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Spanking and Alternative Discipline Strategies

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The goal of an effective family discipline system is to teach children *self-control* as well as the values and norms of society. For many, the word *discipline* is synonymous with *punishment*, the inflicting of some sort of penalty in response to a behavior that is considered wrong. When used sparingly and correctly, punishment is only a small part of the total discipline process. Although punishment can take several forms, many parents rely heavily on spanking.

SPANKING: WHY ALTERNATIVES ARE NEEDED

Research has suggested that spanking may be the least effective discipline method. Spanking does not teach an alternative behavior and can instead promote even more undesirable behaviors. Specifically, spanking is not advisable because:

- Spanking teaches children that hitting is an acceptable way to solve problems, and particularly it teaches children that it is O.K. for bigger people to hit smaller people.
- Spanking sends confusing messages about the parents' attitude toward the child. Repeated spankings teach children that they are "bad" and can have lifelong negative impact on their self-esteem.
- Spanking can also affect a parent's self-esteem. Spanking often leaves the parent feeling guilty over the use of physical punishment and erodes confidence in his or her parenting skills. Parents who use spanking routinely may fail to develop alternative discipline strategies and enter a hard-to-break cycle of physical responses to misbehavior.
- Spanking tends to promote anger in both the child and the parent. Even if spanking seems to work in reducing misbehavior, victims of spanking tend to feel overpowered and humiliated, which over time leads to resentment and anger toward the parent and thus undermines the parent-child relationship.
- Spanking can quickly escalate into full-blown abuse. If parents use spanking for minor infractions, more serious misbehavior can lead to more serious physical responses. Again, spanking may prevent parents from developing more effective, alternative strategies.

- ✦ Spanking is ineffective in improving behavior. Children who feel badly about themselves—a typical response to being spanked—are more likely to engage in inappropriate behavior rather than learn alternatives.
- ✦ Research has identified a number of negative outcomes of physical discipline, including higher rates of antisocial behavior, aggression toward peers and family members (including child and spousal abuse as adults), and psychological disturbances.

Clearly, alternatives to spanking are needed. An effective, alternative discipline system must contain three vital elements: a learning environment characterized by positive, supportive, loving parent-child relationships; a strategy for systematic teaching and strengthening of desired behaviors; and a strategy for decreasing or eliminating undesired behaviors.

A POSITIVE, SUPPORTIVE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

A supportive, nurturing relationship with parents or caregivers provides the foundation for healthy social-emotional development. Through these experiences, children develop the ability to form satisfying relations with others, as well as trust, empathy, and compassion.

Physical contact. Newborns and young children require continuous physical contact. Throughout development, we increasingly encourage independence and, unknowingly, reduce the amount of physical contact with our children. By 48 months, children begin to dress, bathe, and feed themselves independently. However, throughout each developmental stage parents should find ways to maintain physical contact through the use of time-in. Time-in involves physical contact with your child when engaged in appropriate behavior. Physical contact can range from holding your child's hand to patting your child on the head when playing quietly. While the manner of delivery will change throughout development, the message communicated to your child remains the same. When consistent time-in is available, parents are more effective with the management of behavior problems.

Positive statements. Simply observing your child's behavior can provide clues into your child's individual way of approaching the world. These clues allow you to understand the meaning of your child's behavior, and to respond in a way that is productive and supports development. When children feel that their parents respond to and understand them, their confidence grows. For this reason, it is important for parents to be mindful of how often they give negative verbal reprimands to their children. If children feel bombarded by negative feedback, they may come to believe they are not loved by their family. Parents should strive to provide five positive statements for every one negative comment.

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING DESIRED BEHAVIOR

There are several simple methods that, when applied consistently, will increase the likelihood of desired behaviors.

General Approaches

Specify expectations. First, parents should be specific and descriptive about expectations and/or desired behavior when talking with their children. Tell them how you want them to behave ("Please walk.") rather than what not to do ("Stop running."). When talking with your child, be brief and keep it simple. Also, take time to listen to your child. Listening can help you understand your child's perspective, especially as he or she grows older. Remember, clear communication is a two-way street.

