

Discipline without Punishment By Marilyn Suttle



Vicky's supposed to come home after school, but she goes to a friend's house instead.
Todd gives Mom back talk about finishing his homework.
Natalie leaves a mess in the bedroom . . . bathroom . . . family room . . . and kitchen.

What do you do when your children misbehave? Do you hold them accountable for their actions . . . look the other way . . . hand out punishments? Your response can have a profound effect on your children's attitudes and future behavior.

When you punish a child, you inflict some kind of penalty on them. You either take something away or force something unpleasant onto them. Some of us have automatic punishments we rely on: no television, grounding, no treats, extra chores, verbal attacks, or spankings. Punishments require parents to dominate over children and impose their will onto them.

The problem with punishment is the incredible backwash of hostility it creates. Think back to a time in your childhood when you were punished. What kind of specific thoughts did you feel after being punished? By taking a realistic look at the effects of punishment, you can decide whether another approach may be more helpful. Here are five typical reactions kids have to being punished:

- 1. Hostility toward parents:** "They're mean for doing this awful thing to me."
- 2. A lack of remorse:** "I did the crime. I took the punishment. Now, I'm free to misbehave again."
- 3. A desire for revenge:** "I'll get back at them for this."
- 4. A challenge:** "Next time, I won't get caught."
- 5. Hostility toward themselves:** "I'm a bad person."

Punishment makes it easier for kids to overlook their misbehavior. It's a distraction, taking the children's focus away from self evaluation and onto the punishment. The more we fuss and fret over bad behavior, the worse the behavior gets. Kids become more determined than ever to defeat their oppressive parents.

If punishment isn't the answer to misbehavior, then what is? Children need to be held accountable for their actions. They need discipline and corrective feedback. They need an opportunity to take responsibility for their actions, and return disorder to order. How can that happen without pitting you against your child?

The goal of disciplining without punishment, is to respond in a way that allows the following reactions in our children after misbehaving:

- * **Healthy feelings of remorse:** "I feel bad about doing that."
- * **Personal responsibility:** "My actions, not my character, caused the problem."
- * **Look for the lesson:** "How would I act differently next time?"
- * **Search for solutions:** "What can I do now to redeem myself?"

Children need to see, without distraction, that they are the cause of what happens in their lives. By using parenting methods that create self reflection and a forward focus, we help our children develop attitudes and behaviors which grow responsibility. It's easier for a child to give parents respect and dignity, when they know how it feels to receive respect and dignity. Here is a list of specific steps we can take to create a loving and learning atmosphere for our kids:

- **Express your feelings without verbally attacking the child:** Kids will hear more and resist less when you attack the problem instead of the child. "I'm upset. The kitchen was clean when I left, and now it's a mess!"
- **Focus Forward: Your child cannot go back in time to undo the mistake.** Focus on what needs to be done from this point forward. "The dishes need to be put in the dishwasher, and the soda bottles need to be put in the garage."

• **Express your expectations:** To avoid a power struggle, resist a direct order. Instead, tell them what you expect. “When bath time is over, I expect the wet towel to be hung over the tub.”

• **Offer a choice: Choices give kids ownership over their actions.** When kids make the choice, they are more sincere in their efforts. “Even though you didn’t like the gift grandma gave you, you still need to thank her. Would you like to call her on the telephone or write her a thank you note?”

• **Give yourself time to cool off:** A child’s misbehavior can drive a parent nuts. If you feel overwhelmed with shock, frustration, or rage, tell your child, “I need time to think about this.” By following through after you’re calm, you’ll make better choices which lead to better results.

• **Teach your child how to make amends:** Children want to feel good about themselves. Help them regain good feelings by giving them opportunities to set things right. “It took Dad a whole hour to find the hammer you misplaced. Spending some time cleaning up dad’s tool room might help him feel better about it.”

• **Ask self-evaluative questions:** By asking questions that make children look inside themselves, they gain thinking strategies for the future. They don’t even have to answer the question. Thinking about it is enough. “What choices did you make to get this result?” “What other choices could you make next time?” “What can you do now, to make things better.”

• **Yell sparingly.** The more you yell, the less effective your yelling becomes. If you lose control, you lose your point.

• **Let children experience the consequences of their actions.** When we save them from this discomfort, they lose a powerful learning opportunity. If they break a friend’s toy, let them deal with their friend’s displeasure. If they stay up too late, let them cope with being tired at school. Of course, their personal safety comes first. You wouldn’t let them play in traffic to learn what could happen first hand.

What’s the difference between a punishment and a consequence? When you punish, you do something TO a child. A consequence is the direct result of your child’s actions. Both are unpleasant. However, consequences let kids see themselves as the cause of their discomfort. They made it happen, and they can make it stop by making different choices.

Here’s an example: Antonio refuses to put his dirty clothes in the hamper. If mom punishes him, she might yell, criticize, and tell him he’s grounded. If she disciplines without punishment, she might start by stating her expectations: “I expect your dirty clothes to be placed in the hamper.” If that doesn’t work, she could give a choice: “Would you like to put your dirty clothes in the hamper or would you prefer to take them down to the laundry room?” If he still doesn’t cooperate, mom lets him experience the results of his misbehavior. She doesn’t wash his clothes. She doesn’t berate him, or complain. She lets him see for himself what his actions produce.

Disciplining without punishment creates a climate of respect. A climate in which both the parents needs and the child’s needs are taken into consideration. By giving guidance and accountability, kids gain a set of experiences that will help them develop responsible behavior.

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