

TIME-AWAY:

A PROCEDURE TO KEEP TASK-AVOIDING STUDENTS UNDER INSTRUCTIONAL CONTROL

Diana Browning Wright

Students with challenging behaviors are at times unwilling or unable to perform assigned tasks. At this point, they may intentionally engage in acting out behaviors in order to be removed from the class, or remain passively unengaged in learning activities (i.e., both can be conceptualized as escape seeking behaviors), or engage in behaviors that interfere with the learning of others around them (i.e., expressing a protest about activities they do not wish to do). In all three situations, the student is not under instructional control (i.e., following the directions of the teacher), nor is he/she under stimulus control (e.g., in the presence of the chair, desk, written assignment student is highly likely to engage in written work behavior). It is impossible to force a completely unwilling student to do an assignment. It is also unacceptable to have students engaging in acting out behaviors in order to escape tasks, or to have students not under instructional control. Not all task-avoiding episodes can be solved by sending the student to the office for a 'disciplinary referral.' Therefore, a procedure called Time Away may be warranted as a teaching tool to increase the student's ability to cope with work output demands. A Time Away procedure can be an important component to delineate as a 'Reactive Strategy' in behavior plans for 'behavior impeding learning' as defined in I.D.E.A. Reauthorization, 1997.

Time Away Differentiated from Time Out

In a time out procedure, access to reinforcement is removed or reduced for a specified time period contingent on a response. Either the student is removed from the reinforcing environment, or the reinforcing environment is removed for a designated time period.¹ In common usage, Time Out is often used as a punishment for misbehavior. The teacher tells the student when to leave and when to return, often with lengthy removals being the norm.

In a time away procedure, as defined by this author, the student exercises the option to leave a learning task which has become aversive to him/her. The student moves to a location in the environment designated for this purpose and remains there until he/she is ready to cope with the demands of the learning environment. The student then returns to the assigned learning location (e.g., assigned seat at a desk), by his/her initiation, not by a teacher signaling the return.

¹ Wright, D.B. & Gurman, H.G. (2001) Positive interventions for serious behavior problems (2nd ed.-revised). Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education Publications Division (pp.166-167)

Effective Use of Time Away

The student can be privately encouraged to leave the activity as a “cooling off” period, until he/she is ready to cope with the assignment, but it must be clearly conveyed that this is the student’s choice and that this removal is not a punishment for misbehavior.

Sample dialogue:

“Steven, I am really pleased that you have come to class today and have all your materials with you. However, you seem very upset and unable to get started, despite you and I doing the first few problems together. Steven, you know that in my classroom you have the option of moving to the ‘cooling off spot’ anytime you aren’t yet ready to cope with the demands of school. Why don’t you think about this carefully and make your choice: 1) begin your work or, 2) choose to just cool off for a while. I’ll wait to hear your decision. I need to go help Michael for a few moments while you think this over.”

Notice the critical characteristics of this dialogue:

- Teacher called the student by name and then identified desired behaviors he has recently exhibited
- Teacher pointed out the undesired behavior and reminded Steven that joint efforts had already been made to help him begin his work before this point was reached
- Teacher invited choice-making between two acceptable options
- Teacher did not force an immediate choice. Rather, student was given time to think through his choice

Time Away Systems

The Beach

6th Grade Teacher informed students that when she is having a bad day, going to the beach, even for a few moments has helped her. Therefore, in her class anyone who just needs to escape for a breather can go to the beach. The beach is a small box of sand in the back corner of the room equipped with several very large seashells which, when listened to carefully, will produce the calming sounds of the ocean.

Australia

Kindergarten teacher, 4th grade teacher and high school special day class teacher read the book, Alexander and the Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day by Judith Viorst² to their classes. Students were informed that they could choose to escape to Australia whenever they needed to recoup, think over something, cope with their feelings or frustrations. 'Australia' is a location in the classroom with a map of Australia and several books of Australia to look at. The high school teacher further explained to her class that if you leave this country to enter another, you must 'go through customs' and 'declare any baggage you are bringing in'. She has students enter the time they enter Australia, their departure time, and the number of the baggage contents they are bringing in which was previously generated by the students.

