

## Child Development – Discipline

Discipline is the guidance of children's moral, emotional and physical development, enabling children to take responsibility for themselves when they are older.

It involves teaching children the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, and it makes them aware of the values and actions that are acceptable in their family and society.

- Discipline can be positive,  
for example, praising the child for doing something good or for stopping doing something inappropriate
- or discipline can be negative  
for example, smacking a child for doing something wrong.

Positive discipline normally involves helping children to understand why certain behaviour is unacceptable and other behaviour is acceptable.

Negative discipline such as physical punishment focuses on doing what you are told in order to avoid something unpleasant.

### **Physical punishment**

Physical punishment is often used as a form of discipline but it is difficult to put a line between physical punishment and physical abuse.

It is not possible to define what a "safe smack" is. Abusive and non-abusive parents differ mainly in how often and how severely they physically punish their child, and whether that physical punishment is purportedly for correcting children.

**Physical punishment has negative effects on child outcomes**, especially if it is harsh, regardless of culture.

Research on physical punishment indicates that physical punishment is both ineffective and harmful as a method of disciplining children.

Long considered an effective, and even necessary, means of socialising children, physical punishment has been revealed to be a predictor of a wide range of negative developmental outcomes. The extent of agreement in the research literature on this issue is unusual in the social sciences.

### **Social Behaviour**

Corporal punishment is associated with children's aggression and other antisocial behaviour (towards peers, siblings and adults).

Ironically, the behaviour that parents are most likely to intend to prevent when they physically punish children is exactly the behaviour that they are likely to be strengthening. Social learning theory (Bandura 1969) also suggests that physical punishment enables children to learn aggressive behaviour through modelling. If parents try to modify their children's behaviour through inflicting pain, then those children are likely to do the same to others when they want to influence other people's actions.

### **Cognitive Effects (Thinking)**

Children thinking develops through interacting with others (parents, guardians, teachers, friends, peers, other adults etc). This directly or indirectly influences children's learning and motivation to learn. Explanations and reasoning is a better strategy to use while disciplining a child than physical punishment and therefore better for a child to learn. Also, children who are anxious about being physically punished may be inhibited from exploring their physical and social worlds, and therefore less likely to be explore their environment.

### **Quality of Parent–Child Relationships**

One concern arising out of attachment theory is that the use of physical punishment can have an adverse effect on the quality of the relationships between children and their parents. Children's secure attachment is fostered by warm, positive

parent–child interactions and negatively associated with harshly punitive interactions.

Attachment security is vital for children's sense of wellbeing and their feelings of safety within and outside the boundaries of the family, and is a vital ingredient in the development of conscience.

Research has consistently showed that physical punishment is positively associated with poorer child–parent relationships.

### **Mental Health**

The development of internalizing problems such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and other mental health concerns that are often ignored can have lifelong effects, including influencing the parenting of the next generation. According to Straus (1999), mental health problems are associated with physical punishment due to their being an outcome of the suppression of childhood anger associated with being hit by adults who children depend on for love and nurturance.

### **Moral Internalisation**

The goal of family discipline is to help children internalise the values and attitudes of society to guide their own behaviour. Many parents want their children to internalise such values. Physical punishment is associated with diminished moral internalisation. Internalize moral values requires disciplinary measures that include explanations.

### **Interactions with Culture and Ethnicity**

Several authors suggest that the effects of harsh disciplinary strategies, in particular physical punishment, may vary across social and cultural contexts (Deater-Deckard and Dodge 1997, Horn et al. 2004, Kelley and Tseng 1992, Simons et al. 2000).

*There are more adaptive strategies for disciplining and guiding a developing child's behaviour.*

## Positive strategies for guiding and managing children's behavior

Responding to a child's behavior by hitting, beating, or using other forms of violent or humiliating punishment does not necessarily teach children how to manage their behavior. It can even teach them how to avoid being caught.

### **Strategies for guiding children's behavior and for responding to difficult behavior in a positive way**

1. *Model the behavior you want in your children.* Social Learning Theory – Bandura Experiment. Children learn by copying parents and others around them.
2. *Set clear limits and guidelines for behavior and explain the cause and effect of behavior* – explain to them in plain language what will happen if they do something e.g. look at this but don't touch because it might break. Don't kick your brother because he will be sad and mummy will be upset and you will not be allowed to watch pepper pig.
3. *Be consistent.* Kids will test set limits – because they are curious. Be consistent with the limits but also with the consequences of breaking them.
4. *Acknowledge good behavior.* Don't just notice children's wrong behavior while you ignore the good behavior. If they learn that it pleases you when they do something, then they will more likely repeat it.
5. *Ignore inappropriate behavior* – at least pick your battles.

Remember children sometimes do things to get attention from adults. If inappropriate behavior is not serious, it is best to ignore. Paying attention to it may make the child do it more often.

6. *Accept that children make mistakes* – young children are learning all the time and they learn good and bad behavior. When you are learning something new, it takes a while to get it (think about learning how to drive). They are children meaning they sometimes forget the rules and make mistakes. Try not to get upset. Rather remind them of the rules and your expectations
7. *Encourage children to express their feelings.* They need opportunities to express their emotions and feelings if they are to learn how to manage them.

Before they can talk, children express their feelings by crying, smiling, laughing and screaming. With the development of language and other communication skills, they learn to talk about their feelings and use gestures, drawing, pretend play, dance and other ways of expressing their emotions and feelings.

8. *Teach self-control.* Controlling and managing behavior requires adult support. Give them simple choices even about the clothes they want to wear. This makes them feel they have more control and it boosts their confidence. (The options you give your child must be acceptable to you).

The behavior of young children is closely linked to their feelings. They laugh when they are happy, cling to an adult when they are frightened, shout or hit when they are angry. Children should be allowed to express these emotions. Adults can help children learn to manage their behavior by showing them safe and acceptable ways to express how they feel.

9. *Teach children to solve problems.* For example, if a child cannot share a toy, help him/her find a solution such as taking turns and supervising this activity. You make up a story about a child who had a problem that is similar to the one your child is having and how she/he got over it.

10. *Time out for children.* This is an effective strategy for helping children regain self-control when they have 'tantrums' or are very angry. Children under 2 years are too young to understand time out.

When using the strategy, tell the child why you are unhappy with his/her behavior. The child should not sit alone for more than 5 minutes. You can designate a special 'time out area' of the room or in a separate space if necessary. When the child has calmed down, tell them it is alright to go and play again or help you with a task. This will re-assure them that you still love them and want to spend time with them despite the bad behavior.

11. *'Time out' for Parents.* Children's behavior can sometimes be very challenging. It is natural for parents to feel upset and angry at times. If you are getting out of control for yourself, calm down and then respond to the child's behavior.

12. *getting help*. If you are worried about your child's behavior, and the general strategies suggested do not work, then you should seek help. The earlier you get help the better for both you and your child.

### **References**

Deater-Deckard, K. and K.A. Dodge (1997) "Externalising behavior problems and discipline revisited: Nonlinear effects and variation by culture, context and gender" *Psychological Inquiry*, 8(3):161–175.

Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2004) "The effect of corporal punishment on antisocial behavior in children" *Social Work Research*, 28(3):153–164.

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