

Punishment Strategies: First Choice or Last Resort

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Abstract

Is it appropriate to implement punishment strategies in the home and school settings when children display disrespectful and inappropriate behaviors? This article depicts the advantages and disadvantages of teachers and parents utilizing an array of punishment strategies including: (a) reprimands, (b) response cost, (c) timeout, and (d) corporal punishment. It is critical that educators and parents know the advantages and disadvantages of each of the punishment strategies so that they can make well informed, knowledgeable decisions.

Punishment Strategies: First Choice or Last Resort

Should teachers and parents dare utter the “p” word in regard to behavioral strategies for students who repeatedly display an array of inappropriate behaviors? The “p” word in this article referring to the often criticized and denounced word “punishment.” According to Bos and Vaughn (2006), the definition of punishment is when a teacher or parent follows a “behavior with a consequence that decreases the strength of the behavior or reduces the likelihood that the behavior will continue to occur” (41). What do teachers or parents do when students are making minimal behavioral improvements with the utilization of positive behavioral strategies? Is it appropriate to consider implementing punishment type behavioral strategies when severe tantrums or aggressive behaviors occur on a continuous basis? This article examines information that all educators and parents should know so that they can weigh the positive and negative attributes of the following selected behavioral strategies: (a) reprimands, (b) response cost, (c) timeout, and (d) corporal punishment.

Aspects of Punishment

There are many aspects of punishment that teachers and parents should be conscientious of before deciding if they want to implement punishment techniques with their students. According to researchers the following are negative aspects of punishment that should be considered:

- (1) Aversive feelings towards school or home can develop in students who receive punishment frequently. These students may demonstrate negative feelings toward the adults administering the punishment and develop resentment. They may also exhibit fear towards school, possible aggression, and increased anxiety (Bos & Vaugh, 2006; Martens & Meller, 1990; Taylor, Smiley, & Richards, 2009).

- (2) Punishment strategies may often rapidly decrease undesired behaviors; however, over time punishment is ineffective and does not eliminate the behavior (Bos & Vaugh, 2006; Martens & Meller, 1990; Taylor, Smiley, & Richards, 2009).
- (3) Punishment strategies often do not generalize across settings. For example, a student who receives timeout for having a tantrum in reading class may then display tantrum behaviors in math class one hour later. Therefore, the student does not comprehend the concept that tantrum behaviors result in timeout across all settings, not just in reading class (Bos & Vaugh, 2006).
- (4) Punishment strategies do not teach students appropriate behaviors. The student only learns which behaviors should be avoided in front of the person delivering the punishment (Bos & Vaugh, 2006).

Guidelines for Punishment

According to Mather and Goldstein (2001), the following are guidelines that teachers and parents should consider when implementing punishment strategies:

- (1) Teachers and parents should provide clear guidelines depicting which behaviors are considered inappropriate and the consequences or punishments for each of those behaviors. For example, if a student refuses to complete his or her chores at home or assignments at school, he or she may lose a certain privilege such as playing outside. The student must understand which inappropriate behaviors result in which specific punishments.
- (2) Students should be provided with models of appropriate behaviors. They need to see and practice which behaviors they are expected to perform.
- (3) In order for punishment strategies to be at all effective they must be fair, consistent, and given immediately after the student performs the inappropriate behavior.
- (4) It is vital that students be given natural and logical consequences for inappropriate behaviors. For example, if a student destroys school property, a natural and logical consequence would be that he or she completes jobs at school to pay to replace the damaged property.

Reprimands

Definition. According to Houton (1980), a reprimand is a form of punishment that may be used when a child exhibits inappropriate behavior that causes harm to others, himself, or property. Although reprimands are appropriate to use with some behaviors, Bacon (1990) recommends that they be used infrequently, and with a statement indicating to the child an appropriate behavioral alternative.

Redirection vs. reprimand. The terms reprimand and redirection should not be utilized interchangeable because the words definitely do not communicate the same meaning. When a teacher uses the behavior strategy, redirection, he or she explains to a student that a behavior is inappropriate. The educator teaches the student the appropriate behavior. He or she then allows the student to correct the inappropriate behavior and when the student appropriately performs the behavior, a reward is provided, such as praise. According to Bryant, Smith, and Bryant (2008), “Redirection is an effective way to help a student stop a problem behavior and receive further instruction on appropriate behavior in a relatively short amount of time” (358).