Examples include:

- 1) Fight with someone important in my life is still on my mind
- 2) Can't concentrate because of extreme fatigue
- 3) Work looks too long or too complicated for me right now

The Think Tank

Middle school teacher in a day treatment unit for students with emotional disturbance has a small, padded cubicle sometimes used for counseling sessions in the back of her classroom. Students are told that they may take a brief time-away in the think tank whenever they need to 'get their act together' and that choosing this option rather than acting out behavior will allow them to retain their points for that time period (15 minute sessions throughout the day earn points for appropriate behaviors that may be redeemed during daily free time activities).

Dinosaur Time

Student, age six with a diagnosis of autism, had a history of running away from reading group instruction, resulting in several adults trying to force him to return. In this time away procedure, Christopher was allowed to take the dinosaur from the table as a token symbolizing his permission to walk calmly around the room. When he has finished this walk, he returned to his seat and replaced the dinosaur. Average time away was approximately three minutes per twenty-minute instruction period, required no adult interventions and did not disrupt the learning of others.

² Viorst, J. (19) Alexander and the horrible, no good, very bad day.

Key Components for Effective Use of This Strategy

- Classroom environment must be one in which unconditional, positive regard is available for all students, with effective classroom organization in place. This procedure is not a panacea for an out of control classroom³. This procedure will be misused by students if teacher/student interactions are typically coercive and punitive.
- Instructional material must in general be accessible to the student, with appropriate accommodations or modifications in place to support student in successfully completing the assigned material. This procedure will be misused by students if this is the only way they can escape inappropriate seatwork activities.
- Initial explanation of the Time Away option should be given to the class as a whole (for students who do not have severe disabilities), with explanation of what might be a reason to choose this option, and what might NOT be a good reason. 'Learning to cope with the demands of school' should be emphasized. No punitive result will occur from selecting this option, and if the teacher encourages someone to think about whether 'Time Away' should be chosen, this is NOT a punishment for misbehavior.

Teacher language sample: "Boys and girls, for example, if the work just looks hard, try gaining your teacher's assistance to get going, to help you break up the assignments into smaller units, or to gain more help from your classmates or adult assistance. That would be a better choice than Time Away. However, if you are really upset today and just need a little space to gather your thoughts, calm down and cope with your feelings and frustrations, Time Away could be a good choice for you."

- When the student returns from Time Away to the assigned work location, the teacher should privately reinforce the use of this procedure by a quiet acknowledgment, such as, "Steven, thank you for choosing to take a time away. Glad to see you're ready now". This reinforcement upon return is critical for maintaining the integrity of this procedure and to assure the students do not confuse it with Time Out.

³Refer to necessary effective components in Wright, D.B. (1999) What every teacher should know in order to positively support student behavior. *NASP Communique*, (29) 1.

Responses to Typical Teacher Questions

- ***“What If They Won’t Come Back?”***

If it is observed that a student is spending a lengthy time in a Time Away location, the teacher may wish to examine the task(s) the student is continuing to avoid. If the task is too difficult, if the completion criteria is not explicit, if the task(s) seem meaningless to the student, it may be necessary to change the task(s), modify them, or provide one on one assistance. If this is not the case, the teacher may wish to engage in reflective listening to further determine why the student is not yet able to cope with the task(s) demands. Sample dialogue: “Steven, I have noticed that you have been unable to cope with seatwork for quite a while. I am beginning to wonder what we can do about this. I am wondering if I can help in any way with the problem. I am also worried about how we can quickly help you catch up with the work you have missed. I am wondering what steps WE should be taking now to help US solve OUR problem. Would you think about this and I’ll check back with you in a few minutes.” (Note the collaborative emphasis: we, us, our. Also note, an appointment for a future discussion alleviates the student’s need to engage in challenging behaviors. Often just a few minutes to reflect will result in better later compliance.)

