



PARENT RESOURCE GUIDE

The Most Common Discipline Methods Don't Work



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Introduction

After 30 years of working with parents and hearing of their daily struggles in disciplining their children, I am convinced that the most common strategies used to discipline children are simply ineffective. In fact, they often prove to be counter-productive and make the situation worse. I want to take some time to explain why, and how to fix the problem.

In that respect, the tried-and-true discipline method of taking away privileges (video games, a favorite toy), use of time-out, or sticker charts, often leave parents more frustrated and exasperated. How can that be, you ask, when taking away a favorite activity is probably the most commonly-used behavior management strategy, next to time-out, parents have in their arsenal? Many parents have tried sticker charts only to find their kiddo nonresponsive to the approach after a week or so. Let's take a closer look at the situation.

I trust you'll find this guide to be informative and helpful in managing your child. Feel free to see more of my articles at HelpForYourChild.com, where you can also schedule an appointment. You can reach out to me for help at hello@helpforyourchild.com. May God richly bless you and your family.

— *Dr. John Carosso, Psy.D.*



Taking Away Privileges Often Makes the Situation Worse

Okay, so here's a common scenario: your child does not do their chores or backtalks; you raise your voice (a nice way of saying you start to yell) and then you take away your kiddo's video games "for a week!!!!". Of course, right on cue, your child yells back, maybe tries to negotiate, and the drama ensues.

Now, if you thought that scenario was bad, well, it just gets worse from there.

Let's say, for the sake of argument, that you actually follow through and remove access to the video game or whatever. What happens next? C'mon, you know the answer to that one — your child starts to pester, whine, and carry on to get back the video games. The situation becomes quite emotional and unpleasant. You feel pressure to follow through but have mixed feelings because you want to avoid the drama. In the heat of the moment, you're left with determining how long you'll be removing the privilege, which usually means 'a long time' — at least a week or two, or maybe even a month. Is that too long? Who knows, but you feel like you have to do 'something' that's meaningful and will have an impact.

How long is too long, anyway? Be careful not to take your own options off the table.

After You Take Away a Privilege, Let's Explore What Happens Next

Your child has now lost their video games (or whatever) — let's say for an entire week. What happens?

Does your child sit quietly and watch the paint peel? Does your child suddenly begin to behave better? If so, for how long — a day, two days, maybe three?

We know that kids are pretty resourceful and will simply find something else to do. Even if you 'ground' your child, what does that mean? They can't go outside? Okay, so what do they do? They will play with other toys, read a book, instigate

their siblings, and/or pester you to get the video games returned.

What happens next? You start to get worn down by the instigating and pestering, and find that life was far easier when your child had access to whatever you took away. Or, you start to feel guilty because, maybe for the next day or so, your child starts to behave better and, as a parent, you're a sucker for your kids (we all are) and want them to be happy and content. So you give in.

What else may happen? Well, you find that the most powerful tool to discipline your child has been removed. You already took away the video games, so what do you remove next? Say you believe that a particular toy is next-in-line as most coveted by your child, so you remove that too. What's next? If you've removed these items for a week or so, now those things are off the table to continue using as a discipline method. So, if you remove the video games or toys for an entire week, the next time the child misbehaves — an hour later or the next day — you don't have these things at your disposal; they're already taken away. Moreover, you have to continue monitoring the loss of privilege to ensure your child does not sneak the item, which all can prove to be exhausting.

So, in this scenario, the threat of taking away video games (or whatever) results in worse behavior due to the emotion stirred at losing the favored item, the subsequent pestering, and not having the games to use later as a punishment. Does that sound effective? Not so much.

What About Time-Out?

I've found that taking away privileges is the 'numero uno' of punishments, and time-out is a very close second. However, how does time-out work for you?

Let's take a closer look.

Your child is back-talking or pestering, and you, again, raise your voice (a nice way of saying you yell) for your child to be quiet and stop the badgering. You threaten who-knows-what and, finally, when you're completely fed up, you send your child to the steps, or the corner, or the couch, for a time-out. Of course, it takes 15 minutes of yelling, cajoling, and emotion to get your child to the time-out spot and keep them there (if they stay there at all). Your child continues to fuss once they are in time-out and pester about when time-out will be over, reacts to siblings making faces at them, and seeks attention from you. Finally, maybe if you're lucky, they “complete” time-out after a few minutes of quiet — if you get that out of them.

What About Behavior Charts?

Finally, let's look at behavior charts. Do they work? You've tried them before, and it seems to go well initially but, after about a week, they tend to lose their luster. Why is that? You give stickers once a day, and you're tracking 5 different behaviors, and have a reward planned for the end of the week. You give the stickers faithfully before bedtime but find that your child often gets upset when they don't earn more than 1 out of 5 stickers. Consequently, you find that your kiddo doesn't actually earn the reward at the end of the week — can't seem to get enough stickers to pull that off — and the enthusiasm begins to wane.