For example, James is a third grader who receives special education services in a behavioral classroom because he has the eligibility of emotional disturbance. His teacher, Mrs. Holder has a classroom expectation that all students must raise their hand and wait to be called on if they would like to answer a question. One day, James shouts out an answer in class without raising his hand or waiting for the teacher to acknowledge him. Mrs. Holder utilizes the strategy of redirection by privately reminding James of the classroom rule. She encourages him to raise his hand if he knows the answer and patiently await her to call on him. The next time James raises his hand and waits to be called upon, Mrs. Holder deliberately chooses him to answer the question. She then praises him for abiding by the expectation.

On the other hand, while redirection is considered a positive behavioral strategy, a reprimand is considered as negative. When a reprimand is utilized, the student is only informed that the behavior is inappropriate. According to Bryant, Smith, and Bryant (2008), reprimands should be avoided and do not “provide the student with the opportunity to practice the correct behavior and receive reinforcement” (358). For example, Timmy pushes a student one day when the class is lining up to go to lunch. His teacher, Mrs. Tooke, utilizing a reprimand as a behavioral strategy, raises her voice and says, “Timmy, how many times do I have to tell you that we do not push other students in my class? Since you cannot line up appropriately without pushing other students, you can just walk with me down the hall.”

Suggestions for implementation. Walker, Ramsey, and Gresham (2004) suggest that, in order for reprimands to be effective, the following guidelines should be applied:

- (1) The child should be told specifically what behavior he or she performed that was inappropriate.
- (2) The child must not be humiliated or shamed.
- (3) The reprimand should occur immediately following the inappropriate behavior.
- (4) The adult issuing the reprimand should remain calm and not display anger.
- (5) The adult should use a firm voice when reprimanding.
- (6) If the child’s behavior was causing harm to others, the child should be removed from the situation quickly.
- (7) A reprimand may be paired with loss of privileges.

- (8) The child should not be embarrassed in front of peers and when the reprimand is over, the adult should not keep chastising the child.

Ineffectiveness of reprimands. Over the past forty years many studies have been conducted concerning the ineffectiveness of reprimands. A research study conducted by Thomas, Becker, and Armstrong (1968) suggested that reprimands were ineffective. In this study even though twenty-eight elementary student participants received reprimands and disapproving comments for inappropriate behaviors three times the typical rate, their behaviors did not improve. A study conducted by Madsen et al. (1968), proved similar results when increased reprimands were given to students who did not stay seated during class. The results of this study showed that as the number of reprimands increased so did the frequency of the students getting up from their seats. According to research by Iwata et al. (1994), reprimands given by caregivers (parents / guardians) often had the opposite of their intended effect. Even though the purpose of the caregivers was to curtail inappropriate behaviors, issuing reprimands to their children often increased the undesired behaviors by serving as a positive reinforcement.

Effectiveness of reprimands. Salend, Jantzen, and Giek (1992) conclude that the research pertaining to reprimands varies, and numerous conditions exist to determine if the implementations of reprimands are successful. According to Jones and Miller (1974), reprimands had a higher success rate when the teacher paired the reprimand with a facial expression that displayed disapproval. Research conducted by Houten et al. (1982) concluded that reprimands were more effective when the teachers were in close proximity to the students at the time the reprimands were delivered. The research by Houten et al. (1982) also indicated that inappropriate behaviors of the student participants decreased when the teachers utilized a combination of reprimands, eye contact, and firmly grasping the students' upper arms.

Summary of reprimands. The research surrounding the implementation of reprimands yields mixed results. Certain research studies (Salend, Jantzen, & Giek, 1992; Jones & Miller, 1974; Houten et al., 1982) produced positive results if certain conditions existed. Whereas, other studies (Thomas, Becker, & Armstrong, 1968; Madsen et al., 1968; Iwata et al., 1994) concluded that the use of reprimands were virtually an ineffective behavioral strategy. It is crucial not to confuse the negative behavioral strategy, reprimands, with the positive behavioral strategy, redirection. Whereas the behavioral strategy, redirection, provides the student with guidance on appropriate alternative behaviors and allows the student to demonstrate the replacement behaviors, the strategy, reprimand does not.

Response Cost

Definition. Response cost is a punishment strategy used when a student displays certain targeted inappropriate behaviors. According to Bos and Vaughn (2006), response cost is a "procedure in which a specified amount of a reinforcer is removed after each occurrence of the target behavior" (41). Kazdin (2001) describes response cost as a mild punishment strategy that does not cause the undesirable effects of other more severe punishment strategies such as corporal punishment. Walker et al., (2004) writes that the use of response cost as a punishment strategy is much easier to implement than timeout.

