle underlies several of the preceding guidelines about how to initiate a time-out. ***When the teenager is in time-out you want him or her thinking about what he or she did to get put in time-out.*** You don't give him the explanation ahead of time because you would like him to try to figure that out on his own. You don't tell him how long he'll be there so that he might spend some moments wondering about that rather than merely watching the clock. Finally, you try to sound calm about sending him to time-out for two reasons. First, because you want him thinking about what he did to get put in time-out you don't want him distracted by the thought that he got put there simply because you happened to be in a crabby mood that day. So, for the few minutes it takes to initiate a time-out, try to sound calm and assured regardless of how frustrated or exasperated you might feel at the moment. Second, you want to convey the confidence of assured authority.

At this point your assurance lies not in any particular level of confidence that he will actually go to the porch when sent. Rather, it lies in the knowledge that if he doesn't go to the porch you are well prepared with sound back-up plans.

Where to send him: Sending children and even teenagers to their rooms as a means of punishment is a fairly common practice. No doubt in many cases this is entirely adequate. There are specific reasons why I recommend that adolescents be sent out of the house for time-out rather than to their rooms. A teenager can be very territorial about his or her room. They tend to have an inflated sense of entitlement about their rooms, as if they were paying the property taxes on that square footage of the house.

This sense of entitlement typically far exceeds their sense of responsibility and this is one of the things we wish to bring back into balance by adopting a more rigorous disciplinary plan. I strongly recommend against making ultimatums unless one is prepared to follow through with the threat. However, the *attitude* which we want to convey to the adolescent might be summarized as follows, "You can hang around here, do what is expected and be considerate of the other members of this household, or (at least for fifteen to twenty minutes at a time) you won't be a member of this household." Putting a teenager out of the house amounts to displacing him from the family and all of its resources on a manageable temporary basis.

Rarely is it necessary to consider permanently displacing a teenager from the home. However, when the time-out spot is outside of the house, particularly in the cold months of late fall, winter and early spring, the teen is much more likely to consider the value of home and family in a more appropriate perspective.

I have found that parents are often reluctant to put even teenagers outside in the cold or dark of night. When I offer the back steps as the preferred time-out spot, it is because this has proven to be much more effective than sending children, especially teenagers, to their rooms. This is one of the refinements which makes this program

appropriate for teenagers who have become grossly oppositional and defiant. With less challenging adolescents such extreme measures may not be necessary. Other time-out spots which might be considered include an apartment hallway or balcony, an unfinished basement, a garage, a laundry room or even a car parked outside.

How long to punish: For teenagers, time-outs of 15 to 20 minutes are generally adequate. Under some circumstance, in consideration of convenience to yourself or extremely frigid weather, you might choose to shorten the time-out period. Rarely is anything to be gained, however, by exceeding an upper limit of about thirty minutes. Longer time-outs are generally no more effective than time-outs of 15 to 20 minutes. Furthermore, routinely working with time-outs of 15 minutes, in principle, gives you up to four opportunities every hour to initiate time-outs. This is roughly twice the opportunities you would have with a 30 minute time out. In any event, keep in mind that how long he will have to be in time-out is “for you to know and for him to find out.” Don’t discuss it with him. We don’t want an argument about whether he gets to use the car to degenerate into an argument about how long he has to stay in time-out for arguing about whether he gets to use the car.

When a single 15 minute time-out is not a sufficient punishment to fit the crime, consider repeating the standard length time-out later in the day, up to two or three times. Refer each time to the original offense. For example you could say, **"Do you remember this morning when I gave you a time-out for smacking your brother? (Yeah.) Take another time-out. I'd like you to think about that some more."**

Here are some specific illustrations of how the time-out period might be terminated depending on the offense being addressed:

Interrupting: Send him to time-out. Reduce the length of the time-out to half the usual time if the interruptions occur during a family meal. Once the time is served call him back in saying, **"You can come back in now but don't interrupt."**

Procrastinating: Send him to time-out. Afterwards tell him, **"Now (take out the trash) like I told you to."**

Arguing: Send him to time-out. Afterwards say, **"If you think you are done (arguing) you can come in now."**

Getting into the refrigerator: Send him to time-out. When he's done tell him, **"Now put all this food away. You are going to have to learn to eat at meal time."** If he still argues, give him another time-out and have him finish putting the food away after the second time-out.

