

What Is It?

Timeout from positive reinforcement (or “time out”) is not a single strategy but includes a number of related strategies designed to reduce a student’s challenging behaviors by removing a reinforcing environment. Timeout withdraws the opportunity for a student to access positive reinforcement for a short period of time if he or she demonstrates challenging behaviors. Timeout can involve the removal of a reinforcing item for a short amount of time, or the student can be removed from a reinforcing activity or situation.

When to Use It

- Timeout from positive reinforcement should only be used for students whose challenging behavior serves to gain attention or to gain access to an item/activity. It is not effective for behaviors used to escape an activity, avoid a task, or escape attention from someone.
- Use timeout from positive reinforcement when the setting/area/activity that the student is being removed from has a high level of reinforcing qualities.
- Timeout from positive reinforcement should always be used with other interventions that teach and reinforce appropriate replacement behaviors.
- Timeout from positive reinforcement may deny the student the opportunity to engage in learning and social opportunities in the classroom. It should only be implemented after trying other positive behavior interventions first.
- Teams should review district protocols for timeout before implementing timeout from positive reinforcement in classrooms.
- It is important to note that timeout from reinforcement is not the same as seclusion or isolation.

Steps to Implementation / How to Do It

After identifying that the function of the student’s challenging behavior is to gain attention or activity:

	1. Identify the situation or activity that typically occasions challenging behavior. Choose the specific timeout strategy (see below planned ignoring, withdrawal of materials, contingent observation, time out ribbon, or exclusionary) that will be appropriate, keeping in mind your school and district guidelines.
	2. Try teaching and reinforcing an appropriate replacement behavior first before using timeout procedures.
	3. Make the classroom environment and activity as reinforcing as possible so that the student wants to engage in learning and social opportunities in the classroom.
	4. If the student demonstrates a challenging behavior, remove access to the reinforcement for a short period of time.
	5. Students should have the opportunity to earn access to the reinforcement in future occurrences. Review the parameters and expectations for gaining access to the reinforcement with the student.
	6. Release the student from timeout when they demonstrate the acceptable behavior.

Example

Carter typically demonstrates challenging behaviors during reading lessons on the carpet in Mrs. Hunt's second grade classroom. When seated with his peers, Carter pokes his classmates. Each time Carter engages in this behavior, he disrupts the lesson and distracts other students. Several students have reported that Carter's behavior bothers them. In response to Carter's challenging behavior, Mrs. Hunt has tried to redirect Carter, move him next to a different peer, and implemented a token system to try to reinforce Carter for demonstrating the appropriate behavior. Despite these attempts, the frequency of the disruptive behavior has increased since the beginning of the school year and Mrs. Hunt submits a request for help to the behavior intervention team. The team completes a functional behavior assessment and determines that the function of Carter's challenging behavior is to gain attention from Mrs. Hunt and his peers. They decide to implement timeout from positive reinforcement in addition to other positive behavioral interventions that teach and reinforce the appropriate behavior.

The team decides to use contingent observation procedures for the timeout when Carter pokes his peers. When this occurs, Carter will be asked to return to his desk for two minutes. Carter's desk is positioned away from the carpet area. From his desk, he can watch the lesson but the rest of the students face away from him, and he is unable to interact with Mrs. Hunt or his classmates. The team reminds Mrs. Hunt that she needs to make group reading lessons on the carpet as reinforcing as possible by providing praise and attention to students frequently, passing out schoolwide tokens for appropriate behavior, using partner activities such as turn-and-talk, and delivering an engaging and interactive lesson. Because the function of Carter's behavior is to gain attention, when he is asked to return to his desk for a short period of time, he is not able to access attention from Mrs. Hunt or his peers.

Mrs. Hunt implements these procedures during the next reading lesson on the carpet. When Carter begins to poke his classmates, Mrs. Hunt tells Carter to return to his desk. After two minutes, Mrs. Hunt asks Carter to rejoin the group. She implements these procedures each time Carter demonstrates the inappropriate behavior. Over time, there is a reduction in Carter's inappropriate behavior and he can appropriately engage in the entire lesson on the carpet with his peers. After Carter demonstrates the appropriate behavior for the duration of group lessons over many occasions, Mrs. Hunt discontinues the use of timeout procedures and focuses on using the other positive behavioral intervention to reinforce the appropriate behavior. The team continues to closely monitor Carter's behavioral data and make changes to this plan as needed based on the data.

How to Increase Effectiveness

- The function of the behavior must be known before using this strategy in the classroom. It is most effective for behaviors that function to gain an item, activity, or attention.
- Make the classroom environment and activity as reinforcing as possible to encourage the student to engage in the activity with the appropriate behavior. In order for the intervention to be effective, the student must want to participate in the activity.
- Keep timeout periods short and always provide an opportunity for the student to demonstrate the appropriate behavior and gain access to reinforcement.
- Pair timeout from positive reinforcement with other positive behavior interventions that teach and reinforce the appropriate replacement behavior.
- There are different types of timeout from positive reinforcement. Select the type of timeout that is least intrusive and most appropriate for the classroom, activity, and student.
 - *Planned ignoring* is when attention is withdrawn for a short pre-determined period of time. This should only be used when the challenging behavior is mild.
 - *Withdrawal of materials* is a timeout procedure where the adult would remove reinforcing items when a challenging behavior occurs. Consider using the withdrawal of materials when the students truly wants to engage with the materials but ensure that the student knows what he should do if he does not have access to the materials for a short period of time.
 - *Contingent observation* occurs when a student is removed from the reinforcing activity/lesson but still expected to observe it. Consider using contingent observation when you will want the student to hear and see the other students and the lesson.
 - *Exclusionary* timeout occurs when the student is completely removed from the reinforcing setting. Only consider exclusionary timeout per the policies of your school district. Many states and districts regulate and restrict the use of exclusionary timeout given that it is limiting the student's access to instruction.

Resources

Alberto, P., Heflin, L. J., & Andrews, D. (2002). Use of the timeout ribbon procedure during community-based instruction. *Behavior Modification, 26*, 297-311.

Yeager, C., & McLaughlin, T. F. (1995). The use of a time-out ribbon and precision requests to improve child compliance in the classroom: A case study. *Child & Family Behavior Therapy, 17*, 1-9.