

PUNISHMENT VS. DISCIPLINE

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What is the difference between punishment and discipline?

In talking with parents over the years about discipline and punishment most parents all have the same intention: to help their children learn appropriate, respectful behavior so that they can become happy, successful, contributing members of their families and communities. Many parents have tried using punishment as a deterrent for future misbehavior, others have tried to avoid consequences altogether, usually by attempting to reason with their children through conversation. Still others have tried to cajole appropriate behavior through a series of rewards or bribes. However, parents usually find these methods ineffective in the long run, even though there may be some immediate and temporary change in behavior.

Punishment can be roughly defined as imposing pain or discomfort in attempt to make a child feel badly for their actions. Simply put, the thought is that if a child feels bad they will be motivated to do better. The problem is that it really doesn't work. Hundreds of research projects have demonstrated that punishment is not an effective method for encouraging positive outcomes. Subjectively and logically, we as adults don't do better when we feel worse or fear future pain, we do better when we feel better. Why do we think that children will do better when they feel worse?

Discipline comes from the Latin root, *disciplina*, meaning instruction. Effective discipline teaches children important life skills like empathy, respect and cooperation; it is effective long term; and helps children develop a healthy sense of self-esteem and personal responsibility. Instead of being harsh or permissive, effective discipline is both firm and kind at the same time, and encourages children to make healthy decisions for themselves and for others vs. making decisions based on self-centered fear of pain (emotional or physical).

The difficulty many adults have with implementing effective discipline methods is “opposite side of the same coin” thinking. In an effort to avoid being passive or permissive some adults use punishment, and this results in power struggles, disrespect, rebellion, and passivity. They wind up punishing for the same behaviors over and over again (this is a good clue that punishment doesn't work). In an effort to avoid being too harsh or strict, other adults try to use conversation and reasoning with their children, but this lacks firmness and results in power struggles, disrespect, poor social boundaries, and entitlement. These parents converse about the same behavior over and over again (a good clue that passivity doesn't work). In truth, most of us bounce back and forth between kindness and firmness vs. being kind and firm at the same time. We start off either too kind, then revert to being too firm or punitive when children behave disrespectfully, or we start off too punitively and revert to kindness because we are seeing that our behavior is disrespectful.

Consequences not punishment

Allowing children to experience the consequences of their actions is a much easier way to discipline children. Natural and logical consequences give appropriate power to children by giving information up front and allowing the children to make choices for which there are positive and negative outcomes. Simply put, consequences give children the dignity to make mistakes, experience the consequences of their decisions and actions, and learn from both their mistakes and successes.

Natural Consequences

Natural consequences are those that happen without any need for adult intervention, and happen naturally. If you don't eat you get hungry. If you forget to put on your coat you get cold. Here, the primary action of the adult is to simply do nothing and allow the consequences to unfold.

Logical Consequences

Logical consequences are arranged by the adult and are a socially logical outcome to a given behavior. If a child is disrespectful at the dinner table his parents may ask him to eat by himself. A parent might inform their child that if they are playing with something roughly that it won't be available to be played with until both the parent and child feel that the child is ready to play with it respectfully.

The wonderful thing about using consequences for parents is that doing so allows us the opportunity to be kind and firm at the same time. For example, "Tom, I noticed that you didn't pack your lunch last night. I packed it this morning for you, but I'm not willing to do that anymore. In the future if you don't pack your lunch it will be your responsibility to figure out how to solve that problem."

Using consequences allows us, as parents, to step out of power struggles and more clearly define responsibility. Adults begin to see where they've been rescuing and disabling vs. enabling and empowering.

Here are some important considerations when using natural and logical consequences:

- When using logical consequences be sure to discuss up front before initiating a consequence. This gives the child the opportunity to make a choice in his/her actions and experience the positive and negative outcomes of his/her choice.
- Start with the small stuff – consequences that you can live with your child living with. This will insure that you will be able to follow through. So, don't say that you'll leave without your child if he's not ready if you really won't.
- Natural consequences and health and safety! Obviously when allowing a natural consequence, be sure that is something that your child can navigate safely. The natural consequences of a young child playing in the road are more than a child can navigate safely. However, arranging a logical consequence of having to go inside if a child decides to go into the road is certainly appropriate.
- When a child experiences a natural or logical consequence, take time to process the experience with them when they are in a calm mood. Ask questions like, "What happened? What caused that to happen? What did you learn from this? What's your plan for next time?"
- Be kind and firm at the same time.
- Get comfortable with the fact that your agenda and your child's agenda might be very different. The purpose of consequences is not to get them to see things our way, but to help them learn important life lessons their way.
- Always remember, mistakes are an opportunity to learn!