How often to punish: On days when you are home with your teenager for the entire day, aim for from three to five time-outs per day. Choose what to punish given that that is as many time-outs as you have to work with. Consistently imposing time-outs more frequently than that leads to a greater risk of engendering unnecessary resentment. After you start getting good results you will have fewer occasions to give him time-outs based on the initial target list of behaviors.

When you have fewer problems with the original list of items, add some of the less troubling behaviors to the target list and continue to give him from two to four time-outs per day. In this way the discipline program moves from teaching your child to refrain from more serious problems like being verbally abusive to his parents and disobeying direct orders to less serious problems like procrastinating or being rude to other children in the family. By that time you have moved beyond the problem solving phase of the discipline program to the routine maintenance phase. Once you are clearly in the routine maintenance phase of the program you'll find that you have fewer than three occasions per day to punish your child, and that is as you would hope it would be.

Back-up Plans for Getting Time-outs to Happen

If improving self-discipline in teenagers was as simple as saying "Go to the porch." then there would be few problems indeed. Academic underachievement, delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse and sexual promiscuity would be all but unheard of. Almost all kids would grow up to be mature, responsible, productive adults with positive, meaningful relationships with their families and peers by, say, age 20.

The fact is, establishing an effective program of discipline with a moderately unruly teenage son or daughter is not a simple matter. Saying, "Go sit on the back porch. I'll let you know when you can come in." is almost certainly not going to meet with compliance the first time out. You need to anticipate that and be prepared.

By the time children become teenagers there is very little about their behavior over which parents can unilaterally impose control. The Time-outs for Teens program starts with the realization that parental authority has power to shape the lives of children largely to the extent that the adolescents voluntarily consent to that authority. The back-up plans consist of using whatever can conveniently be controlled to persuade teenagers to consent to authority in ways that could not otherwise be imposed.

When it comes to introducing a new discipline plan, if you don't have a back-up plan, then you don't have a plan. The back-up plan is best seen as a temporary arrangement; a means of moving the adolescent towards accepting time-outs on demand. As soon as the teenager will demonstrate his willingness to accept the time-out procedure, the back-up plans can be phased out.

Why not just continue to use the back-up plan if it works? The field of psychology has generated an enormous amount of research on the effectiveness and potential negative side effects of punishment as an approach to discipline. The plan which I am outlining represents an attempt to maximize the effectiveness of punishment while minimizing the potential negative consequences involved in both parental and adolescent resentment which it can entail. Once the teenager can be brought around to consistently accepting time-outs, relying on them exclusively allows for a simpler, more convenient and efficient approach to discipline than do either of the back-up plans which I propose.

Back-up Plan A: If he refuses to go to the porch tell him, **"You've got two choices. Either you can learn to take a time-out without any argument or I'm going to go into your room and take your phone, your stereo, and your TV, and you will be grounded and lose phone, TV and driving privileges until you do learn to take a time out."** If he argues or complains be prepared to respond only to his first retort by asking **"Am I to understand that you are not yet willing to take a time-out?"** Unless he is willing to take a time-out, promptly break off contact and walk away. Don't allow further discussion or you will risk getting into a protracted argument about whether time-outs are "appropriate", "fair" or "stupid." It may be best simply to refuse to answer any questions at this time. You could terminate the discussion with **"That's all I need to know."**

Any further argument on his part is a defacto refusal to accept the time-out. Having made the point clearly one time, you should break off communication and remove yourself from the immediate vicinity. Stay only close enough to see whether or not he chooses to comply by going to the porch within the next sixty seconds. You need not be a stickler about the sixty second time limit, but if he doesn't get himself out there within a couple of minutes or so, you'll need to begin watching for an opportunity to remove the appliances from his room. Don't try to remove the appliances while he is at home. Wait until he is gone so that you don't run the risk of another pointless or potentially violent argument.

It may be that the appliances can be disabled without actually removing them simply by taking the power cords or speaker wires. Small luggage locks can be clipped through the holes on the tips of the power cords. Depending on the wiring in your house you may be able to disable his room by tripping the circuit breaker for

the electricity in his room without effecting other essential areas of the house. Exercise a little creativity and do it the easiest way possible. You may have to go through this process more than once.

