

Does Punishment Really Work?  
**A Case for the Punishment-Free Environment**

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**What's Wrong with "Punishment?"**

- Punishment is usually a short-term solution without long-term, positive effects.
- Punishment often models exactly those behaviors and values we'd like children to avoid.
- Punishment tends to create followers, not leaders, because it rarely allows for feedback.
- Punishment may be a "last ditch" effort of desperate adults and, thus, not a thoughtful act.
- There is a good chance that punishment may not work at all or may work for the wrong reasons.

Thankfully, it is increasingly accepted that physical and excessive verbal punishment are inappropriate and unacceptable means for disciplining children. They are abusive and have been shown to cause short and long-term harm.

Though society is beginning to move away from condoning these forms of punishment, our current methods for modifying behavior -- such as creating guilt, isolation, taking disciplinary action, meting out consequences or withholding rewards -- may be mere euphemisms and possibly questionable, as well.

The semantics of these alternatives can be enlightening. One day, in the supermarket, I saw a parent threaten to spank her child for pulling groceries off the shelf. The youngster pleaded, "Don't hit me!" to which Mom responded, "I don't hit, I spank." Again, the little boy said, "Don't hit me!" She repeated, "I spank, but I *never* hit." They went back and forth a few more times before it was obvious that the mother was becoming very confused about the difference between "hit" and "spank." I was glad she finally chose not to strike her son. After all, is there a difference between hit and spank? If children hit their siblings, do they ever get to say, "I didn't hit, I spanked?" and would an adult accept that as an excuse?

### **Does Punishment Really Work?**

The punishment-free environment alternative is controversial and raises provocative questions regarding non-punitive approaches. I will suggest some, but the most important goal of this article is to raise questions that encourage creative exploration toward new directions and dimensions.

Does punishment work or is it the desperate act of adults who don't know what else to do? Think about our mindsets when we punish. If we thought anything else would have positive results or we were not at the end of our personal ropes, we probably wouldn't take such actions.

I am often challenged by school administrators. They say, "We're not desperate when we write the rules and consequences booklet for our students." They freely admit, however, that the guidelines are prepared to anticipate worst-case scenarios when faculty and staff feel they have no other choices.

The point is that because punishment relies on force, it can change *behavior* but is not likely to change *values*. Values can only be changed

internally, and only when we see something modeled that we admire; when we think a change will make us better; if we're mature enough to handle something different; or if we have sufficient information to sway us.

Suppose we say our only interest is in *stopping* an action or in *changing* a behavior. Are traditional forms of punishment OK in *these* circumstances?

Consider this perspective - would you rather have the child change her behavior because she thinks it's the right thing to do or because she simply wants to avoid punishment? If an adult isn't around to punish her, why wouldn't she just go back to her old behavior? She's used to it. It's easy and still makes sense for her. Besides, you're not around to punish her, and without you there, what reason does she have to behave any differently?

### **Punishing Doesn't Make Parenting or Teaching Any Easier**

If you punish to ensure behavior you think is right, you'll *always* have to be vigilant and your job will *never* get any easier. Wouldn't it be better if the child internalized the values you consider important? Then he'd monitor his *own* behavior, and you could spend your energies on activities more important than policing.

Here's another curious example of punishment gone awry. Imagine a parent who is spanking a child for hurting a younger sibling. Between hits the parent says "this will teach you to hurt someone smaller than you!" That's certainly true. The child must be extremely confused by that message. Why wouldn't he think that if he's being physically hurt by someone *bigger*, it must be OK for him to physically hurt someone *smaller*?"

The same logic applies to a fight on the playground. Educators are constantly telling children that, if threatened, they don't have to respond but can just walk away. Then there is a punitive response to their actions.

**What should concern us most is that punishment of *any* kind models vengeance.** The message is clear: you must pay or suffer the consequences for your bad behavior. "I'm punishing you because you did something wrong!" How is that any different from the child who says, "I'm hitting him because he took my snack?" You'd probably immediately jump in and say "First of all, it's not all right to hit under *any* circumstances. But secondly, just because she took your snack doesn't give you the right to hit her! Don't do it again! You're being vindictive! Revenge isn't healthy!"

However, that's the nature of punishment. When people punish they're essentially taking, *and teaching*, revenge.

### **What if the Punishment Means Nothing?**

Punishment only “works” if the recipient cares about the consequences. Take the example of the child sent to her room to “think about what she did.” There’s a good chance this punishment or “consequence” will have little meaning for her. Had she known how to think clearly about the ramifications of her actions, she might not have behaved that way in the first place. A conversation about behavioral effects would probably be much more enlightening.