Establish consistency. Be consistent in setting rules and/or expectations. Although children will often test limits, they are usually doing so in order to find the bottom line. Children want and need clear and consistent limits. Clear and consistent limits are necessary for safety and help children

learn appropriate behavior. Follow through is equally valuable when discussing consistency. Always make sure you can follow through on what you are saying to avoid making threats that you can not realistically enforce (“Do that one more time and you’re grounded for life!”).

Stay in control. Parents should maintain patience and control with their children. When parents cannot control their own actions, they will likely have difficulty managing their child’s behavior. Children learn from what they see. Remember, your behavior and actions provide a model for your child to follow. Respond to stress and frustration in the same way you would like your child to respond. In fact, your actions teach your child how to respond.

Specific Strategies to Increase Appropriate Behaviors

Praise. Provide your child with positive feedback for what he or she has done well. Pair your feedback with physical contact (Say, “Wow, you made a really good choice,” while placing your hand on his or her shoulder.).

Give lots of attention. Children love attention and will do whatever necessary to receive it. If you only attend to negative behavior, the child will engage in inappropriate acts to elicit your attention; negative attention is better than no attention. Attention is powerful. It can be nonverbal (physical contact) or verbal. You can give attention by listening, asking questions, and showing interest in your child’s day or experiences.

Selective ignoring. Selective ignoring means to ignore a child’s demand for negative attention. While there are many behaviors that should not be ignored (aggression, safety concerns), many behaviors (whining and tantrums) are used to seek attention. By attending to inappropriate bids for attention, a parent inadvertently increases the likelihood of future occurrences.

Incentives. Parents should connect special events (going to McDonald’s, going to a movie) and tangibles (stickers, small toys) to good behavior. To increase a desired behavior, these special items can be used as powerful reinforcers. A reinforcer is a desired item by a child and can be used to strengthen a desired behavior. It is important to pair all tangible reinforcements with positive praise or encouragement.

Reward charts. Implement a reward chart to reinforce appropriate behavior. Identify desired behaviors and list the behaviors on the chart. Be sure to describe the desired behaviors in positive terms. For example, if you want your child to stop swearing, you can write, “Use appropriate language,” and *not* “Stop swearing.” When your child engages in the desired behavior, place a sticker, plus sign, or smiley face next to the item on the chart. At the end of the day, tally the number of stickers, plus signs, or smileys. While the marks on the chart may be salient enough for some children, others may need tangible incentives. You can connect a certain number of stickers, plus signs, or smileys with a predetermined incentive (which is described above).

Set a good example. Children learn through imitation. Parents are powerful models for teaching appropriate behavior through their actions.

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR THE ELIMINATION OF UNDESIRABLE BEHAVIOR

Parents should be aware of the factors that might lead to misbehavior. This awareness will help you respond effectively and appropriately to your child’s needs. There are a variety of potential factors underlying misbehavior. For instance, children may misbehave owing to biological factors, such as hunger, fatigue, or illness. Children may become angry when frustrated or act out in response to fear (the dark, new places, new people). Sometimes children misbehave because they desire attention from a caregiver. Strategies to reduce undesirable behaviors are effective if applied appropriately to specific behaviors. When delivering instruction and correction, remain calm and be understanding. Listed below are descriptions of several commonly used strategies:

Immediate and consistent consequences. Consequences teach cause and effect and how to

make decisions. Good decisions result in positive consequences, and poor decisions result in negative consequences. Aspects of effective consequences include clear communication between the parent and child about what the problem behavior is and what consequence the child can expect when the behavior occurs. Provide an immediate and consistent consequence when the targeted behavior occurs. Consequences should be immediately enforced so that your child will connect the consequence with the relevant behavior/misbehavior. Follow through on the consequences you have established or your child will quickly learn that you will not follow through.

Removal of privileges. This is effective when used in conjunction with misbehavior. Children may lose an opportunity (to watch a favorite TV show) if they misbehave (break a sibling's toy) or do not engage in a desired behavior (put away dirty dishes).

Redirect misbehavior. Sometimes children misbehave because they do not know the best way to get what they want. Before you punish your child for inappropriate behavior, teach the appropriate behavior. Provide an appropriate alternative to achieve the payoff.

Time out. When children misbehave, they may need to lose the privilege of participating in an activity for a short time. This time away gives children the opportunity to refocus and think about how they need to behave in order to be allowed to participate. In order for time out to be effective, it cannot be too long or too short. The amount of time a child spends in time out is directly related to age. The general rule is 1 minute per year (a 5-year-old should have a time out that does not exceed 5 minutes). Be consistent with the amount of time spent in time out. Using a timer can be helpful. Communicate clearly to your child how time out works prior to using the procedure.