Phasing out the back-up plan: He starts getting his appliances back *after* he has demonstrated that he will reliably submit to time-outs. Continue to watch for opportunities to give him further time-outs. Aim for trying to give him one to three time-outs per day. We want the teenager working at avoiding conflicts with you, not you working to avoid conflicts with him. When you see a good opportunity to give him another time-out say to him, **“Here is an opportunity for you to move towards getting your appliances and privileges back. Are you ready to take a time-out?”** If he answers yes tell him, **“Go to the porch. I’ll let you know when you can come back in.”** Leave him there for the standard length of time (15 to 20 minutes). Afterwards tell him, **“You can come in now.”** Don’t be drawn into a discussion of how many time-outs he will have to take before he gets off restrictions. Use a response like, **“I’ll let you know when you can have them back. Until then, I don’t want to talk about it.”**

If your child tends to get argumentative or defiant in an episodic rather than a continuous pattern then it might not be efficient to wait for the next offense before offering him an opportunity to go to the *time-out plan* from the *back-up plan*. This can be introduced by saying, **“If you would like to start getting off restrictions I’ve got a plan for how you could do that.”** (Well, OK) **“Before that happens I need to see that you are willing to take time-outs when I give them to you. If you are willing to show me that you can take a few practice time-outs without any problem, I’ll get you your things back.”** The only difference between the practice time-outs and the real ones is that practice time-outs need only last about five or ten minutes and they can be given for no reason whatsoever.

If the teen declines to cooperate with the practice time-outs don’t try to persuade him. Simply acknowledge that the choice of being under the time-out discipline plan or the back-up discipline plan is up to him, e.g., **“Suit yourself.”** Continue to inquire about whether he would be interested in doing the practice time-out option once every other day or so. If he takes the initiative to request that he be allowed to get off the back-up discipline plan, don’t give into pressure that he be allowed to start working through his practice time-outs immediately or all in one day. Learning to accept delayed gratification is an important part of self-discipline.

Back-up Plan B: If when you give him a time-out he ignores you and leaves the house and yard, don’t try to call him back. Decisive action and strong measures are called for here. Chasing after him is unlikely to work and an unsuccessful attempt to reestablish control would do more damage than refraining from trying. You want to draw the battle lines where you know you can win.

Instead of calling after him, simply lock the doors. While he is out see that his appliances are removed or disabled. When he comes back and finds the doors locked he’ll knock on the door or ring the bell. Open the door just enough to be able to speak to him. Tell him, **“Oh, you’re back. It’s good to see you. Now go to the back porch like I told you to and wait there until I say you can come in.”** Close the door and don’t carry on any further discussion. After about 15 minutes, go tell him he can come in. If he refuses to come in when invited, let it go. You will have succeeded in controlling what you need to control. Don’t get bogged down in trying to control things you don’t have to control.

Because, under Plan B, he did not take the time out when you told him to the first time, he will need to get an additional time-out as a *two-for-one penalty*. If there is still time in the day after you let him in go find him 30 to 60 minutes later. Tell him, **“Do you remember when I gave you a time-out and you didn’t take it? (Yeah) I think you need some more practice. Go to the porch and stay there this time until I say you can come back in.”**

Conclusion

At the critical transition point of switching over to a new approach to discipline it is important to distinguish between what can be controlled and what cannot be controlled. At the beginning you will not be able to effectively control everything on your target list (see Appendix A). To attempt to do so would be to risk that nothing will ever be consistently and effectively controlled. For example, whether your child is doing homework during his free periods at school or smoking marijuana in the parking lot is not something you can exercise any immediate direct control over. While this may concern you a great deal, to be effective you have to concentrate on problems which you are better able to monitor.

These are the problems that go on every day in your very own home. These problems most often include neglecting responsibilities and indulging in inappropriate expressions of anger. What is reflected in these problems, as well as the more serious problems that may occur elsewhere, is a lack of self-discipline on the part of the teenager.

The major thing oppositional teenagers need is to develop more self-discipline and the only way children learn self-discipline is by being effectively disciplined by adults. The Time-outs for Teens program helps parents accomplish this with a set of relatively simple procedures for initiating time-outs, and appropriate back-up plans for getting teens to comply with the time-outs. Arguments and frustrations are quickly minimized when parents abandon the previous ineffective strategies. Once the adolescent begins routinely accepting time-outs then he gets opportunities to practice self-control as often as necessary.