- ***“What If They Won’t Go When I Tell Them To?”***

This happens much less frequently than teachers expect. First, remember that this procedure will not be effective in a coercive or disorganized classroom. The student is not “told” he “must” choose this procedure. Rather, this is one of two options, delivered unemotionally to the student: work, or choose a Time Away. If the student does continue sitting in the work space, not working, and will not go to the time away location, the teacher may wish to invite a quiet one-on-one dialogue about the difficulty. If this is not possible, the teacher may wish to wait briefly, then present a quiet, unemotional, private, second two choice format: “If you are unable to work right now, Alice, as I have said, you may take a breather in our Time Away location, that is no problem. Alternatively, you may choose to get an office referral. Think about this a moment and let me know your decision.” The teacher must convey genuine personal connection with the student at this time, (use of student name can be especially helpful here) and have previously established a real, meaningful relationship with the student through past words, deeds and reinforcement for achievement from the teacher.

- ***“What If Everyone Wants to Be There At Once?”***

When you initially set up the Time Away procedure with the students, explain the rules as to how many students may be there at one time. (Suggestion: limit area to one or two students, not able to communicate with each other through use of an environmental barrier if necessary.) Explain to the students: “There are other ways of handling difficulties. If you are having a problem that is preventing you from working, and someone else is briefly in the Time Away location, let me know your difficulty and WE can think of how to handle OUR problem.”

Adaptation for Non-Verbal Students or Students with Severe Disabilities

This procedure has effectively been used with many students with severe disabilities as well. These students are often adept at using challenging behaviors to escape a task due to either limited verbal ability in general or limited ability to verbally negotiate when stressed. Teaching the student that a 'break' can be had through communicating the need either verbally ('break'), or non-verbally (gestures, signs, use of 'break' card or 'stop sign' picture card) gives the student a functionally equivalent alternative way of meeting his/her needs without resorting to challenging behavior. Teachers have found that the location may need to obscure the student from view of others, yet be observable by adults. This is achieved through the use of low barriers or low book cases. Allowing the youngster to sit in an oversized beanbag chair with an option for a heavy quilt or other bean bag placed on the student has been found to be especially calming for many students. Careful analysis of the sensory responses of the student may help in effective program design and in providing the most calming Time Away procedure. It is also extremely important that the environment in which the student wishes to escape be thoroughly examined to assure instruction and activities are meaningful and accessible for students with severe disabilities.⁴Wright, D.B. & Gurman, H.B. (1998) *Positive intervention for serious behavior problems*. Sacramento, Ca.: California Department of Education Publications Division

Final Note

This procedure has been utilized in consultations with teachers across grade levels, for students with and without a full range of disabilities. When the student is actively refusing a task, or escaping the task through the use of inappropriate behaviors, the student is not under 'instructional control', nor is the work space reliably eliciting work behaviors from the student, i.e., 'stimulus control' is not in effect. This technique keeps the student under these controls because the teacher is advocating student selection of a location in which not working is allowable, selecting the location is viewed as meeting with teacher approval, and being in this location, not working, is still considered an activity that demonstrates the following of the teacher's instruction. Learning to cope with the demands of work output is a challenge for students with emotional difficulties or those experiencing situational stressors. Learning to step back and reflect can become an important cognitive skill for students with fragile coping systems and can result in improved ability to attend and produce an acceptable amount of work. In the author's experience with defiant and fragile students, simply knowing that 'not working' for a time is an acceptable choice. This 'freedom' can be an important method of meeting the student's needs in the classroom.⁵

The author invites communication about effective use of this procedure or others that keep difficult to support students under instructional control. dwright@dcs-cde.ca.gov

⁴Refer to programming components and analysis of sensory responses in: Wright, D.B. (2001) *Positive Interventions for Serious Behavior Problems*, 2nd Edition, Revised. Sacramento, CA: CDE Publications

⁵For further explanation of the four human needs (fun, empowerment, freedom, belonging), which, when met, often dramatically reduce acting out behavior in the classroom, refer to: Wright, D.B. (1999) *Classwide Systems to Cue, Shape and Model Behavior: Strategies for Teachers*. *NASP Communique*. (27) 7.