



# PSYCH NOTES™

Courtesy of

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Volume 2 Issue 2

## BEHAVIORAL CHANGES WITHOUT PUNISHMENT

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For many parents, punishment is often an automatic response to their children's misbehavior. Some parents often feel as if their children are "always being punished." Yet only a small percentage of these parents ever consider the possibility that the punishments must therefore *not* be working! There are many reasons why punishments may be ineffective:

- Punishment doesn't eliminate behavior, it only suppresses it (behavior will stop at that moment, but will likely recur),
- the child may be over punished, and therefore immune to its effects,
- punishment doesn't model the desired behavior (i.e., it tells kids what *not* to do, but not what *to do*),
- children focus on the punishment, not the behavior (think about anger toward the punisher, rather than behavior itself),
- punishment doesn't generalize to other settings (behavior will occur elsewhere),
- punishment is only effective when the threat of punishment exists, and if child is motivated to please the punisher,
- kids lose the ability to judge their own behavior (i.e., believe that they've been good because they didn't get punished).

When children are punished, they frequently focus on the punishment rather than the behavior. They also tend to associate the punishment with the punisher rather than with the unwanted behavior. Furthermore, while they learn what behavior is not wanted, punishment rarely teaches children which behaviors are desired. These are several of many reasons why punishment, contrary to popular belief, is frequently not the most effective way to change unwanted behavior in children.

**Some strategies for successfully changing behavior in children include:**

### ***Positive feedback***

While punishment and negative feedback stop behavior, positive feedback changes behavior. By praising children for desired behaviors, we teach them what we want them to do rather than simply what we don't want them to do. In addition, since positive feedback and praise are reinforcing, children will be more likely to repeat these behaviors over time.

### ***Reward direction not perfection***

Rarely can children transition from a pattern of undesirable behavior to their ultimate goal with no stops in between. For example, it is difficult to go from a grade of 60 in math to 100 without first getting 70s, 80s, and 90s. Rewarding children for any progress made toward the ultimate goal will show them that their hard work is being recognized. Ignoring these small steps can be discouraging to children, and can make them stop trying. This strategy is more formally known as rewarding *successive approximations*.

### ***Provide minor choices***

While it is true that children want power and control, they want their own, not yours! Give children small choices so that they feel some sense of control, but are ultimately making a choice that you desire or deem appropriate. For example:

- "you need to clean your room today, which would you like to do first, make your bed or put your clothes away?"
- "if you run ahead of me in the store you're going to get punished – are you going to walk next to me or run ahead of me?"

These strategies ultimately promote desired behaviors by teaching children how we would like them to behave rather than simply telling them what we don't want them to do. Like adults, children need to see that their hard work is paying off. This can be accomplished by recognizing small steps made toward their ultimate goal. Moreover, these techniques provide children with a sense of control over their own decisions, mastery over their environment, and teach them how to make positive choices that lead to positive consequences – all skills that will help them throughout their life!

(Information adapted from Richard D. Lavoie, M.A., M.Ed)

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