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ABSTRACT

Parents of young children feel a keen obligation to maintain adequate control over their child's behavior. In this paper, factors are examined that in all probability affect the adult's success in maintaining sensible control and changing child behavior when it seems necessary to do so. Five such factors are: (1) the child's desire to please his parent; (2) parental use of praise and approval for good behavior, (3) parental use of r asons and explanations, (4) consistency in discipline and the effective timing of punishment, and (5) the fear of punishment. If parents and children are to live comfortably with each other, there must be give and take. Since the parent is the more mature of the parent-child pair, the parent must take the initiative in seeing to it that his or her relationship with a child is vital, constructive, and rewarding. (Author/CS)

DISCIPLINE IN CHILD REARING

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Parents of young children feel a keen obligation to maintain adequate control over their child's behavior. Most try to accomplish the disciplining of their child with a minimum of family unpleasantness and no more than a reasonable expenditure of parental effort. Different approaches are used to fit different occasions. At times, the parent instructs or directs his child; at other times he uses himself as a model and expects his child to imitate. Sometimes he reasons with his child or appeals to his sense of obligation. He may flatter or compliment. He may insist or threaten;and at some point, he will punish. If his philosophy is to nip misbehavior in the bud, he will use threats and punishment with less provocation than another parent who feels that punishment is to be used only as a last resort.

A few parents feel that punishment should be avoided at all cost; most find the use of punishment helpful or even necessary from time to time in the modification of their child's behavior. Most parents try to keep the use of punishment from becoming a predominant characteristic of their interactions with their child.

Discipline and behavior modification is an aspect of child-rearing that does not lend itself to simple formulas. One can nevertheless examine the factors that in all probability, affect the adult's success in maintaining sensible control and changing child behavior when it seems necessary to do so. Five such factors are: (1) The child's desire to please his parent, (2) Parental use of praise and approval for good behavior, (3) Parental use of reasons and explanations, (4) Consistency in discipline and the effective timing of punishment, and (5) The fear of punishment.

The Desire to Please

There is in every parent-child relationship a degree of compatibility that determines how cooperatively a parent and child will work together in child rearing. There is a degree to which the members of a parent-child pair trust each other, develop a friendship for each other, and show mutual respect for each other. Good will between a parent and child is probably one of the most crucial determinants of the parent's success in the management of his child's behavior.

Compatibility comes more naturally to some parent-child paris than others; for some, personalities mesh comfortably and rapport develops easily. It is not, however a given of the biological relationship. In most cases, good rapport between a child and his parent must be earned by the parent through an investment of time and effort and the deliberate nurturance of a friendship with his child. Child rearing can proceed without the child's good will and often does; but in times of trouble the parent must then rely heavily on repression and the fear of punishment to maintain adequate control over his child's behavior. With the child's good will on his side, a parent's disapproval or punishment can usually be mild and infrequent and still be effective.

Ironically, though good rapport is essential to success in disciplining, it is probably fostered more by the things a parent does when his child is not misbehaving than by the things he does when his child is misbehaving. A child's feeling of compatibility with his parent is probably determined more by the number of pleasant episodes shared by the parent and child, and by the warmth and nurturance between them, than by the particular handling of episodes involving discipline.

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Warmth and nurturance from a parent seems to sensitize a child to parental disapproval. Disapproval or punishment from a nurturant parent is especially effective because it represents a temporary reduction of the acceptance and friendship that the child has come to enjoy. Without nurturance between a parent and his child, the parent frankly has less to bargain with in coping with misbehavior from his child.

The Use of Praise and Approval

One very practical thing that a parent can do to help guard against his child's misbehavior is to regularly and conscientiously reward his child for good behavior. Rewards need not be material benefits like special treats or money, although these things are admittedly powerful incentives to children. Because of the attachment children have for their parents, social rewards are also important incentives for good behavior. Smiles, pats and hugs for younger children, and compliments, approval and praise for older children are powerful sources of reinforcement that should be used regularly by parents and teachers. Unfortunately we tend to pay more attention to bad behavior than to good behavior even though it is blatantly clear from both research and everyday observation that attention and approval for good behavior tends to increase its occurrence.

We are inclined to take good behavior for granted. Parents may comment to each other about the growing maturity of their child but say nothing to their child to indicate that they are pleased. A mother, for example, may be particularly gratified when her child and a companion play for forty-five minutes without trouble, yet she may not bother to tell the children what good friends they were and how well they shared toys and equipment. Or a mother may know that her child has managed to do something that was particularly fearful or anxiety-arousing (such as approaching a big but friendly dog), yet not tell him how well he managed even though he was afraid and it was a hard thing for him to do.

