



How to Help Your Child Manage Time & Understand Expectations

Time is an unclear measure for children. It is common to feel frustrated with a child when they have not done what they were asked (e.g., pick up toys, put on shoes) even after they have been given a 5-minute warning. However, it is important for adults to know that there is little difference between five minutes and an hour to young children because of how they experience time. Children live in the moment; the future is difficult for them to measure. When adults use time (rather than events such as “when I get to the top of the stairs”) to communicate what they expect the child to do, it can lead to the child feeling confused and frustrated, and ultimately expressing strong emotions.



Visual timers are excellent tools families can use to help young children learn to measure time and understand expectations. Children can see a sand timer, turn it over and watch the sand fall to the bottom. There is a clear beginning, middle and end which gives children a way to predict and understand what will happen when the sand runs out. Sand timers empower children and help them feel like they are a part of the process rather than simply being told what to do. Sand timers also give parents and caregivers an opportunity to encourage and affirm their child when they are moved to action to “beat the clock”—a much more enjoyable and effective activity than nagging.

Suggestions for Families

You can help your child learn the skills needed to share, trade and take turns using a timer. For more information on how to help children learn the skills of sharing, trading and taking turns, check out those topics in the Backpack Connection Series.

- **Taking Turns:** “I see Tony is playing with the puppets right now. When this 3-minute timer is done it will be your turn.”
- **Trading:** “You are having so much fun playing with your train. When the timer is done, you and Austin can trade. He will give you his car and you can give him your train.”

- **Sharing:** “You and Ben are both playing in the sand. There is only one shovel and two boys. You have the bucket and Ben has the shovel. First Ben can shovel the sand into the bucket and when this timer is done, you can shovel the sand into the bucket. That is a great way to share the sand toys!”

Timers can also help with transitions. “I see you are happy playing with Legos. It is time to go to school. Would you like to put your shoes on now or in one minute?” After you say this, set the timer; you may be surprised how your child is able to make the transition on their own. Timers can help move an activity along. “I wonder if you can put all your trains into the box in 3 minutes.” Timers can help YOU stay on track too. “I would be happy to get down your puzzles. I am on the phone and will do it in 5 minutes.” This clear boundary helps children know exactly what to expect and can reduce whining and repeated asking. Timers can also help at dinner time. “We all sit together as a family at dinner time. You can get up when the timer is done.”

Suggestions for Educators

Timers can be used in early learning and care settings to help children learn how to take turns and solve problems. Sand timers are also used to let children know how long an activity will take or to let them know that they will be transitioning to a new activity soon. Timers allow children to manage tasks without help from an adult and give them the ability to retain control over a situation because they can watch the time and see when it is almost up. Timers are also used in classrooms to offer choice. For example, an educator might ask, “Would you like to do that in one minute, or two?”

The Bottom Line

Time is a difficult concept for young children to grasp. Timers give children something they can see and touch to help them measure time. When timers are used to help children understand expectations, take turns and transition to new activities, they can reduce the frequency of challenging behaviour, encourage children to participate in tasks and even do things by themselves. Parents benefit from timers as well because the timer reduces or eliminates the need for the child to be constantly reminded and monitored. Additionally, timers can offer more opportunities for parents to compliment and congratulate their child.