Appendix A

Developing a list of what to punish.

Review your child's recent behavior and make a list of all the problems which you eventually want to bring under control. Be as specific as possible. List behaviors rather than referring to his or her attitude or personality. The examples which are repeated on the next page may help. Write the problems that concern you below.

Having completed your list, go back and number the items in the order in which you would like to see them brought under control. As you begin to implement the Time-Outs for Teens program you may need to concentrate on just the top three or four problems. Limit what you issue time-outs for so that you will only be doing this two to five times per day. See page 3 for more details.

Examples of problems which are common with teenagers include:

- Interrupting others' conversation,
- Nagging when he doesn't get his way,
- Arguing about everything,
- Not admitting errors and refusing to apologize,
- Procrastinating about doing what he is told to do,
- Not going to bed on time,
- Neglecting routine chores or homework,
- Teasing other children or pets,
- Failing to come home on time,
- Demanding that things be bought for him,
- Refusing to comply with phone restrictions,
- Refusing to accept punishments, e.g., groundings,
- Smoking in the house,
- Saying disrespectful things or using profanity,
- Lying,
- Acting out violently or threatening others,
- Throwing tantrums, slamming doors, etc., or
- Defiantly leaving home when told to stay.

Appendix B

Lines to be Memorized.

Taking time to commit some of these lines to memory is the most effective way to prepare yourself for implementing the time-out procedure. If you are mentally prepared to stick to the script then it is less likely that you will be dragged into an argument with your teenager. You may need to modify the underlined phrases to fit your specific situation. Refer back to the first several items on your list in Appendix A when necessary and write your versions of the following statements on the last page of this section.

Implementing the time-out: (See pages 4 - 6)

"Go sit on the back steps. I'll let you know when you can come in."

Terminating the time-out: (See pages 7 - 8)

"You can come back in now but don't interrupt."

"You can come in now and take out the trash like I told you to."

"If you think you are done arguing you can come in now."

Back-up Plan A: If he refuses to go to the porch:
(See pages 9 - 12)

"You've got two choices. Either you can learn to take a time-out without any argument or I'm going to go into your room and take your phone, your stereo, and your TV, and you will be grounded and lose phone, TV and driving privileges until you do learn to take a time out."

If he argues or complains be prepared to respond only to his first retort by asking

"Am I to understand that you are not yet willing to take a time-out?"

Unless he is willing to take a time out promptly break off contact and walk away. You could terminate the discussion by saying,

"That's all I need to know."

Phasing out the back-up plan: (See pages 12 - 13)

He starts getting his appliances back *after* he has demonstrated that he will reliably submit to time-outs. When you see a good opportunity to give him another time-out say to him,

"Here is an opportunity for you to move towards getting your appliances and privileges back. Are you ready to take a time-out? (Yeah, I guess.) Go to the porch and stay there. I'll let you know when you can come back in."

To avoid arguments about how many time-outs he will have to take before he gets off restrictions.

(See page 12)

"I'll let you know when you can have them back. Until then I don't want to talk about it."

When a single 15-minute time-out is not sufficient:

(See pages 7 & 8)

"Do you remember this morning when I gave you a time-out for smacking your brother? (Yeah.) Take another time-out. I'd like you to think about that some more

Back-up Plan B: If he runs off instead of staying on the porch:

(See page 13)

"Oh, you're back. It's good to see you. Now go to the back porch like I told you to and wait there until I say you can come in."

Write in any other specific phrases which you anticipate needing.

Appendix C

Time-out Scorecard

It will be very helpful at the outset of launching the Time-outs program if you prepare a scorecard to record instances of giving time-outs. List the common infractions that you expect to most often address with time-outs. Indicate that a time-out was given for a given child by a specified parent on a particular day by recording the parent's initial in the cell that corresponds to the row for that child and that offense and in the column for the day on which it occurred. If the child argued or complained in the course of taking the time-out, circle the your initial indicating that that time-out was not taken appropriately. That is to remind you come back five to fifteen minutes later and give a "do-over" time out for the specific offense of not taking the time-out appropriately.

What follows is a sample of a time-out scorecard.

Sample is under construction

E-mail me and I will send you one. JohnGallagherPhD@gmail.com