Punishment

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Punishment is often used as a synonym for discipline, but the two are not interchangeable. Discipline is a system of actions or interactions intended to create orderly behavior. Some disciplinary systems use punishment as a tool. Therefore, discipline does not always involve punishment, but punishment is sometimes a method of discipline. However, it is the child's interpretation of the punishment that is critical. Punishment can be either physical or nonphysical. Behavior modification techniques, such as "logical consequences" or "time out ," use rewards and nonphysical punishments to control behavior. Behavior modification is sometimes distinguished from punishment with the claim that it is "corrective" rather than "retaliatory, " but any time a penalty is imposed because of unwanted behavior, it is punitive. Physical punishments are used frequently in Western society, as well as elsewhere, despite controversy over their effects. Numerous studies have shown that using physical force to control behavior can lead to more resistance and aggression on the part of the child. However, many parents, teachers, psychologists, religious leaders, and others still believe that there is a place for physical punishment in effective discipline. Most current promoters of punitive discipline in the United States, however, espouse nonviolent forms of control, or "mild" punishments, such as time-out, scolding and disapproval, natural and logical consequences, and penalties (restricting television viewing, for example). Time out is a behavior modification technique that has become quite popular in recent years. Used mostly on children between the ages of 2 and 12, it attempts to stop unwanted behavior by removing the child from all stimulation and attention. A certain room or chair is designated as the "time-out" place, and a child is ordered or carried there whenever he or she engages in a particular unwanted behavior. Time-out can be effective in modifying disruptive behaviors, like hitting, grabbing, talking back, or tantrums. Proponents of behavior modification claim that the child learns quickly to control his or her own behavior so as to avoid time-out. Detractors of punitive discipline argue that external controls do little to change internal motivations or attitudes. Children simply learn to resist or evade external controls.

Another technique of behavior modification involves "logical consequences. " Children often learn not to behave in certain ways through the natural consequences of their actions, such as getting burned when touching a hot stove. Parents and adult caregivers extend that form of learning by arranging consequences to children's actions. To be effective, these arranged consequences must be logically related to the action. For example, if a child does not complete his or her task of washing the dishes one night, the next night he or she must wash double the amount of dishes. Sometimes, natural consequences are too dangerous, so a parent arranges logical consequences instead. A child who rides her or his tricycle into the street cannot be allowed to be hit by a car (natural consequences), so instead the parent takes the tricycle away from the child for a week (logical consequences).

Behavior modification systems of discipline that use "mild" punishments suffer from a serious contradiction, however. Studies have clearly shown that in order for punishment to be effective it must happen immediately after the behavior, be severe, and occur every time the behavior occurs. Nonviolent punitive systems of discipline, on the other hand, recommend that parents not punish a child in anger (meaning parents must wait until their emotions cool down), and that the punishment be mild. This recommendation negates the first two requirements of effective punishment. The third requirement is impossible to fulfill, as parents are not constantly present with their children to witness every occurrence of the unwanted behavior.

Americans believe that severe physical punishment defeats its own purpose by modeling aggressive or physical behavior, the very behavior it is often attempting to correct. Studies have shown that violent punishment can produce aggression, anxiety, fear, paranoia, apathy, hatred, depression , delinquency, and self-destructive behaviors. Adults who were punished violently as children display an increased likelihood of criminal activity, domestic violence, and suicide.

Further Reading For Your Information - Books

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Greven, Philip. Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse . New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

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