Suggestions for implementation. When implementing the punishment strategy, response cost, Walker, Shea, and Bauer (2004) recommend that the following procedures be used in order to increase the success of the strategy:

- (1) The child must fully be aware of the behavior he displayed which caused the punishment to occur.
- (2) The correlation between response cost and the inappropriate behavior demonstrated should be understood by the child. For example, if a child throws toys during playtime, he should be unable to play with the toys during the following recreational time.
- (3) Threatening the child or using excessive warnings should not be employed by the adult.
- (4) Once the rules have been established and response cost has been deemed the appropriate consequence, the punishment should be executed.
- (5) When issuing punishment, the adult needs to be calm and unemotional.
- (6) Consistency should always be maintained by the individual issuing response cost.
- (7) Consequences should be enforced that are both fair and reasonable. If a child throws toys during playtime, stating that the child cannot play with the toys for six months is unreasonable and unfair.
- (8) Inappropriate behaviors must not be the only behaviors emphasized. Positive, appropriate behaviors must also be reinforced by adults.

Thibadeau (1998) recommends these additional guidelines when implementing response cost as a punishment strategy:

- (1) The parent or teacher must collect data to determine how many times an inappropriate targeted behavior occurs. This data is also referred to as a baseline.
- (2) Once response cost is implemented, the parent or guardian should continue to collect data to depict if this targeted behavior has decreased over time.
- (3) Evaluation is needed on a regular basis so that alterations can be made if needed.
- (4) The student must completely understand the rules of the response cost system and the adult must carry out the system consistently.

Timeout

Definition. Powell and Powell (1982) define timeout as “time away from positive reinforcement” (p. 19). Research by Zabel (1986), Ruhl (1985), and Shapiro and Lentz (1985) indicated that general education teachers, special education teachers, and school psychologists commonly used

timeout as a behavioral management technique. According to Lane, Gresham, and O' Shaughnessy (2002) timeout is utilized in the classroom setting only for students who demonstrate unacceptable behaviors. This strategy is also employed to deter other students from displaying inappropriate behaviors.

Criteria for timeout. According to researchers (Alberto & Troutman, 2005; Cuenin and Harris, 1986; Kerr & Nelson, 2006) in order for timeout to be an effective behavioral management technique, certain criterion must be considered.

- (1) There must be a distinct difference between the timeout and time-in environments. The student must desire to be included in the time-in environment.
- (2) Targeted behaviors are identified and the use of timeout is initiated consistently when those behaviors occur.
- (3) The child must understand why he is being sent to the timeout environment.
- (4) The timeout area must contain no stimulus that the child would find appealing or pleasing.
- (5) The duration of the timeout must be appropriate for the child's age.

Seclusion timeout. According to Bryant, Smith, and Bryant (2008), seclusion timeout is a behavior strategy used for students who demonstrate out of control behaviors and has "gained popularity because it offers the student a chance to calm down, think about what happened, and rejoin the group in a short time period" (366). Whereas traditional timeout may involve that the student be removed to a certain designated area within the classroom, such as a certain desk, carpeted area, etc.; seclusion timeout involves that the student be removed to a small, separate, isolated room (Alberto & Troutman, 2005).

Smith and Rivera (1995) offer certain guidelines that are important to consider when implementing seclusion timeout.

- (1) Before a teacher implements seclusion timeout, he or she should provide the student with ample opportunity to correct inappropriate behaviors.
- (2) A student's behavior should be carefully evaluated before a teacher utilizes seclusion timeout. The behaviors that the student is demonstrating must be severe enough to justify this behavioral strategy since a period of instructional time will be temporarily missed for the student.
- (3) If the student is struggling academically or socially, he or she may desire to be removed to seclusion timeout as an avoidance technique. It is crucial that the teacher be aware of the student's academic and social circumstances to insure that the student is not attempting to escape a difficult assignment or unpleasant social situation.
- (4) The student must be monitored while in seclusion timeout to prevent self-injurious behaviors.
- (5) Parents must be notified that seclusion timeout was utilized with their child. This notification includes that the teacher complete certain

documentation describing the specifics of the situation (duration of timeout, incident preceding the teacher's decision to use seclusion timeout, efforts on teacher's behalf to use other behavior strategies first such as positive reinforcements.)

