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Ineffective Punishment - Tip Sheet

The use of punishment with children is a topic guaranteed to stir heated debate between two diametrically opposed points of view. But to simplify the issue of punishment down to an argument about whether it is morally right or wrong to smack your child is to miss the point entirely.

So is to argue that children today don't get enough punishment for misbehaving and so simply need a "kick in the pants" to pull them into line.

Views such as these show a very limited understanding of children and their problems.

Many children who have been referred to our parenting program over the years have had more spankings than hot dinners. Insufficient punishment is rarely a problem — how punishment is used frequently is.

While there is little doubt a firm smack on the bottom can be an effective deterrent, particularly when a child is doing something dangerous, at best corporal punishment works some of the time, for some behaviors, with some children. When used ineffectively and inconsistently it more often than not leads to further behavior problems.

A wealth of research and experience about the way humans behave has shown us that consequences for misbehavior work best when applied immediately after the offending behavior has occurred and in sufficient intensity to serve as a deterrent.

I have always recommended that parents consider using alternatives to physical force when disciplining their children. These alternative approaches need however to be specific and practical. Children do not thrive in an environment without rules, structure, guidance and consequences.

An important part of helping parents learn effective alternative discipline strategies involves showing examples where common types of punishment don't work and can lead to more misbehavior.

Punishment threatened but not carried out.

"Wait until your father gets home," is a threat sometimes heard in families. But if a child hears these threatens of punishment often and rarely receives any consequences the threat won't do much to control behavior. Indeed some children consider threats of punishment a dare to test their parent's limits.

Punishment given in anger.

Parents often use spankings and other punishments when they are angry with a child. But when parents become extremely angry there is a risk of losing control and causing injury. Outbursts of rage serve to make a child feel unloved, resentful and insecure. While it is inevitable a parent will sometimes feel angry, it is not always helpful to act in openly hostile ways when children misbehave.

Punishment as a crisis response.

A few years back a mother in our program had a 10-year-old who constantly harassed her with complaints about where he wanted to spend a long weekend. Several times she tried to reason with him that the family could not afford the trip, however when he kept up the nagging she eventually exploded, screaming insults at him and sending him to his room. Responding to the misbehavior with punishment before it became intolerable would probably avoided her reaching a crisis point and subsequently overreacting.

Inconsistent use of punishment.

A couple who came to us with a 7-year-old who was polite and well behaved at school but at home let loose with swearing and abuse whenever he didn't get his way, couldn't agree on how to handle the problem. The mother thought it best to ignore the behavior. The father insisted that any swearing should be dealt with by a good spanking with his belt and sending the child to his room. This meant the child got away with swearing some times and not others, and the problem behavior got worse over time, not better. Children cannot be expected to learn acceptable patterns of behavior if their parents' reactions are unpredictable.

Remember too, discipline strategies always work best in a caring, loving, predictable environment where children receive plenty of praise and encouragement when they behave well.