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Why You Shouldn't Punish Your Kids

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What? You're saying children shouldn't be punished? How will they learn that their actions have consequences? How will they function in the real world where people get tickets for speeding, and fired for coming in late to work?

The idea of raising kids without punishing them for misbehavior might sound extreme ... maybe even a little crazy. Kids need to learn to follow rules—at home, in school, on the road, at work. And they need to learn that something happens if they don't follow the rules.

The purpose of punishment is to create an unpleasant experience for the child, in the hope that he will be discouraged from repeating an unacceptable behavior. Unfortunately, studies confirm what many parents and teachers learn through experience: More often than not, punishment fails to address the reason for the misbehavior, so the child is bound to get in trouble again.

The strange, counterintuitive truth is that children learn to regulate their behavior better when we use alternatives to punishment. Punishment can actually distract children from changing their behavior and encourage them to think selfishly: *How long will I be grounded? What TV shows or dessert will I miss out on?* Much as we like to imagine the punished child reflecting constructively on his misdeeds (*Gee whiz, sitting in this chair in the corner I've had an epiphany! I should treat my dear brother more gently when he knocks down my block towers*), he is more likely to be stewing with resentment towards the adult who punished him, or plotting how to avoid getting caught next time. If our larger goal is to teach children how to fix problems and avoid them in the future, punishment is not our best tool.

So What's a Parent or Teacher To Do?

If punishment is ineffective, what *does* work? We recommend bypassing punishment and moving directly to the powerful tools that motivate a child to do better in the future.

1. Express your feelings strongly.

Kids need to learn how their actions affect others. What seems obvious to us is not always obvious to a child.

A youngster who draws on walls needs to hear, “That makes me mad! I don’t like green marks on the wall.” This kind of statement will be much more effective than telling a child, “You know better. No dessert for you tonight!” That will cause her to focus on ice cream instead of her parent’s frustration.

2. Help a child make amends.

One way to inspire a child to do better in the future is to give her an opportunity to do better in the present. A punishment makes her feel bad about herself. Making amends helps her see herself as a person who can do good.

“We need a rag and soapy water. This will take some hard scrubbing to make it clean again.”

3. Help a child solve the problem for the future.

Working together on solving problems gives children an invaluable roadmap for life. When we have a conflict, we work together to find a solution that will satisfy both parties, instead of looking for ways to hurt each other.

“You like to use markers. What can a person draw on that won’t make her mother mad? A drawing pad? Grocery bags? Cardboard boxes?”

4. Take action to protect people and property.

You may already be familiar with this tactic. When you have a conflict with an adult—say, for example, you have a friend who’s always borrowing things and returning them late or broken or not at all—you probably don’t think about how you can punish that person. You think about how to respectfully protect yourself. You don’t say, “Now that you’ve given me back my jacket with a stain on it, and broken the side mirror off my car, I’m going to ... slap you.” That would be assault. Or “... lock you in your room for an hour.” That would be imprisonment. Or “... take away your smartphone.” That would be theft.

You’d probably say something like, “I don’t feel comfortable lending you clothes anymore. I get very upset when they come back damaged. And, I can’t lend you my car, which I just got repaired. I need to have it in working condition. In fact, I’d appreciate some help with the repair bill.”

So, for the child who is drawing on the walls, we can *take action without insult* by putting the markers out of reach and out of sight without attacking the child’s character.

Instead of: “No more markers for you! You can’t be trusted,” it’s more helpful to say: “I’m putting the markers away for now. I can see that it’s too tempting to draw on the walls, and I don’t like that.”

The focus is on protecting property instead of making the child feel bad about herself.

But What About the Real World?

Marks on the wall are small potatoes. What happens when this precious, sheltered child who’s never been punished is old enough to drive and goes racing down the interstate at 90 m.p.h.? The traffic cop isn’t going to problem solve with your little darling.

Children don’t need to be punished at home to understand that they can get a ticket for speeding. The important question is: how can we ensure that our children drive in a way that doesn’t endanger themselves or others?

Studies suggest that while traffic fines help fund local governments, they don’t actually encourage a change of behavior. Many drivers who receive speeding tickets are not deterred from repeating the offense. In fact, while they will certainly slow down in the presence of a police officer, they are more than twice as likely as other drivers to receive another speeding ticket in the following months.

As parents we’re not looking to achieve the effect of having our kids behave only when they’re in danger of being caught. What’s more, we don’t want our kids to fear and avoid us the way most drivers fear and avoid traffic cops. That’s not the relationship we’re looking for.

If I had a teenager who drove dangerously, I wouldn’t depend on a traffic fine to change his behavior. I would take action by confiscating the car keys. I wouldn’t do it to punish him, but rather to protect him, and to protect other drivers sharing the same road. I might say something like this: “I can see how tempting it is to drive fast and enjoy the power of speed. I can’t let you use the car until we figure out a way for you to drive safely. I would never forgive myself if someone got hurt.”

Then I would follow up by problem solving until we came up with a plan that we were both comfortable with.

But how about when your coddled kid gets a job and comes in late every day? Won’t he be shocked when the boss fires him instead of “problem solving”?

