

Give child choices to help improve behavior

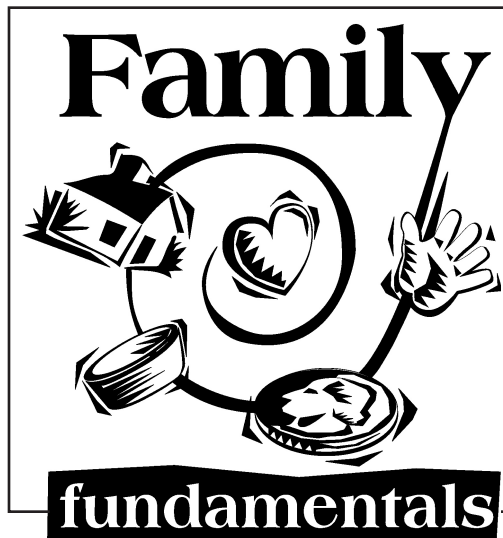
We have been good at using "time-out" with our 5-year-old, but his behavior often doesn't improve. Any ideas?

The "time out" method of guiding children's behavior has been around for years. Several steps beyond the old "go to your room" school of discipline, the goal of a time-out period isn't punishment, but a quiet time to allow children to calm themselves and re-direct their thoughts and behaviors. The general guideline is to limit time-outs to one minute per year of age — so your 5-year-old would have a five-minute time-out period, during or after which you would talk to him about why his behavior was unacceptable and how he could handle the situation in the future.

In more recent years, child development professionals have added a twist to traditional time-out methods that you might find helpful. The key concept: Life is all about choices.

First, forget about designating a special time-out spot. If the goal of the time-out is to redirect behavior, then do so directly by offering a choice of another activity. For example, if your son throws his toy truck across the room, tell him that throwing trucks is not a choice, and offer other options — reading a book or playing with a doll or action figure. Tell your son he can play with the truck again when he decides he is ready not to throw it.

This puts the responsibility on your child. If he decides — after 20 minutes or after two seconds — that he's ready to play with the truck without throwing it, let him do so — just let him know what the consequences will be if he doesn't change his behavior: "If you



throw the truck again, it will have to be put away until tomorrow." In this way, your son will begin to realize he is in control, and that good choices have good consequences. It's important to make the consequences logical — they should be directly connected to the behavior or object involved.

Offering choices is a great way to avoid power struggles and help children build self-esteem and self-control. Practice offering your child choices whenever possible: "Would you like a banana or an apple?" If your child wants a different option, you can accept it as long as it is OK with you: It's fine if your child responds, "I'd like an orange instead."

Whenever you offer a choice, you have to be willing to accept your son's response. When there's really only one acceptable option, try to find a way to frame it as a choice: "Would you like to have your snack now or in five minutes?"

This method even works in peer-to-peer relationships. For example, if a couple is trying to split up household tasks, it often helps if one starts the conversation with something like, "Would you prefer doing the dishes or helping the kids with their homework?" Presenting options in this manner instead of "I wish you would do the dishes tonight" helps both parties realize that splitting chores is important, and replaces a potential power struggle with a conversation between equals.

Family Fundamentals is a monthly column on family issues. It is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Family Fundamentals, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1044, or filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu.



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Dear Subscriber: This column was reviewed by Joseph Maioran, family and consumer sciences educator for Ohio State University Extension in Harrison and Jefferson counties.

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