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## Using Time-Outs Effectively



### When Should I Use Time-Outs?

The “time-out” is a useful tool for eliminating many unwanted behaviors in dogs. Repeatedly interrupting an unwanted behavior and immediately giving your dog some time alone can rapidly decrease the frequency of that behavior. Time-outs are especially effective in discouraging the following common problems:

- Harassment of another pet (chasing the cat, playing too roughly with another dog, etc.)
- Attention-seeking behaviors, like barking, pawing, whining or mouthing
- Jumping up, mouthing and rowdy behavior when greeting visitors
- Mouthing clothes, hands or feet during play
- Begging during mealtimes

It may take some time and effort, but if you consistently deliver time-outs when your dog does something you don’t like, he’ll soon decide that the activity isn’t much fun after all!

### How Do I Use Time-Outs?

#### The Technique

Here’s an example of how to use time-outs to teach your dog to stop putting his paws on the table while you’re eating.

- If possible, prepare a time-out room in advance. Choose a safe, small space, like a bathroom or a laundry room. Make sure that the area is free of toys and things your dog might destroy.

- When you're home and can supervise, keep a lightweight leash clipped to your dog's collar, and let him drag it around.
- The instant your dog's paws touch the table, say "Too bad!" Then immediately pick up the leash and march him to the time-out room. (If you don't have a small room to use or think that your dog might have fun in his time-out area, shut the leash in the door to limit his movement.)
- Wait 10 to 30 seconds. Then, if your dog isn't barking, let him out of the room and pretend that nothing happened. If he does bark while in time-out, wait for him to stop.
- If your dog puts his paws on the table again, march him right back to time-out. Repeat as many times as necessary. If your dog does not jump up on the table, seize the opportunity to reinforce his good behavior. He's starting to understand what you're trying to teach him! Let him know how clever he is by giving him plenty of praise, petting or a treat.

## Time-Out Tips

- **Timing is important**  
Dogs learn by experiencing the direct consequences of their actions. Your dog should hear you say "Too bad!" the instant he puts his paws on the table—not right afterward. That way, he'll be better able to pinpoint the moment when he did what you don't like. It's also important that the time-out itself happens quickly—within 5 to 10 seconds. If you give your dog a time-out two or three minutes after he jumps up on the table, he won't have a clue why he's being banished. If you're unable to catch your dog and quickly march him to time-out, you're better off choosing a different technique.
- **Consistency is crucial**  
To successfully change something your dog does, you must respond the same way, every time your dog performs the unwanted behavior. If your dog jumps up onto the table during dinner and only sometimes gets a time-out, he may not understand why he earned the punishment.
- **Repetition is needed**  
After the time-out, be sure to give your dog the opportunity to misbehave again. He will. That's normal! Through repetition, he can learn which specific behavior will result in negative consequences.
- **Space limitations?**  
If you don't have a convenient room nearby or if you're working with your dog outside, you can use a crate or exercise pen as the time-out area. Some people worry about using crates for punishment, but it's okay a time-out every once in a while. If your dog usually enjoys hanging out in his crate, using it for time-out is like sending a child to his room. You're just taking him away from the fun. If your dog starts to dislike his crate after multiple time-outs, you may need to use a different area.
- **Overarousal**  
If your dog gets more and more excited with each time-out or if his behavior gets worse (for example, he's putting all four paws on the table now), he may need some quiet time. This is different than time-out punishment. Like overexcited children, dogs sometimes need a chance to cool down. Put your dog in his crate or in some other quiet area for 30 to

60 minutes. After he has calmed down, you can let him out again and go back to using time-outs. If overarousal is a consistent problem, make sure your dog is getting enough exercise. Most active young dogs need at least 30 minutes of aerobic activity every day!

- Monitor your progress

As you train, keep track of how your dog's behavior changes. Does he wait a little longer before putting his paws on the table each time? If so, continue giving time-outs. If repeated time-outs don't seem to decrease the frequency of the bad behavior, stop and reassess your training plan. You may need to tweak your technique, or you may need to choose a different technique altogether. Please see the section below called "Why Isn't This Working" to learn more about troubleshooting.

## Why Isn't This Working?

In many situations, time-outs work wonders to decrease mischievous behavior, but sometimes pet parents trying this technique run into roadblocks. Read on to learn about execution errors and situations that make time-outs ineffective.

