

Time-out: How It Relates to Constructive Spanking as a Consequence



What is Time-out? It is a method of isolating a child for (relatively) short periods of time in response to an undesirable behaviour.

Where does Time-out fit into the behaviour modification scale of “PIE” (Prevention, Intervention and Enforcement)? It is a consequence, nothing more and nothing less. All consequences are Enforcements.

What category of Enforcements is it in? A Time-out is a confinement consequence, and belongs to the continuum from time-out, confined to bedroom, groundings, up to imprisonment. These are all the same punishment; they just vary in intensity and duration.

Other non-abusive enforcements include constructive physical discipline (moderate spanking), removal of privilege (toy, game TV...), and monetary penalties (withholding allowances), to name a few.

How does Time-out gain its effectiveness? While moderate spanking gains its effectiveness from a short-term mild physical pain, all other consequences gain their effectiveness by inflicting mental / emotional pain. This is called “deterrence”, and all consequences gain their effectiveness from this.

How Effective is Time-out? While individual experiences vary, real-time studies show that overall; the entire spectrums of consequences that inflict mental pain on pre-teens are less effective (based on recidivism) than moderate constructive spanking. This relationship *inverts* once the child becomes a teen, whereby mental consequences (especially social isolations) become preferable over physical consequences.

How frequently should consequences be used? Consequences are vital to a child’s development, as science is now clear that “positive” parenting that uses no consequences produces developmentally inferior results. As functioning adults, children need to learn that anti-social actions have negative consequences. However, that does NOT mean one should immediately avail a consequence! A sensible and loving parent should progress through a variety of preventions and interventions first (methods of “reason”). Once these fail, a consequence be applied, and it should be consistently applied to modify a particular behaviour. That said, consequences work best when used least – overuse diminishes effectiveness.

Our research highlights Three Points to Consider with Time-outs

1) How does Time-out & constructive spanking compare in parental engagement? Time-outs, like all confinements, are disengaged consequences since the child is necessarily isolated (or temporarily “abandoned”) by the parent. Constructive spanking is engaged parenting: While the spanking lasts only seconds, the crucial aftermath of hugging, consolation, reaffirmation of the mistake being addressed and reaffirmation of love makes this a highly engaged and bonding process.

2) Combining the two techniques: While time-outs are generally ineffective, particularly with preschoolers, they are well worth trying. An oppositional-defiant child will choose to ignore time-out, and simply get up and leave rendering the method useless. Studies (on 2 to 6 year olds, Larzelere, et al) show that an open-handed “two swat spank” for the escaping child dramatically increases effectiveness. Using this method, the parent must return the child to time-out, calmly reaffirm why they are there, and reaffirm a “spanking” will happen if they leave before allowed. This method becomes highly effective in negating the need for the “spank back-up” as children are conditioned to observe their time-out. This should be tried for time-out escape a few times, and if proven ineffective, then abandoned for another method.

One unfortunate and repeatable observation from countries that banned constructive spanking is they experience a notable increase in serious assaults and other types of abuse on children. One of the four reasons for this relates to the default consequence, confinements (time-outs). Where parents are prohibited from using effective back-ups, it sometimes leads to excessive / abusive physical force inadvertently used by parents as they “wrestle” with their defiant child to comply with a confinement.

3) Time-outs gain their effectiveness by inflicting mental pain. Some children cannot tolerate the psychological pain of isolations, and this inculcates anger and resentment; some even lash out violently. If you experience this with any method, it is likely doing more harm than good, and should be abandoned for another consequence type. Anecdotally, the author knows this from personal experience. My own will readily accept a moderate spanking but reacts bitterly and violently if sent (confined) to their room.

All in all, no matter how one parents, we hope this gives some valuable insights into the use of standard constructive consequences.

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