A child who expects to be punished for misbehavior learns to look for ways to avoid punishment. Our young employee, when faced with the threat of being fired for arriving late, may look for ways to sneak in without being noticed. Or perhaps he’ll focus on polishing up his excuses—his

car wouldn't start, the bus got stuck in traffic, he can't walk fast enough because his shoes are pinching his toes.

On the other hand, the child who has been raised to solve problems will look for ways to meet both the employer's needs and his own. Perhaps he'll rig a more effective alarm clock; one that buzzes, flashes and vibrates while spraying water on his head.

But what if his invention still fails to rouse him from the depths of slumber, and he is late once again? The boss will fire him, not to punish him, but in order to take action to protect the business. Our youngster, who has been raised by adults who take action, won't be shocked and disoriented by this outcome. On the contrary, he'll be able to reflect on the fact that he needs to make more of an effort to get to work on time in his next job, because he's learned that employers won't put up with lateness.

Putting Theory Into Practice With a Preschooler

Annette, a mom in one of our parenting workshops, had a beautiful home and a very destructive 3-year-old. Despite numerous punishments, including time-outs and loss of TV privileges, Ivan continued to use black marker on the elegant white couches, scissors on the pillows, and crayons on the walls.

After the session on alternatives to punishment, Annette tried a new approach. She said, "Ivan, I'm very upset that the fringes on this rug were cut. I got this little rug from my grandmother. It means a lot to me. I expect you to fix it." She got out a ruler and held it against the fringes. "This has to be cut very carefully to even it out." Ivan said, "I'm sorry, Mommy" (he had never before apologized when scolded), and carefully evened out the fringes with the scissors. Then she talked to him about his artwork. "I can see you like making art. And I don't like drawing on the furniture. We need ideas." They decided to create an art box, with special supplies just for Ivan to draw with, paint on and cut.

The next day Ivan spilled water on the table cloth. He ran to his mom and said, "There's water on the tablecloth. What should we do to fix it?"

Since the rug incident there have been no more "art attacks" on the house and, more important, there is a new feeling of cooperation instead of opposition between Ivan and his mom.

Putting Theory Into Practice With a Teenager

But what about when kids get older? Don't they need punishment then?

A high school biology teacher reported that he had a student who was constantly disrupting the class. Marco had an inexhaustible supply of energy. As soon as the teen arrived in the classroom, complaints would

follow in his wake. “Teacher, Marco touched me ... tripped me ... grabbed my pen ... threw my notebook ... won’t stop humming”

Marco had been thrown out of class again and again. He’d been lectured, sent to the principal, even suspended. Everything had been tried. Every punishment, that is. But none of those punishments made Marco more cooperative.

Finally, the teacher decided to try something different. He invited Marco to sit down with him at the end of the day. He started the conversation by trying to see the conflict from Marco’s point of view. “I can see you have a lot of energy. You like to move around during class. Sitting still is not for you.” Marco responded enthusiastically. His sullen, sneaky expression evaporated. He told the teacher he didn’t care about biology. He wanted to be a welder. The teacher offered to give Marco a few soldering lessons after school to get him started, and to inquire for him about welding programs. He asked Marco to help come up with ideas for what to do with his energy that would not disrupt the class. Marco offered that he could do jumping jacks when he felt like he couldn’t sit still. The teacher agreed, as long as he did it in the back of the room.

After this talk the classroom atmosphere improved immensely. No longer was Marco disturbing other students during lessons. Marco and his teacher started a soldering project—connecting copper pipes into a sculpture of a trumpet. Even better, the whole relationship between teacher and student was transformed. Instead of looking to goad the teacher, Marco now sought to impress this man who seemed to care for him and respect his ideas.

Will They be Prepared for Life’s Harsh Realities?

We would argue that a child doesn’t need to be punished at home, or even at school, in order to learn to avoid punishment in the rest of the world.

Children will experience pain of all sorts; we don’t need to subject them to all sorts of pain just so they are “prepared.” We don’t deliberately scrape their knees to prepare them for the inevitable scrapes at the playground. We don’t bully them to prepare them for the taunts of their classmates or co-workers.

Perhaps you’re still thinking, “But sometimes in the real world, misbehavior *does* result in punishment.” You’re right, of course. But that doesn’t mean it works. In fact, adults who are punished, by fines or imprisonment, tend to be recidivists. The reality is that punishment teaches the wrong lessons. What’s more, it’s not even an effective deterrent, so why bring it into our homes and schools?

When we take action to protect people and property and then encourage children to make amends and problem solve, we are truly modeling the attitude we want our kids to take toward conflict in their lives. Not, “Who should be punished, and what should the punishment be?” Not, “How can I get away with breaking the rules?” But rather, “How can I fix my mistake?” “What should I do differently next time?”

Teaching children how to make amends and solve problems will help them behave better in the present, and become grownups who know how to resolve conflicts peacefully in the future.

Resources

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Joanna Faber and Julie King are the authors of *How To Talk So Little Kids Will Listen: A Survival Guide to Life with Children Ages 2-7* (Scribner 2017). Joanna and Julie write, give lectures and lead workshops in the United States and internationally. Joanna, a former special education teacher, has also contributed to books co-authored by her mother, Adele Faber, including *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* and *How To Talk So Kids Will Learn*.