

Questions About Kids

What's the Difference Between Discipline and Punishment?

There are few issues parents feel more strongly about than those regarding the discipline and punishment of their children. Although people may use those terms interchangeably, they mean quite different things.

Discipline is the process of teaching a child the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Good discipline should be a positive force focusing on what a child is allowed to do. The goal of discipline is to help a child change impulsive, random behavior into controlled, purposeful behavior, and discipline should be reinforced with teaching, firmness, and reminders.

Punishment is one technique of discipline. It may be physical—a spank or slap; or psychological—disapproval, isolation from others, or withdrawal of privileges. The goal of punishment is to inhibit unacceptable behavior.

Children need to be accountable for their own behavior in order to learn the inner control necessary to function as healthy, self-disciplined individuals.

Is Punishment Effective?

The theory is that punishment will eliminate misbehavior. Although punishment may stop the behavior at the moment in time it's administered, punishment alone does not eliminate misbehavior over time. The suppressive effect of punishment is of value only if acceptable alternative actions are taught while the undesirable behavior is held in check.

Severe punishment used as the exclusive method of discipline on a regular basis can result in undesirable and even damaging consequences.

Punishment often has little or no effect on the misbehavior, and takes the responsibility for the misbehavior away from the child. Children need to be accountable for their own behavior in order to learn the inner control necessary to function as healthy, self-disciplined individuals. A child who is punished with spankings, shouts, and threats may learn how to avoid these punishments simply by not misbehaving in that particular way within sight of the person who punishes. There is no guarantee, however, that the child's behavior will be changed over time or when she is away from the person who punishes her.

Is Punishment Harmful?

Severe punishment used as the exclusive method of discipline on a regular basis can result in undesirable and even damaging consequences: A child may view punishment as an endorsement of aggression and force, and learn only that a large person has power over a smaller one. Severe punishment can also arouse feelings of resentment, counter-aggression, and deep humiliation. A child may develop unfeeling attitudes toward another person's pain. Severe punishment also increases the possibility of incidents of abuse, as it becomes more difficult for a parent to judge the severity of the punishment.

Contrary to what some may believe, intense punishment does not have a more lasting effect on behavior. In fact, it can create a level of emotion in the child that interferes with learning and slows down the child's ability to control undesirable behaviors. This is true whether the punishment is physical or psychological.

in nature. The use of punishment can be a problem if the punishment is severe, if it's used regularly, and if it is the only method of discipline being used.

Is Punishment Always Bad?

The occasional use of mild punishment is acceptable (such as not allowing a child to watch a favorite TV program), if it is used in combination with positive methods of discipline, such as praise or rewards for good behavior. Mild punishment used sparingly within a nurturing environment teaches a child that one can press the patience of others past a point of reasonable endurance. Punishment can serve to emphasize parental conviction, clear the air between parent and child, and relieve parental frustration when a child's behavior is especially exasperating. Punishment should not be used, however, in instances when a child's behavior is beyond her control (bedwetting, regression in bowel habits) or when behavior is truly accidental (spilling milk).

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It's helpful to keep in mind the goals we have for our children. If our goal is to help children learn to control their impulses and become self-directed adults, we must help them by expanding our discipline repertoire to include more than mild punishments which serve only as temporary stop gap measures. We can do this by accompanying mild punishment with a verbal explanation stating specifically what the child did wrong and what she can do to correct the misbehavior in the future. Helping the child understand why the misbehavior is not allowed teaches the child to think about acceptable versus unacceptable behavior and helps him learn to make decisions about his own behavior. (This should not be confused with trying to get the child to be "reasonable;" a child need not agree that parental rules are reasonable in order to abide by them.)

Discipline is an ongoing process in which parents can help their children to become self-directed. The process is a complex one for both child and parent. The parents' duty is to provide their child with a clear notion of what is expected, what is allowable, and what is not acceptable. It is important to remember that there are many methods of disciplining your child, and that punishment is only one. Equating discipline with punishment diminishes both the responsibility of parenthood and the promise of childhood.

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