If that’s the case, or if she adopts the attitude that the consequences don’t matter (she doesn’t care that she’s not allowed to watch television,) she’ll probably continue with her old behavior. It’s comfortable, it’s what she likes to do, and it gets attention. And if the punishment is meaningless, why should she bother changing her behavior?

If a student is unhappy in the classroom or school, removing her or him – or suspending – may be a dream come true.

Once the child ceases to care about the consequences, or the consequences no longer have relevance, the adult is left with either choosing a more severe punishment or having no ability to do anything at all.

When I ask youngsters what they do when they’re sent to their rooms or a detention room, they reply that they spend most of the time being angry at the person who sent them. Very little energy goes into pondering their actions or planning how they will improve their behavior.

### **But I’m More Powerful**

Whenever any one can influence or exert control over someone’s life, there is a power differential. By virtue of the age difference and the fact that children are dependent on adults, there is built-in inequity, which is very easy to exploit. “I’m the parent or school administrator, so you do what I say or else!” “I’m the adult. I know better.” “I’ve been around longer than you, so you’d better listen to me.” Or even “You wait until I tell your Mom or Dad,” implying that the absent parent is a strong, physical or psychological force with the power to exercise it.

Adults need to be constantly aware of the “control” they potentially have over children. If it isn’t carefully managed, with understanding and a desire to give the children ways to even out the differential, it can turn the relationship into a constant struggle for power.

When we use power, we use force, and even with gentle force, we can expect three possible reactions: *fight*, *flight*, or *submission*.

We are not happy when children *fight* back. Their *flight* frightens us even more, whether it's running away physically or through drugs, alcohol or depression. And though we might think we'd like children to *submit* to rules and regulations - not argue back, question, or challenge - we abhor those very same characteristics in adults and call them wimpy, unassertive people.

Remember, power is the ability to influence, and we can influence only to the extent that someone (including a child) lets us. But if the youngster refuses to recognize or grows out of caring about the differential, then the power in the relationship will fail. If you are relying on that power to control, discipline, or influence the child, you'll be out of luck.

### **I Don't Want Kids To Be Followers**

When we exercise power over children, we're trying to control them and tell them what to do. However, we can't teach children to be leaders by always insisting that they be followers.

If we want children to be leaders, they need to be encouraged to question, to challenge, and to not simply accept everything we have to say. Naturally the challenging and questioning should be done respectfully and compassionately, but that's nothing more than we should expect from adults.

Some years ago, I was criticized by a man who felt he should be authoritative with his children. Proudly he told me "they do everything I say when I say it - there's no talking back!" When his son became a teenager, that very worried dad called me. "I'm afraid my son's a follower and that he might be getting into drugs." What he didn't appreciate is that children who are encouraged to question and challenge early on, and to not follow blindly, are more likely to exercise that independence with their peers.

An authoritative environment - at home or school - is a perfect training ground for becoming a follower, because authoritarianism thrives on power and on punishing those who get out of line.

### **So What Do We Do Instead?**

We'd probably agree that we don't want children to behave in certain ways solely because they're afraid of being punished. We would all prefer that kids make the *right* choices and behave reasonably without being forced and/or acting solely out of fear. Certainly my dream -- and it's a dream

shared by hundreds of parents, teachers, and child care workers with whom I've worked -- is to have youngsters experience something internally that guides them in the right direction. Children are bound to make mistakes - to make errors in judgment that cause the adults to question their practices. I suggest that a punitive environment does not increase parental or educator confidence and may even reduce it.

Some years ago I thought about writing a book about parents and educators who don't punish. "Here's what we do instead" was going to be the organizing approach. I started the research, only to find those professionals and parents unable to give me comparative situations. Punishment was not an option for them, so it never occurred to them to think about what they'd do instead. What they *did* notice was that the more they listened to the children, the more the children listened to them and the less their schools and households were plagued by behavioral problems. They were not problem-free, but seemed to be much happier in general.

They found that one of the easiest ways to help youngsters feel they had some influence over their own lives was to explain to them how they, as educators or parents, came to decisions about handling various day-to-day situations. It gave the kids a growing sense of empowerment and an understanding about adult responsibilities that would serve them well as they got older.

### **Communication is Key**

Adult/child relationships in a punishment-free environment are based on communication and a commitment to work things out. However, if you allow yourself to think through a situation requiring a child to change behavior, and you want to practice the technique of communication rather than punishment, be careful not to induce guilt and shame. These are in the same category as "consequences" because they can also be experienced as punitive.