The power of friendly attention and approval has been demonstrated in research with young children. Two psychologists from the University of Kansas, Donald Baer and Montrose Wolf, and their colleagues, have demonstrated over and over that systematic attention in the form of smiles or an affectionate pat given to a child directly following a particular behavior (such as a friendly advance to another child or participation in a school activity) will markedly increase the occurrence of that behavior. They studied nursery school children whose behavior concerned their teachers. One child, for example, had spent a large part of each school day behaving in very babyish ways including crawling on the floor, sucking her thumb and hiding from other children. The nursery school staff had made many futile attempts to lure the child into activities. Teachers were finally instructed to pay no attention to the child when she was behaving in this manner but to watch carefully for any tendency on her part to get up from the floor and behave in more socially mature ways. When the child did so, a member of the staff immediately came over and paid attention to her, smiling and generally being friendly. If the child dropped back to the floor, the adult promptly lost interest and withdrew. Within a very short period of time the child was behaving in a more normal way and interacting with the adults and the children in school.

The behavior modification of this child took place exclusively through the use of carefully planned friendly social attention for mature behavior and the withdrawal of attention for the immature behavior. The child was never criticized or punished for the immature behavior. Tantrums, crying and extreme dependency have also been changed in nursery school children without the use of punishment: by the use of social attention, affection and approval for mature, independent behavior and the withdrawal of attention for the behavior the adult wishes to reduce or eliminate.

The Use of Reasons and Explanations

Parents vary widely in the extent to which they justify the demands and restrictions they impose on their children. Some parents supply reasons and explanations as a common courtesy to their children so that discipline does not seem so arbitrary and inconsiderate. Other parents feel the child's job is to obey: talk and reason only complicate the picture and accomplish nothing.

While undoubtedly there are times when a parent's talk accomplishes nothing, there is evidence to suggest that reasons and explanations help a child to learn the general rules that govern social behavior in a family or society. If a child is told not only what is forbidden but why, he has a better chance of using that information to avoid punishment another time in situations that are similar to the one at hand. For example, a toddler may go into his brother's room and come out with a model airplane. His mother may feel that he should not help himself to his brother's things and angrily demand that he "put it right back." If the child understands only that he cannot play with the airplane, he may put it back and come out with something else from his brother's room. His mother may this time get around to explaining the rule she wants him to observe, namely, "You don't take things that belong to Billy." A parent oriented to giving fuller explanations probably would have said this in the first place, giving the child a fighting chance to understand what class of objects were being forbidden; in this case, all of the things that belong to Billy. She may also have helped the child get the point by suggesting that he go to get some of his things since they are especially for him.

As children get older, explanations can be more complicated and consequently even more useful to the child. A three- or four-year-old may be told following an episode like the above, "You should not take anybody's things--without asking them first." This information applies to many more situations than ones involving Billy's things, and in addition, tells the child a condition under which he may be permitted to take other people's things: namely, if he has their permission.

Needless to say, explanations will not assure a child's compliance but it may lessen the time it will take him to finally grasp the rules he is being asked to observe. Even children as young as three or four are expected to learn very complicated rules to govern their behavior. Aggression, for example, is usually not just permitted or forbidden! It is permitted--provided the child aggresses only upon reasonable provocation, provided he does not use the more blood-thirsty forms of aggression, provided he does not use it against babies, parents, neighbors, or visiting relatives, and provided his mother does not have a headache! The child will almost certainly be aided in learning this complicated protocol if his parent explains, if not on every occasion at least on many, specifically why he may not be aggressive on a particular occasion or in a particular way.

It is worth noting here that giving a child reasons and explanations is not the same thing as trying to get the child to "be reasonable." A child need not agree that his parents' rules and regulations are reasonable to abide by them and to understand why a parent imposes them. Endless discussion about whether a rule or regulation is or is not necessary can be burdensome for young children and their parents.

As a child approaches the end of the preschool years, it is probably wise for his parent to gradually assume more responsibility for having frank discussions with the child about persistent or especially troublesome misbehavior. While there is some risk of parent-child discussions putting undue emphasis on misbehavior or becoming the focal point of family tension, discussion has the advantage of giving a child both the opportunity and the responsibility for examining his behavior in terms of its justness and sensibleness. If the parent is sincerely interested in trying to understand his child's reasons for misbehaving, discussion can lead to more effective solutions to problems and improve the rapport between a parent and child. By the time a child is five or six years of age, informal chats of this kind in which a parent gets things off his chest and also hears what his child has to say, should be a fairly common occurrence between the parent and child.

