‘Time in’ is when a parent stays with their child when they are upset or have lost control of their feelings and behaviour. Staying with a child when they are overwhelmed with big feelings helps them feel safe and secure, and supports them to calm down. Children learn through experience and when they are supported to deal with their emotions, they gradually learn to manage their own feelings and behaviour.

‘Time out’ leaves children to work things out on their own, just when they need you the most.

About ‘time in’

‘Time in’ means staying with your child when they are overwhelmed by ‘big feelings’ and are having trouble managing their behaviour. It does not mean giving in to what they want or rewarding the behaviour you don’t want. It is about staying connected with your child and letting them know you understand how they feel.

‘Time in’ creates the best situation for a child to gradually learn that strong feelings are OK and that they can be managed. It is also a chance, once the emotional storm has passed, to talk about what happened and how to deal with things next time.

Staying with your child during ‘time in’ helps them:
- learn how to calm themselves down
- manage feelings such as fear, disappointment, frustration, jealousy or anger—they learn that while some emotions might not feel good they are nothing to be scared of, and they can be managed
- to feel safe—they learn that you will not abandon them or punish them when they are having trouble with feelings or managing their behaviour
- learn how to problem-solve when things go wrong.

Staying with your child when they have strong feelings or difficult behaviour sends the message that you love them no matter what.

Be patient—young children need lots of practice to learn what is expected.

What to do during ‘time in’

When your child is out-of-control
- Stay calm and take charge. Your child needs you to be a wise and kind guide.
- Let them know you understand how they feel. You might say ‘I can see you are upset because you really want that toy’.
- Use holding, rocking and a soothing voice to settle them. If your child does not want to be touched, stay close so they can come to you for comfort when ready.
- Let them know this upset will pass and they will soon feel calm again.

When your child has calmed down
- Reassure them of your love.
- Help them name their feelings. They will feel more in control and have less need to act out their feelings when they have words to say how they feel.
- Help them find the feeling that prompted the behaviour. Even though your child may seem angry or frustrated, the feeling underneath may be fear, jealousy or disappointment. They will gradually learn to understand all their feelings.
- Help them understand what happened and talk about the behaviour that is expected. Keep reasons short and simple. Young children can learn rules but they are not yet able to understand reason and logic. You might say, ‘I know you want to play with your brother’s truck but it is not OK to hit him’.
- Tell and show your child what they can do next time. Help them learn the words they need to ask for what they want.

Be careful not to shame your child by making fun of them or telling them they are silly or naughty. Shaming a child hurts them deeply and the effects can last a lifetime.
Create a calm space in your home

It can help to create a ‘calm space’ in your home where children and adults can go to feel calm and relaxed. Don’t call this space ‘time in’ because your child may see it as where you go when you are ‘bad’. Ask them what they would like to have there to help them feel calm, for example, soft toys, books, bean bags, blankets.

When you see your child getting upset, help prevent a melt-down by getting in early. You might say, ‘I can see you’re upset because you want to play outside. Let’s go to the calm space so you can feel better. We can work out what you can do until the rain stops’.

What about ‘time out’?

‘Time out’ is when an upset child is removed from the situation and sent or taken to a ‘time out’ place. They are left alone to calm down and think about what they’ve done wrong, and to change their behaviour. ‘Time out’ has become popular with some parents as a way to discipline children but it is not as effective as ‘time in’ because it:

- triggers a child’s innate fear of being left alone—they often forget why they are there because they feel abandoned
- does not help a child learn how to manage strong feelings and out-of-control behaviour

- can send a message that big feelings are ‘bad’—children often ‘push down’ upset feelings so they can leave ‘time out’ rather than learn to manage them. The feelings may show up in other ways, for example, by becoming rebellious and defiant, withdrawn or anxious, or having stomach pains or sleep problems
- doesn’t teach your child what they can do, just what not to do—it assumes a child can work out what you want on their own. However, children under three years don’t have the skills to work out problems on their own. Children under six don’t have the ability to reflect on their behaviour and understand what caused it
- assumes the child already knows the right way to do things, and that by going to ‘time out’ they will be able to remind themselves what to do
- can encourage battles because the child often feels a sense of injustice at being sent away—even older children can feel angry or hurt when sent to ‘time out’ rather than thinking about how to ‘do better’.

‘Time out’ for parents

Taking ‘time out’ for yourself can help you calm down if you feel overwhelmed. Make sure your child is safe. Let them know you will be back in a few minutes to help them with their feelings.

If your child’s behaviour ‘pushes your buttons’ a lot you may need to talk with your doctor or a counsellor.

Contacts

Child and Family Centres
(parenting information and support)
9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Gungahlin 6207 0120
9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Tuggeranong 6207 8228
9am–5pm Monday–Friday: West Belconnen 6205 2904

Maternal and Child Health
8am–5pm Monday–Friday 6207 9977

Websites

www.cyh.com Parenting and child health information
www.parentlink.act.gov.au Other parenting guides, including Discipline (birth to 12 years), Tantrums
www.raisingchildren.net.au Raising Children Network—covering topics for parenting newborns to teens

www.parentlink.act.gov.au | now every parent can be well connected