

# **Does Punishment Really Work?**

## **A Case for the Punishment-Free Environment**

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Thankfully, it is increasingly understood that excessive physical and verbal "punishment" are inappropriate and unacceptable means for disciplining children. These types of punishment 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 actions for modifying behavior -- such as "creating guilt", "placing in isolation", "taking disciplinary action", "meting out consequences" or "withholding rewards" -- may be mere euphemisms for less well known but nevertheless negative forms of punishment which are also questionable.

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 the mother was becoming very confused about the difference between "hit" and "spank". I was glad she finally chose not to strike her son. (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 we ever accept that as an excuse?)

The idea of punishment-free environments is controversial and raises provocative questions regarding non-punitive alternatives. I will suggest some, but the most important goal of this article is to raise enough questions to encourage creative exploration into new directions and dimensions.

## **Does Punishment Really Work?**

Does punishment, in the broadest sense, 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 work or we were not at the end of our personal ropes, we probably wouldn't take such actions.

I am often called to task by school administrators who say "But 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 the worst case scenarios when faculty and staff are desperate.

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; or when we think a change will make us better; or if we're mature enough to handle something different; or if we have sufficient information to sway us.

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

Well, would you rather have the child change her behavior because she thinks it's really the right thing to do or because she simply wants to avoid punishment? If you aren'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 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 your child internalized the values you hold? 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. Take 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!" Although that's certainly true,

the child must be as confused as I am about that message. Why wouldn't she think that if she's being physically hurt by someone bigger, it must be OK for her to physically hurt someone smaller"?

What concerns me most is that punishment of any kind models vengeance. The message is clear: you must pay (suffer the consequences) for your bad behavior. "I'm spanking you because you did something wrong!" How is that any different from the child who says "I'm hitting him because he took my toy"? 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 toy doesn't give you the right to hit her! Don't do it again! You're being vindictive! You're being revengeful!"

Unfortunately, that's the nature of punishment. When people punish they're essentially acting out of 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 his bedroom to "think about things" amidst his toys, computer, sound system, books and favorite collections. There's a good chance this punishment or "consequence" will have little meaning for him.

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

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.

### **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 an automatic power differential which is very easy to exploit. "I'm bigger than you, so you do what I say or else!" "I'm the parent. 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 father (or mother)", implying that the absent parent is a strong, physical or psychological force with the power to exercise it.

Parents need to be constantly aware of the "control" they potentially have over their children. If it isn't carefully managed with understanding and a desire to give their 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 our children to submit to our 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 child refuses to recognize (or grows out of) the differential, then the power in the relationship will fail. If you were relying on that power to "control" or "discipline" or "punish" your child, you'll be out of luck.

### **I Don't Want My Child to be a Follower**

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

If we want our children to be leaders, they need to be encouraged to question, to challenge and to not simply accept everything we and others have to say. Naturally the challenging and questioning should be done respectfully and compassionately, but that's nothing more than what we'd 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, a 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, challenge early on and not follow blindly are more likely to do the same with their friends.

An authoritative environment - at home or school - is a perfect training ground for becoming a follower, because authoritarianism thrives on power differentials 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. I assume if there's any choice - and usually there is - we would all prefer that our children make the right choices and do the right things 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 children experience something inside themselves that guides them in the right direction.

Some years ago I thought about writing a book about parents who don't spank or otherwise punish. "Here's what we do instead" was going to be the organizing approach. I started the research, only to find these parents unable to give me comparative situations. Punishment was not an option for them, so they never had to think about what they'd do instead. What they did notice was that the more they listened to their children, the more their children listened to them and the less their households were plagued by behavioral problems.

One of the easiest ways to help your children feel they have some influence over their own lives is to explain to them how you come to decisions regarding the ways in which you're raising them and handling various day-to-day situations. It will give them a growing sense of empowerment and an understanding about adult responsibilities which will serve them well as they get older.

### **Communication is Key**

Parent/child relationships in a punishment-free environment are based on communication and a commitment to work things out. 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 are, in fact, forms of punishment themselves.

Our young 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!". To which he replied, " I spend half my life in conversations. I'd do anything to get grounded!"

### **Setting Expectations**

It is 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.

One of my son's friends observed about our home, "For a house with no punishment and non-strict parents, it's pretty clear what the expectations are".

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

in charge can still take every opportunity to teach children about the better, more communicative, more civil ways of handling conflicts or disruptions.

For instance, the adult who removes a disruptive child from the group 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 message is a good one for both the individual child and the rest of the children. The adult gets immediate needs met, but everyone knows if s/he had time and energy, s/he would have preferred to talk with the child instead. However, 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. A busy parent and teacher by occupation once told me she finally figured out that it's not her kids or students she has to organize and structure, but herself. She noticed that when she was in control 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 which 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. Our 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, as a parent, 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, they'll acquire the life-long skill of showing respect for others.

## **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 often ask me "What do I do when my 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 do you have the time not to? Time taken now saves a lot of time later. Mutually acceptable resolution is far more time-efficient 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 be reasoned with -- especially before they know how to talk -- we sometimes make the erroneous assumption that they'll understand the emotion behind spanking or yelling but not behind heartfelt talk. 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, 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 a compassionate and loving human being.



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

Punishment usually serves as a short-term solution without necessarily having long-term, positive effects.

Punishment often models exactly those behaviors and values we would like children to avoid.

Punishment tends to create followers, not leaders.

Punishment may be a "last ditch" effort of desperate adults.

There's a good chance that punishment may not work at all or may work for the wrong reasons.