Consistency in Discipline and Timing of Punishment

How can parents best help their children learn which behaviors are acceptable and which are unacceptable from the myriad of things the child might do? Since learning depends upon the child's ability to accurately predict the consequences of his behavior, one obvious thing his parent can do is to be consistent in approving and disapproving of various behaviors. If the child is punished for a behavior one minute but allowed to perform it the next, it will be a long time before he learns to give up the behavior completely. Fortunately perfect consistency is not necessary for effective learning; a certain amount of vacillation by parents, due either to uncertainty about whether or not to permit a behavior, or laxity in following through on discipline, will not completely disrupt learning. Nevertheless rewards and punishments must be administered with enough consistency to allow the child to develop some clear impressions of which behaviors are permitted and which are forbidden. If parents are too uncertain or lax in enforcing standards of behavior, the child will almost certainly develop elaborate techniques to avoid having to comply. If a child can blatantly misbehave without fear of disapproval, he may just learn to ignore his parent and continue to do as he pleases. If the parent will not tolerate blatant disregard for requests, but is lax in following through on discipline issues, the child may learn to make abortive little moves toward behaving, stall a bit, and bide his time until his parent forgets about the issue or gets distracted by other things at which time the child can continue to do as he pleases. Children whose parents weaken at any sign of challenge from their offspring will learn to protest and argue, cry or put on a show of temper in order to get their parents to back down. All children use these techniques, and others like them, from time to time in coping with parental demands. It is when misbehavior seems to be a routine response to parental demands that parents need to take a firmer stand with their children. They should then think through discipline issues, decide what they will and will not permit and enforce their decisions with vigilence, consistency , and if necessary, mild punishment.

One source of inconsistency in family discipline comes from the differing expectations of mothers and fathers. Fortunately children become very skillful in predicting what each of their parents will and will not tolerate. If parental demands from mothers and fathers are not in conflict--in which one parent rewards or demands precisely what the other punishes or forbids--the child will probably make the adaptations without too much difficulty. Adapting to the differing standards of his parents may, in fact, sensitize the child to similar differences among teachers and other persons in authority outside of his home. The child will rarely find two authority figures with identical standards of behavior.

Some approaches to discipline inadvertently teach a child to persist in misbehaving. For example, if a parent consistently goes through a predictable sequence that begins with a gentle request or two, then a somewhat firmer request, then a show of anger and only then, the threat of punishment, his child may learn to ignore the requests, and the show of anger and time his compliance to escape the punishment; that is, he may continue to misbehave until his parent has worked himself up to the point where he is a threat to his child. While patience is clearly a virtue in living peacefully with children, parents would do well to allow their patience with non-compliance to vary from time to time so that their child does not come to feel that first requests, or ones that are mildly expressed, can be ignored without risk of consequences.

Certain kinds of negative attention that are not really unpleasant for the child to tolerate (though they are meant to be by the parent) can also result in persistent misbehavior. For example, a parent may slip into the habit of characterizing a child as one who is lazy in the completion of chores, ill-mannered at the table or a show-off when there is company. When the entire family notices that "he's doing it again," the child may actually take some pleasure in the attention he receiv even though the attention is in the form of chiding and criticism. This kind of behavior can best be ignored by the parent when it occurs unless the issue is worthy of full discipline action.

Constant, ineffective parental nagging is another form of criticism that a child may take secret satisfaction in, since, though his parents are annoying him, so is he obviously annoying them.

Recent research suggests that the timing of the punishment is an important determinant of its effectiveness. Criticism or other forms of punishment administered at the beginning of a misdeed has been shown to be more effective than punishment administered after a misdeed has been completed. One has the impression that the timing of punishment is an especially critical factor for very young children who have trouble understanding precisely what behavior is being punished. For these children, punishment administered at the beginning of a misdeed may help to associate fear and guilt with the start of the specific behavior that has been punished, such as stepping off a curb, or reaching for a cookie that has been forbidden. The child may then check the behavior before it even gets underway. Of course, punishment while the child is reaching for a forbidden cookie also has the advantage of interrupting the behavior before the child gets to the payoff; that is, before he has a chance to eat the cookie!

The timing of punishment may not be a very critical factor in the disciplining of older children who know, or who can be told by their parents, precisely what punishment is all about.

