

Time-Out

Last week the Minister of Education Hekia Parata commented on the use of 'seclusion' and 'time out' in schools, labelling it as "absolutely intolerable".

The NZ College of Clinical Psychologists is a professional association exclusively for clinical psychologists, with a membership of over 900. We believe it is necessary to clarify the difference between seclusion and Time-Out as the use of Time-Out is an appropriate, effective and safe strategy for managing children's behaviour.

Seclusion: Time-Out is different to seclusion. Seclusion is where a person is placed in isolation from others in a room or area from which they cannot freely exit.

The College does not support or approve the use of seclusion as it can have negative impacts on the person's wellbeing and undermines their basic human rights.

Time-Out: is where, in a planned way, a child is verbally prompted or gently guided away from a situation for a period of time so that they can calm down. This requires a specific plan and practise so that both adults and children know what to expect and children can use this time to regulate their emotions.

Time-Out is the removal of stimulation (i.e. loud noise) and reinforcers such as attention. It is not a punishment. Time-Out is provided to the child to allow them time to calm down in a safe environment. It should occur in a predictable, comfortable place with a familiar supervising adult close at hand. If there is no better alternative this may require a separate room and only for short periods of time.

Although there can be limitations and it is not appropriate for every child, when used correctly Time-Out is an acceptable practice both at home and in cases of more extreme behaviour, at school.

Time-Out at school should only be used for cases of severe behaviour where the well-being and safety of other students and staff are at risk and where other strategies have not been effective. Children with autism spectrum disorder more frequently require a low stimulation space to calm down in.

The College supports the appropriate use of Time-Out. The College recommends that schools consult with behaviour specialists and that Time-Out is part of a comprehensive behaviour plan.

The Ministry of Education's Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) initiatives are a great example of using positive strategies to encourage and endorse desirable behaviour. Strategies such as: praise, positive rewards for appropriate behaviour, structure, routine, having a calming space within the classroom, understanding and meeting the child's needs and giving the child a sense of achievement are all successful ways to manage behavioural issues.

If schools do not have a mechanism by which to manage extreme behaviour they will be left with no option other than to suspend and eventually exclude a child who is putting the safety of others at risk. This could well reverse what has been an increasingly higher rate of inclusion of children with special needs in the mainstream education system.

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