### Your Technique Needs Tweaking

If time-outs aren't working, you may just need to tweak your technique. Maybe you're a little slow getting your dog to his time-out area? Perhaps you don't give your dog a time-out every time he does the behavior you want to discourage? Review the information above to find out if you need to make some changes.

In addition to poor timing and inconsistency, making time-outs too long can make them ineffective. Like children, dogs left alone for long periods of time often come up with ways to amuse themselves. If your dog learns to enjoy being on his own during lengthy time-outs, you've rendered the technique a useless tool. This mistake can be difficult to avoid if you have a dog who barks during time-outs. If you release him while he's barking, you'll reward the barking! But if you leave your dog in time-out until he stops barking, you might be in for a long wait. If you have a barker, choose a different approach or find a way to stop his barking whenever he's in time-out. A quick tap on the door may get you the moment of silence you need to let him out again. Alternatively, you can use a collar that delivers a spray of citronella when your dog barks. For more suggestions, please see our article on [Barking](#) <sup>[1]</sup>.

### Time-Out Isn't the Right Technique

#### It Isn't Appropriate

In some situations, giving a time-out isn't appropriate. In certain cases, repeatedly giving your dog opportunities to make a mistake can be dangerous. If he steals things from the trash, for example, letting him make that mistake so you can punish him with a time-out may result in a trip to the vet when he scarfs down something toxic. In other cases, the time-out technique is unsafe for other animals. If your dog has a bad habit of mounting an older, frail dog in the household, letting him repeatedly make that mistake could mean stress or injury for the other dog. It's also inappropriate to use a time-out if your dog is doing something because he's upset. For example, if your dog growls at you when you try to clip his nails, it won't help to punish him for that behavior. Instead, you need to help him overcome the fear or anxiety that's causing his

aggressive response. Please see our articles on [Desensitization and Counterconditioning](#) <sup>[2]</sup> and [Fear of Nail Trimming](#) <sup>[3]</sup> to learn more.

### It's Fun!

Does your dog have fun in his time-out area? If he has access to a bunch of toys, amuses himself by unrolling and shredding toilet paper in the bathroom or lounges on the comfy sofa in the den, the time-out may be an enjoyable, rewarding event—not a punishing one.

For some dogs, the trip to time-out itself may be enjoyable. Many dogs, especially smaller ones, enjoy being picked up and carried around. If this is true for your dog and you scoop him into your arms on the way to time-out, you may be rewarding his misbehavior by accident. Instead, use a lightweight leash attached to his collar to lead him to the time-out area.

### It's a Relief

If your dog engages in a behavior to warn off people who make him nervous, he might enjoy time-out. If he doesn't want to be around the strangers in the first place, taking him away from them will teach him that his misbehavior works.

### It's Worth It!

If your dog gets a time-out after eating an entire Sunday roast he stole from the counter, the punishment may be well worth it for such a stunningly reinforcing crime. If you can't catch your dog as his paws first touch the counter, before he even licks the roast, your time-out won't make much of an impression. In fact, your dog might enjoy relaxing in a quiet area after his big score! Time-outs are much more effective if your dog wants to play and interact with you. For example, if your dog barks for attention, making him spend 10 seconds alone as a consequence is the perfect punishment. Isolation is the opposite of what he wants. If you know that your dog won't mind a time-out, especially if the behavior you want to punish is highly rewarding for him, it's best to choose a different training technique or prevent unwanted behavior. Put up a baby gate to keep your dog out of the kitchen, or simply keep the roast out of your dog's reach. (For more information about curbing a counter-surfing habit, please see our article on [Counter Surfing and Garbage Raiding](#) <sup>[4]</sup>.)

### When to Get Help

If your dog becomes aggressive as you're trying to take him to time-out or if his behavior seems to be getting worse instead of better, it's best to get help from a trainer or behaviorist. Please see our article on [Finding Professional Help](#) <sup>[5]</sup> to locate a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or Associate CAAB), a board-certified veterinary behaviorist (Dip ACVB) or a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT-KA) in your area. If your dog is behaving aggressively, make sure that the expert you hire is qualified to help you. He or she should have extensive experience successfully treating aggression in dogs.

### Tags:

[Dog Behavior - Training Your Dog](#) <sup>[6]</sup>

### Animal:

[Dogs](#) <sup>[7]</sup>

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