



Time Out to Calm Down

Time Out to Calm Down is often misunderstood. Used well, it looks quite different from how it is sometimes used or modelled elsewhere. Here are some things worth knowing.

A last resort, not a first response

Punishing behaviour is not an effective way to change it. It works far better to notice and reward good behaviour generously while quietly ignoring low-level negative behaviour. Time Out to Calm Down should be reserved for the behaviours we really cannot ignore, such as hitting, kicking, biting, or point-blank refusal to follow instructions.

What it is, and is not

It is a non-violent, ethical response to conflict that gives children a chance to calm down, take responsibility, and develop their conscience. It also gives parents a moment to control their own anger. It is not designed to cause distress or “enough pain” to teach a lesson, and it should not be used to get revenge or make a child feel bad.

Keep it brief

A short calm down period, no more than around five minutes, is just as effective as a longer one, and lets the child try again quickly. Some children genuinely do not mind Time Out to Calm Down, and that is fine; the goal is not distress, it is a cooling-off period.

Fresh start afterwards

Once the calm down time is over, move on, even if feelings are still a bit raw. Reminding a child why they were sent for time out afterwards just re-opens the wound. Instead, try: “Let’s try again, I know you can do it.” Problem-solving about what happened can wait until everyone, including us, has properly calmed down.

These ideas can feel different from how discipline has been modelled elsewhere, and that is okay. If you would like to talk it through, the school’s pastoral team is happy to help.