So, with all that in mind, I can't tell you how many times parents have complained to me that “I've tried that and it doesn't work.” If you think about the scenarios I just described, well, it's no wonder. If you feel the same way, I don't blame you — you're right; these strategies, as they are typically used, don't work.

So, What Can We Do to Make These Strategies More Effective?

You can be reassured that there is a way. Each of these strategies, if used properly, can be very effective. However, what most of us don't realize is that these strategies are actually quite complicated. There are dozens of important questions that need to be answered at each step and, if you get one wrong, well, the rest of the steps don't go so well. This is why parents end up talking to somebody like me — they realize there is more to this 'game' of discipline than meets the eye, and they seek out help. You wouldn't let just anyone work on your car, would you? How much more for your kids?

So, with all that in mind, let's tackle each method to make it more effective.

Making Loss of Privilege Work

Loss of privilege can be very effective, but there are specific ways to make it work.

The Premack Principle (When/Then)

First, differentiate between immediate loss of privilege that is used until a task is accomplished (the Premack principle, or using 'when/then'). In this manner, you would explain to your child that 'when' he has cleaned his room or done his homework, he can 'then' go out to play. The 'not being able to go out to play' is the loss of privilege, and is withheld immediately until the unfavored task (chore) is done. This approach is extremely effective.

The 24-Hour Method

The other form of 'loss of privilege' can be used over a 24-hour period. This way, every day, specific tasks need to be accomplished — homework, chores, respect toward parents — and if the task(s) are accomplished by a specific time each day (say, 8:00PM), then the next day the child earns the privilege (video games, going out to play). If not, then the next day the privilege is not earned. Each day is a new day and dependent on what happened the day before. In this scenario, it's vital to make sure the tasks are achievable, and that the child has a fair shot at completing the task; otherwise, you're dooming your child to failure.

Choosing the Right Activity to Remove

In terms of the activity you're going to take away from your child (the loss of privilege), choose an activity in which your child spends the most time — usually that's video games but, for a younger child, may include playing with a favorite doll or game. Yes, if you take away that privilege, your child will, in fact, find something else to do. That is one of the weaknesses of loss of privilege, and why I tend to prefer time-out. Nevertheless, if your child really enjoys the privilege, the loss can have a notable impact.

Step-By-Step: Using Loss of Privilege Effectively

- 1 Choose the coveted activity or toy.
You already did that.
- 2 Talk to your child.
Ensure they understand the expectations for behavior and precisely what behavior will allow them to keep the privilege, and what behavior will result in them losing it.
- 3 Lavishly praise your child.
Do so when you see your child carrying out the expected behavior. Yay!
- 4 Give one clear, unemotional warning.
When you see your kiddo beginning to misbehave in a manner that will result in them losing the privilege, give one clear, succinct, and unemotional warning.
- 5 Take away the privilege.
Do so without emotion, drama, arguing, or lots of words. It's vital you avoid 'acting like a child' and behaving in a manner similar to your child. Instead, take a deep breath, say a prayer asking God for calmness, and remember you're the adult — remain calm, collected, and to-the-point.
- 6 Set the timeline.
You would have already explained that your child is losing the privilege for the remainder of the day and the next day. What happens (in terms of your child's behavior) that next day determines whether your child earns back the privilege the following day. For example, if your child loses video games from 5:00PM Tuesday through Wednesday, he can earn back the video games on Thursday depending on his behavior on Wednesday. This way, your child always has the carrot right in front of his nose and is therefore motivated to 'get it together' on a daily basis. Moreover, you don't lose the motivator — the privilege — and always have it on hand to use whenever needed.

Using the Half-Day Option

This technique can also be used on a half-day basis. For example, completing chores in the morning (making the bed) and getting off to school on time without a fuss results in access to privileges in the afternoon after school (of course, after homework is done). In that respect, the half-day option targets specific areas of the day where there are problems. Another example is basing access to privileges after dinner on behavior before dinner (from the time your child gets home from school until dinner).

Don't set your child up for failure. Don't set the bar too high — make the demands achievable. So, if your child gets into fights with siblings every day, usually around 4 times per day, it likely is unreasonable to demand absolutely no conflicts, not even a mild squabble, or else he loses video games. Maybe start with 'no physical aggression,' or that he stops by a 3-count, and increase the expectations over time.

Can They Earn It Back Early?

Should your child be able to earn back the privilege sooner than 24 hours? Well, that's up to you, but likely not the best idea. It would not be entirely unreasonable to allow your child the opportunity to earn back a privilege early if he agrees to, for example, clean the entire house or do a host of chores. However, be careful, because if you allow that option, your child will likely always expect this 'way out' and pester for it each time you remove a privilege. Moreover, you're then in a position to monitor the chores that were completed, and whether they were completed in a thorough manner, which could raise a whole new set of problems.

So, in summary: provide clear expectations and explain how loss of privilege will work, provide lavish praise when you see the proper behavior, remove the privilege for one day, and allow the opportunity to earn back the game or toy the next day based on 'good' behavior.

