

2nd Mile: Time-in

Why do time-in?

Parents sometimes focus too much on their children's problem behaviors and not enough on their good behavior. The consequences are significant. First, children who do not receive regular positive attention and emotional nurturing may increase their undesirable behavior. Second, admonishing children about what they shouldn't do never works as well as praising them for what they should do. Children learn best through positive engagement. Third, unless parents regularly give attention for desirable behaviors, standard techniques for managing misbehavior will not work. Parents may have to use "ignoring" or "timeout" to deliberately create distance between themselves and their child, thereby defusing potentially explosive situations, and teaching that certain behaviors will not get much attention. These are important tools in the behavior management kit which we will discuss in detail. However, parents cannot *effectively* withdraw attention if it is not regularly provided. Parents who practice time-in religiously should not feel guilty when they have to use time-out. Fourth, the relationship between parent and child suffers if too many interactions begin as negative reaction to misbehavior. Parents and children both deserve islands in time when they can truly relax and enjoy each other's company. Time-in takes time and effort, but it is time and effort very well spent. Try to make time-in a priority in your lives.

How to do Time-in

Time-in is designed to give children positive attention just for being who they are. During time-in, parents do no questioning, no teaching and no commanding. If there are no behavioral expectations, then there will be no problems. Many parents find that doing time-in every day creates a whole new atmosphere in their home. The goal is simple: positive time together.

1. *Get one-on-one:* It is very important to do time-in without any distractions or interruptions. Create a clear zone. If at all possible, other children and adults should be out of sight, out of hearing, and out of mind. Turn phone ringers off. Or if it rings, don't answer: "I'm not going to get that. This is my special time with you."
2. *Get relaxed:* Time-in should not be done when you are in a hurry or preoccupied. Your child should have your undivided attention. That's the whole idea. This is the Zen of parenting. Take a cleansing breath. Shift gears. Forget about the past and don't worry about the future. Live in the moment. For this short time, you don't have to "parent". Leave the stress. Learn to look forward to this time together.
3. *Get into whatever your child wants to do:* This time is truly child led. Some parents announce, "It's time-in, what do you want to do?" Others have a regular activity that they look forward to doing together. Most find it is best to just join the child in whatever they are doing. Pause first to observe. See the world through his or her

- eyes. Reflect on what your child is doing right now. What seems to be interesting your child in this moment? Follow.
4. *Give custom-designed positive attention:* During time-in, the parent can describe out loud what their child is doing. While giving this kind of *verbal positive attention*, parents can think of themselves as narrators or broadcasters. Be specific about what you see your child doing. Focus on the activity, not the child. For example: “Hey, look at the way...” or “I like how...” Keep up a running commentary. Many children love this kind of overt praise. Other children feel that verbal feedback is phony and irritating; some just don’t seem to notice it. For these children parents can give *non-verbal positive attention*. Appreciative facial expressions: smiles, winks, eye-contact. Gestures: thumbs up, “ok” (index finger and thumb forming a circle) signs, applause. Touching: gentle strokes, big hugs, high fives. For some very sensitive children, just “being there” is more than enough; letting them simply feel your attentive and appreciative presence. Your child just needs to know that you enjoy what he or she is doing. Each child enjoys different types of positive attention. Do whatever works.
 5. *No questions, no commands, no teaching:* For many parents, this is the hardest part. Whenever you ask a question, give a command, or suggest a better way, you are not following your child’s lead. You are expecting him or her to respond to you. Life is too full of times when your child has to answer, comply and learn. Time-in is a break from all that; not just for the child, but for the parent as well.
 6. *Each child, each parent:* Parents often begin time-in because one child has behavior problems or developmental challenges that stress the parent-child relationship. However, siblings of challenging children have special needs too. Furthermore, if one parent logs more direct child-time than another, then time-in is a positive way for the other parent to give his or her partner a break; at the same time, enriching his or her own relationship to the child. Every parent and every child should have special time-in together. Parents should take turns doing time-in with each of their children. With commitment and creative planning, this can be accomplished.
 7. *Get a plan:* Each parent should try to do time-in for 15-30 minutes each day. At a minimum, parents can alternate days. Parents should think carefully about when and how to pull this off. With some children, the schedule should be previewed, with start and finish times announced. With others, the approach should be more subtle and indirect. The parent can simply “mosey-on-over” and join the child in whatever he or she is doing. Just as casually, time-in can end. Time-in is easier when there is only one child. If there are other children, time-in requires more planning. Time-in can be done with one child while others are: occupied by another parent or adult; in school or scheduled programs; asleep; or assigned specific activities that can be done independently, such as projects, reading, computer, or TV. Parents should also carefully consider where to do time-in. The space should be safe and full of child-friendly toys and materials. If it is difficult to end time-in, parents can plan a positive follow-up activity; for example, meal or TV time. Sometimes, specific start and stop times with reference to clocks or timers can be helpful. Other times, a more subtle shift to other activities works best.
 8. *For the teenager:* Some parents might feel that their adolescent never wants to spend time with them. Time-in with teenagers might be at midnight, when he or she just needs you to sit on their bedroom floor. This can be a time to “discuss” something. Keeping with the spirit of time-in, remember that he or she really does not want your commentary. Just listen. Empathize. Parents can make breakfast for their teenager

