



Time-In and Time-Out:

A Guide for Parents

Young children act up a lot. When your child does something you don't want them to do, it is your job to set a limit. Limits show your child what you expect. Your toddler may get upset, but that is completely normal.

Is time-out helpful for young children?

A typical time-out asks a child to sit and think about their behavior. For this to help, a child must be able to stay calm and sit still. They also need to reflect and remember so they can use the lesson next time. This makes time-out a poor fit for young toddlers. Self-control and self-regulation start to grow between 3.5 and 4 years old. These skills take many more years to use regularly.

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 into their caregiver's feelings, and they can "catch your calm." This means your child can settle much more easily when you are nearby and soothing them, and time-in works best when you are not upset.



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



When time-in doesn't work

Sometimes your child may be out of control and may throw, kick, hit, or bite. They may even reject your comfort. When kids are overwhelmed, you can get pushed to your own limits. A short break for both of you can be helpful.

A break is not a typical time-out; it's a chance to calm down. Here are some ways to set this up:

- 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 is where people in your family go when they are upset and need a break.
- Let your child help set it up. It might be a pile of pillows in a corner, or a moving box with one side cut out.
- When needed, guide your child there. Say, "It is time for a short body break." Stay as calm as you can.

More ways to respond

- Ignore the behavior, but not the child. If your child is upset but not hurting anyone, try ignoring the behavior. Pay attention to them, but not the yelling.
- End the break when your child is calm, or set a timer and check in.
- Keep everyone safe from harm. If your child is hurting themselves or others, calmly hold them to keep them safe.

Remember the reason: calming down

Toddlers are not yet able to think about their behavior. A break lets you both regroup. Talking about what happened or how to do things differently should happen once everyone is calm. No learning can take place when kids or adults are still upset.

Have more questions?

Talk to your child's healthcare provider or one of the professionals supporting your family.

©2026 by the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. All rights reserved.

Receive messages like this on your phone

Text **SPARKS**
to **274 448**