Making Sticker Charts Work

What about the use of sticker charts — how do we make that work?

- ✓ Pick, at most, three behaviors to track.
- ✓ Make sure that your child will most assuredly earn 2 of the 3 stickers.
- ✓ Initially, give the stickers very often: every 30 minutes for a 3-5 year-old, hourly for a child 6-10, and every 3 hours for a child 11 or 12. Around middle school age, you'll switch from a sticker chart to a point system.
- ✓ Pick exceptionally problematic behaviors, such as a 4-year-old biting or hitting.
- ✓ Make the rewards small and daily rather than weekly. The younger the child, the more frequent the allocation of stickers and rewards should be. For example, the child has to earn at least 4 stickers per day to get ice cream for dessert. A week for a 4-year-old is like waiting 3 months for you and me.
- ✓ Ensure your kiddo will relatively easily earn two of the three stickers, which will increase enthusiasm and motivation to keep trying. You'll have to adjust for inflation relative to the ratio between stickers earned and stickers needed — this is often trial-and-error, with the goal of not making it too hard, nor too easy.
- ✓ Usually sticker charts are used for 2-3 weeks to address a particularly problematic behavior, then faded out. It's rare a parent will have the fortitude to consistently use a sticker chart on an ongoing basis; it tends to be too labor-intensive.

Okay, So What About Time-Out?

Clearly, the key to time-out is that it's used without any pestering and with no emotion (from you, the parent). There is no arguing, fussing, or carrying on no matter the child's reaction; rely on the consequence of time-out, not your words or your emotion.

Let's think for a moment about time-out. What is time-out a time-out from? The answer to that question is multi-faceted but, most importantly, time-out results in a loss of attention — a loss of attention from you. It is vital that your child, when in time-out, does not receive any attention from you, or from siblings, or from grandma, or the neighbor, or anyone.

Keep in mind that 'attention' also means eye contact, or talking to your child from around the corner. If your child's sibling sticks out her tongue at her brother while in time-out, that is attention — even being able to see his sibling is attention. As a result, time-out on the couch, or in the corner in the kitchen, or anywhere your child can have ongoing banter with family members is less than optimal and makes time-out ineffective.

It's also vital that, once you give the directive to time-out, your child ends up in time-out as quickly as possible. The more drama, and the longer the duration between the directive and getting them there, the less effective time-out becomes.

Time-Out, Step-By-Step

-  **1 Give the directive.**
The child is directed to time-out and is walked there in a calm manner.
-  **2 Choose the right location.**
Time-out is, most optimally, in their room — not in a corner or in the kitchen. This way the child is out of sight and can't seek attention. You could also use a room downstairs that, while not your child's room, is convenient.

3

Set the door policy.

Your child is informed, ahead of time, that once in time-out the door will remain open if they remain calm. If they yell, the door will be closed. If the child will not stay in their room, you will lock the door from the outside, so long as you are sure your child will not become destructive or do anything that could cause injury.

4

Remove reinforcing items if needed.

Your child can do whatever they want in time-out, except electronics. Your child wants to be with you and the family, and will find the prospect of being alone in their room, even with access to toys, to be punishing. If some toys are too reinforcing such that time-out loses its effectiveness, you could remove those as well.

5

Adjust for young children.

If your child is 2-4 years of age, you may not consider closing and locking the door but, rather, installing a gate or something clear so your child does not feel so confined, but still is, in fact, confined. For young and small children, sometimes a fortified playpen can be used as a time-out area.

6

Don't start the clock until they're calm.

If your child kicks the door, you can hang some padding on the door to reduce the noise. You don't even start timing the time-out until your child is quiet — usually one minute per year of age.

7

You decide when it's over.

Base that decision on your child being calm and responsive to direction.

The nice thing about time-out in the room is that it immediately ends the emotion, gives everyone a chance to calm, and when it's over, it's over — and you move on!

Can We Use These Techniques Together?

These strategies can be used in conjunction with one another, and they often serve to have a synergetic effect.

An example is using a sticker chart with one of the behaviors being that the child does not go to time-out. If your child, for example, does not go to time-out for a three-hour period, he gets a sticker. He can cash in his stickers for extra computer time (a privilege). See how that works?

This was an overview of why loss of privilege, sticker charts, and time-out can be ineffective, and how to improve your chances of positive outcomes.

Conclusion

There you have a summary of why the most common discipline methods often fail, and the steps to make them genuinely effective. I hope you found this overview helpful. It's typically best to obtain professional guidance in walking through these steps, and we're here at Help For Your Child, welcoming the opportunity to provide such support.



I hope this resource helps you confidently discipline your child in a way that's predictable, effective, and preserves your relationship. Be sure to visit www.helpforyourchild.com for additional resources on these and related topics. Don't hesitate to reach out to us at hello@helpforyourchild.com or (724) 850-7200 with any questions along the way.

*Sincerely,
Dr. John Carosso, Psy.D.*