Extinction. When you want a behavior to stop entirely, you may want to try extinction. Extinction suggests that a behavior that is not rewarded will not reoccur, and therefore you must eliminate rewards (intended or unintended) that follow your child's misbehavior. If your child is seeking attention, you must ignore the behavior, therefore eliminating the typical reward for the behavior (attention). Remember that negative attention can reinforce a behavior as much as positive attention, and thus the importance of totally ignoring the behavior.

SUMMARY

Most parents desire well-behaved children who mature into productive, responsible, and self-disciplined adults. This is no easy task. When developing an effective discipline strategy, it is important to understand that the parent-child relationship is vital to the development of an emotionally healthy child. Caregivers provide guidance through life's challenges and offer opportunities that shape their child's views of life. Accordingly, the supportive, nurturing parental relationship will create trust, making it easier to implement an effective discipline system.

Resources

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Severe, S. (2000). *How to behave so your children will too*. New York: Penguin.

Shapiro, L. E. (2000). *An ounce of prevention: How parents can stop childhood behavioral and emotional problems before they start*. New York: HarperCollins.

Websites

AskDrSears.com—www.askdrsears.com (see Discipline and Behavior links)

Early Childhood and Parenting Collaborative—<http://ecap.crc.uiuc.edu>

National Association of School Psychologists—www.nasponline.org

Adapted from *Helping Children at Home and School II: Handouts for Families and Educators* (NASP, 2004)



Ten Guidelines for Effective Discipline of Children

- The goal of discipline is to teach children acceptable behavior. Whenever possible, teach children what you want to see rather than punishing them.
- View children's misbehavior as a mistake in judgment. It will be easier to think of ways to teach more acceptable behavior.
- Never hit or shake infants. They do not know right from wrong. They do not misbehave on purpose. They need love and protection, not punishment.
- Create a safe environment for children. Baby-proof the house. Distract or remove infants and toddlers when they are doing something they shouldn't be doing.
- Provide order and consistency. Whenever possible, have regular times for meals, studying, and bedtime.
- Give toddlers and preschoolers age-appropriate choices and consequences.
- Establish family rules that are appropriate for children's ages. Keep them few in number with clear and reasonable consequences for not obeying.
- Develop a trusting relationship with children by protecting them from harm, by being honest and trustworthy, and by exhibiting predictable and mature behavior.
- Children need to hear more good things about themselves than bad things. Offer praise for appropriate behavior. Praise will increase that behavior.
- Adopt a "no-hitting" attitude. No one has a right to hit anyone else in the household ... that includes hitting children for misbehavior.

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Ten Reasons for Not Hitting Children

- Physical punishment increases the risk of child abuse. It is easy to hit too hard and cause injuries like bruises, broken bones, welts, and nerve damage.
- Physical punishment erodes trust between a parent and a child.
- Physical punishment, when administered regularly, is related to a worsening of behavior rather than an improvement in behavior. It increases antisocial behavior such as lying, stealing, cheating, bullying, assaulting siblings or peers, and lack of remorse for wrongdoing.
- Hitting children transmits a proviolence attitude. It teaches that it is acceptable to hit persons who are smaller and weaker.
- Fear is not an effective way of teaching appropriate behavior. Fear may lead children to obey only when the person who hits them is nearby.
- Children who are frequently hit often grow up with childhood memories of anger and resentment.
- Children are often hit for behavior that is not “bad” behavior but rather behavior that is related to needs for attention, nutrition, sleep, and exploring.
- Hitting a child for misbehavior means the caretaker loses an important opportunity to teach a more appropriate behavior.
- While hitting a child may stop a misbehavior for the moment, other methods like time out, reasoning, talking, and implementing nonviolent consequences work as well or better and do not have the potential for harm that hitting does.
- Better alternatives exist. Children learn best through teaching, discussing, and observing adults who model responsible, caring, and self-disciplined behavior.

This list was adapted from *Ten Reasons for NOT Hitting Children* (retrieved February 1, 2008) with permission of the The Center for Effective Discipline. For other resources and further information see the Center's website at <http://stophitting.com>.