and just join him or her at the table. During these busy years, time-in can happen without warning or preparation. Seize the moment when it presents itself. Catch some time-in when you can.

9. *Time-in is not just for parents:* Other adults involved in the child's life - teachers, tutors, coaches, doctors - should make time to connect in ways that communicate unconditional acceptance. Obviously, such engagement must be modified to fit the setting. But the chart, the curriculum, the plan, the schedule should sometimes be put aside to allow for some special moments. Simple conversation about the child's interests, just noticing what "turns them on", a gentle touch, a hug, a smile – all subtle, all easy, all powerful.
10. *Time-in is not just for children:* Time-in is not a way of life. Parents have a duty to command, teach and question. But these jobs are easier if we build our relationships on a positive foundation. Wouldn't it be nice to have some measure of unconditional acceptance and undivided attention - with our children, with our friends, with our spouse? Couldn't we all use just a little time-in each day?

Common questions about time-in

Q: What if I *don't enjoy* what my child wants to do during time-in?

A: If you don't like sports or dolls or bugs but your child does - tough. Get into it anyhow. Make sure to carve out time for yourself too; but *this* time-in is about your child's needs, not yours.

Q: What if my child wants to do some very *passive, self-absorbed or isolating activities* such as watching TV, listening to music, playing video or computer games?

A: These activities do not work very well for time-in. When the child is just sitting there, parents do not have much opportunity to give positive attention to what the child is doing. Or the activity is such that the child does not even notice that the parent is in the room. This defeats the whole purpose. Try to do time-in around other things. However, with some children, parents have to take what they can get. If the child truly gives no alternative, we may have to default and sit along for TV shows, video games or rap music. Desperate times call for desperate measures. Hopefully, this time-in evolves into something richer. For now, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em".

Q: What if I *don't approve* of what my child wants to do during time-in?

A: Remember, this is not a time for teaching or commanding. There will be plenty of time for that later. During time-in, let it go. If there are violent themes in play, simply narrate: "That (action figure) sure is angry!" If there is cheating, simply play along as if your child has creatively changed the rules of the game. If your child is focused on winning, enjoy letting yourself be beaten. If he or she wants to use a book or chess set in ways that defy custom, that's fine. ("That pawn has magic flying powers.") During time-in, we simply abandon our preconceptions about how things are supposed to be done.

Q: What if my child *misbehaves* during time-in?

A: This is very rare. Children love time-in. They are doing what they want to do and getting undivided attention for it. In fact, I have never heard of misbehavior when time-in is being done right. If there is misbehavior, it is probably because the parent broke the rules and

either questioned, taught or commanded. For whatever reason, if there is misbehavior, try to briefly ignore or distract. If the misbehavior is truly not ignorable, simply end time-in for that day. If the misbehavior continues once time-in has ended, deal with it as you usually would. Try time-in again tomorrow. The child is given a clean slate. Time-in should never depend upon good behavior.