Comparison of timeout and reprimands. Jones, Sloane, and Roberts (1992) conducted a study with three preschool children, comparing the effectiveness of verbal reprimands and timeout; these three children were markedly aggressive and oppositional. The mothers of the three children implemented the two behavioral strategies - verbal reprimands and timeout, in the home after being properly trained. The findings of the study concluded that, when used correctly, timeout was more effective than verbal reprimands.

Advantages to timeout. According to Taylor (1997) there are many advantages to using timeout as a behavioral management technique.

- (1) The effects from timeout are typically quick and produced long-lasting effects.
- (2) Positive reinforcements are easily integrated with timeout procedures in order to increase desired, appropriate behaviors.
- (3) Timeout provides the child with an opportunity to regain control of his behaviors.
- (4) The child does not have to be removed from the learning environment in order for timeout to transpire (except in seclusion timeout).
- (5) Timeout is not an intrusive behavioral management technique.

Disadvantages of timeout. Walker et al. (2004) caution educators that timeout should only be used as a last resort and after other behavioral strategies have been unsuccessful with the student. According to Zirpoli (2005), timeout has several potential disadvantages.

- (1) Teachers or parents may abuse the duration.
- (2) Some teachers may place students in timeout in order to take a break themselves.
- (3) Some students may find the time-in environment unappealing and desire to use timeout as an escape from academic tasks.
- (4) Timeout may be used too frequently and learning time is potentially lost.
- (5) Timeout could infuriate the student and cause other inappropriate behaviors to occur.

Evaluation necessary. It is important to evaluate the effectiveness of timeout frequently. According to Costenbader and Reading-Brown (1995), teachers must consider the idea that timeout is not effective if a student is repeatedly given the punishment. However, when timeout is an effective behavioral technique for students, inordinate amounts of learning time is not lost in order to correct for behavior. According to Skiba and Raison (1990), "considerably less instructional time was lost to timeout than to other sources of classroom absence, such as suspension or truancy" (p. 36).

Corporal Punishment

Definition. Corporal punishment, which is still practiced in many American schools today, takes on varying forms. Corporal punishment, by far the most severe of the punishment strategies, is physical pain inflicted upon students who have participated in various rule infractions ranging from fighting a classmate to skipping school. According to the Society for Adolescent Medicine (2003) and the U.S. Department of Education (2001a), the various forms of corporal punishment include the following:

- (1) spanking
- (2) hitting
- (3) paddling
- (4) shaking
- (5) using electric shock
- (6) forcing the student to partake in certain body postures for extended periods of time
- (7) preventing the student from using the restroom

The use of corporal punishment can be administered by school personnel and parents / guardians.

Negative effects. Research has demonstrated that many negative side effects can result from school personnel or parents administering corporal punishment to students. According to Hyman (1995), the following are possible negative outcomes to corporal punishment:

- (1) Serious injuries can and do result from the use of corporal punishment, such as bruising, blood clots, discoloration of skin, and welts.
- (2) Corporal punishment can cause life-long, detrimental psychological outcomes, such as conduct disorder, for the students who have endured this type of punishment.
- (3) Students may become more aggressive and have feelings of incompetence.
- (4) Continual use of corporal punishment can affect the ability of students to utilize adequate problem solving skills.

Why is Corporal Punishment Used in Some States?

Twenty-one states in America still use corporal punishment as a means of punishment for students in schools (Kennedy, 1995). Why do some states favor this form of discipline? Corporal punishment in many instances is used as a deterrent to prevent students from committing repeated behavioral wrongdoings. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2001a), the utilization of corporal punishment in schools may reduce serious behavioral offenses. Research by Yancy (2001) supports the concept that when a student receives corporal punishment for a behavioral offense; that student may remember the pain and humiliation of the corporal punishment and be less likely to repeat the same offense in the future.

Summary

Educators and parents must be knowledgeable about varying types of behavioral strategies and decide individually which ones they choose to implement with their students. Of course, there is no real surprise that when educators and parents use physical means (grabbing students by the upper arms as in the Houten et al. study) or humiliation tactics (using reprimands in front of students' peers) to subdue the undesired behaviors of students that some type of results will be inevitable. However, are these results that educators are looking for? According to Taylor, Smiley, and Richards (2009), punishment techniques may control the behaviors temporarily; however, the behaviors many times are not eradicated. Conversely, sometimes it is necessary to implement punishment strategies to assist a student in improving his or her behaviors. However, it is essential that educators and parents know the advantages and disadvantages of each of the punishment strategies so that they can make informed, educated decisions.

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