



Guidelines for Special Time and Time In

“Special time” or “time in” is one-on-one time shared by a child or adolescent and a parent or caregiver. It demonstrates the parent’s or caregiver’s enjoyment of spending time together and offers a break from any tensions or caregiver demands, including those resulting from a child’s or teen’s difficult behaviors.

Special time for children aged 2 through 10 works best when it is

- Called a certain name that the child understands, such as “special time”
- Given every day, whether the child has behaved positively or negatively
- Never taken away as a punishment
- Kept a consistent, short amount of time (such as 10–15 minutes)
- Given at a time convenient for the parent or caregiver, although a consistent time is desirable
- Given separately by each parent or caregiver to each child in the family each day
- Used for a joint activity that the child chooses (within activities acceptable to the adult, such as reading a book together, playing catch, taking a walk, working on a puzzle, or playing a board game)
- Not used for watching TV or using electronic devices
- Not interrupted by the parent or caregiver taking telephone calls or turning their attention away to something else
- Ended on time, in order to prevent begging
- Not saved up and done at greater length on another day
- Separated from other playtime that day by a break, which indicates that the rules are different
- Shortened by any time-out required for misbehavior occurring during special time
- Carried out by repeatedly trying to engage a child who refuses special time, in order to convey the parent or caregiver’s sincere interest

Time in for older children and adolescents works best when it has one or more of the following qualities:

- Screen-free (youth and parent)
- Respectful of homework, sports, connection with friends, and other developmentally important activities
- Spontaneous at times, taking advantage of “breaks” or canceled plans
- A joint activity such as one mentioned under special time (for example, taking a walk, playing a board game)
- A daily non-prying “check-in” by the parent—a brief conversation to ask how the day has gone or is going and how the youth’s friends are doing, follow up on any worries or stresses shared previously, and anticipate upcoming activities

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