The practical problem for the parent who attempts to administer punishment at the beginning of a misdeed is sizable. To accomplish this the parent must be unusually vigilent and almost constantly supervising the child, which, in itself, creates an atmosphere of oppression and suspiciousness. The benefits of well-timed punishment may be outweighed by the psychological hazards of a family atmosphere in which parents seem ready to jump on their children at the slightest show of misbehavior. The careful timing of punishment may be the most useful to a parent in those instances in which he can clearly predict from past experience that his child is about to perform a misdeed that has not been discouraged by past discipline. The vigilent parent who is quick to act at the beginning of the misdeed in this case may find his discipline significantly more effective than in the past when punishment came late or not at all. The vigilent parent can also help his child avoid punishment in many instances by issuing a reminder or a warning at those times when he strongly suspects his child is about to misbehave.

The Fear of Punishment

There is little doubt that punishment can modify behavior. A painful consequence following a behavior will cause a child to think twice before performing that behavior again. Most parents and teachers find the prospects of a child "thinking twice" reassuring enough to use punishment when they feel pressed to the wall by a child's rebelliousness, foolheartiness or rambunctiousnass.

Punishment comes in two general varieties: physical punishment, which includes spanking, slapping, or striking a child; and psychological punishment which includes disapproval, rejections, humiliation, shaming, isolation from others and withdrawal of privileges. Though parents often do express a preference for one of these forms of punishment over the other in dealing with their children, most use both kinds and can probably best be classified on a dimension of intensity of the punishment they use rather than type of punishment. Parents who believe in mild, low intensity punishments are likely to prefer spanks or slaps that do not cause much physical pain, and some of the less ego-threatening psychological punishments like disapproval brief social isolation and withdrawal of privileges. Parents who prefer severe, high intensity punishments are likely to use straps or switches on their child, and the more intense forms of psychological punishment like shaming, humiliation, and rejection, including threats of abandonment.

There is no reason to believe that mild physical or psychological punishment is harmful to children. Most parents feel that punishment emphasizes the strength of parental conviction from time to time, clears the air between a parent and child, and relieves parental anger and frustration at times when a child is being particularly exasperating. It may also teach a child that one can press the patience of others past a point of reasonable endurance.

In most instances, even mild punishment is effective in modifying child behavior. Intense physical or psychological punishment is also effective in inhibiting behavior, at least under some circumstances; there are, however, so many unwholesome side-effects to the regular use of intense punishment that it is rarely recommended by clinicians or child psychologists except under unusual circumstances.

There are four specific limitations to intense punishment that have been identified through research or the clinical study of children. First, intense punishment tends to be ego-damaging, threatening a child's feeling of security and sense of personal worth. Second, it is likely to arouse feelings of resentment and counter-aggression. If the child is fearful of the punitive parent, his resentment may be diverted to other persons. A child, for example, who is resentful of a highly punitive father may act out against his more lenient mother or teachers or against less powerful companions, strangers, or animals. Third, a child may develop a general feeling of uneasiness and anxiety in the presence of a highly punitive parent, causing the child to avoid being in the company of that parent any more than is necessary. Needless to say, this cuts down the possibilities of a parent exerting the casual but important influence on his child that comes from informal family conversations and talks about issues of concern to the child as he matures. Fourth, punitive parents provide aggressive models for their children. Even if a child is thoroughly inhibited from expressing counter-aggression toward his parent, he is likely to begin to think of aggressive, coersive control of persons weaker than himself as appropriate and justified.

Predicting the outcomes of child-rearing practices is an imperfect business at best. Why some children can be exposed to abuse and rejection from their parents, and yet emerge with healthy, normal personalities while others collapse under the strain, is difficult to say. It is nevertheless true that when highly punitive parent-child interactions become commonplace in the child's experience, the child is more likely than other children, to develop extreme behavior tendencies that are maladaptive except for coping with the punitive parent. If the child is particularly sensitive to the punishment, he may become overly fearful of authority; passive and compliant even when he is expected to exert initiative and independence. If the child has inner strength and determination, he is likely to become rebellious and belligerent. He may refuse to be touched by the punitiveness of his parent, defying the authority to break his will. In neither case is the child adequately prepared to get along with authority figures outside of his home like teachers and employers.

It is heartening to most parents to realize that mild punishment is probably as effective in child-rearing as intense punishment since the effectiveness of punishment may be determined more by the consistency of its use, the feelings of guilt it arouses, and the child's willingness to be controlled by it, than by how hard the child is struck or how much he is humiliated. Mild punishment will probably be sufficient if there is good rapport between a child and his parent, if the parent follows through consistently on issues involving discipline, and if the parent makes liberal use of approval for good behavior, so that his child is fortified against some of the temptations to misbehave.

If parents and children are to live comfortably with each other, there must be give and take. Since the parent is the more mature of the parent-child pair, he must take the initiative in seeing to it that his relationship with his child is vital, constructive and rewarding.