Our adult son now tells us he appreciated growing up in a punishment-free environment. There was a time, however, when he felt differently. When he was a teenager, I remember him talking to a friend who said, "You're so lucky you never get grounded. I spend half my *life* grounded!" He replied, "I spend half my life in conversations. I'd do *anything* to get grounded!"

## Setting Expectations

**It's important to remember that a home or school without punishment is not an environment without expectations, nor is it chaotic.** In fact, it requires increased clarification, articulation, and communication. These preferable approaches are usually overlooked or ignored in a punitive atmosphere.

The outcomes of a truly punishment-free environment can be quite extraordinary. If the external “punishments” that force behavioral changes are removed - and a trusting, character-building, supportive environment is created where good value systems are constantly reinforced - long-lasting behavioral changes begin to be generated from *within* the child. Rather than continuing to respond to external rewards and punishments, youngsters internalize what they need to do, and identify expectations for themselves.

A punishment-free environment can be established if the school and family set high priorities on safety, mutual regard, caring, listening to the needs of others, constant communication, and affection. These qualities provide the foundation for modeling creative and respectful relationships because they keep abreast of the needs of every member of the school or family.

There may be many situations where the sheer number of children or circumstances requires establishing more rigid policies, rules, and consequences. If this *is* required (and I'm not all that sure that it has to be), then you and others in charge can still take every opportunity to teach children about the better, more communicative, more civil ways of handling conflicts or disruptions. If it is a question of time, it's important to ask, “Do we have time not to do this?” Time taken now will save time and relationships in the future.

For instance, the teacher who removes a disruptive child from the classroom might say “I'd rather not do this because I'm not sure it's all that helpful, but I can't think of an alternative right now.” The adults gets her or his immediate needs met, but everyone knows if s/he had time and energy, s/he would have preferred to work things out differently. When time is available, more appropriate options can be explored.

### **Staying on Track**

There is a difference between being in control and being controlling. We are most controlling when we're out of control. An overwhelmed teacher once told me she finally figured out that it's not her students she has to organize and structure, but herself. She noticed that when she was in control of herself and feeling centered, the kids did well. When she was not, the children acted out, probably because they wanted her back in control of herself.

Keeping ourselves on track would probably avoid the desperation that leads to punishment. When we're not on track, not centered, and not in control of ourselves, we react by trying to control those around us. Children get the brunt of it because they are less powerful and more easily manipulated. On the other hand, they also need to know we are not always "together, calm, and focused". We may, indeed, revert to more authoritative behavior under those conditions. Later on we can share with them what we would rather have done.

Communication is really the key. Communication, of course, means conversations, and I understand it's hard to have them when you have many other responsibilities. But don't be afraid to say "What I would like to do is have a conversation with you when things aren't going right. But when I just can't do that, I might resort to quicker means". They'll understand and respect you for it. Most importantly, you will have modeled the life-long skills of owning up to vulnerability and respecting and trusting those you respect.

### **Keeping Perspective**

When it comes to children, the context in which behavior takes place makes a difference. For example, in a punishment-oriented environment, challenging questions might be considered "talking back," while in a punishment-free environment they are more likely to be perceived as part of a "discussion."

People ask me "What do I do when a child behaves in ways I don't like?" My response is "What do you do when your spouse, friend, partner or colleague behaves in ways you don't like?" The answer is, inevitably, "We talk about it." Wouldn't it be reasonable to try the same approach with youngsters?

“I don’t have the time for such a lengthy process,” they say. But as I previously mentioned, do you have the time *not* to? Mutually acceptable resolution is far more time efficient in the long run than one-sided dictates because there is a commitment on everyone’s part to do better.

When children seem to be too young to understand conversation or to be reasoned with, we sometimes make the erroneous assumption that they’ll understand the emotion behind yelling or punishment, but not behind heartfelt conversation. When you reason with them and explain why you’re so upset, there’s no question they’ll get the message that you’re trying to work something out with them and that you disapprove of their behavior. Of course, the easiest remedy for very little children is to change their focus: when they are behaving inappropriately, direct them toward more appropriate activity. At that age, their short attention spans are an asset. They’re usually quite happy to get on to something else.

Finally, children don’t expect perfection from their parents and educators, but they do appreciate effort. The more we share our attempts at workable solutions, admit our mistakes and persist in trying - the more we model the behavior of compassionate, loving and thoughtful human beings.