

## Punishment vs. Discipline

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According to the Oxford dictionary, to punish means: to cause the offender to suffer, inflict penalty on the offender. Punishment is, therefore, penalty inflicted on the offender, severe treatment by an opponent.

It sounds like two warring parties, like two enemies at each other, where there is a winner and a loser.

Discipline, again according to the Oxford dictionary, is a system of rules for conduct; behavior according to established rules.

This sounds more civilized than the above, where there is an opportunity for interaction that could lead to positive outcomes and a lot of learning, depending on who is making the rules and what they're trying to teach, and how these are enforced.

When children are punished after misbehaving, all they learn is how to avoid being punished. And when we see what the word punish means, we must ask ourselves seriously if we want to cause the offender (our child) to suffer if we want to inflict penalty on the offender (our child). Or alternatively, do we want our child to feel loved, safe, cared for, and learn to behave better in the process as well?

When children are given safe boundaries within which to operate, they learn self-discipline.

***Discipline will not occur without the setting up of boundaries.***

Children will grow up to be well adjusted in an atmosphere where they feel safe and comfortable; where there is acceptance and tolerance; where there is an atmosphere of respect towards life in general, and towards each other in particular; where the rules are quite clear and easy to understand; where the consequences of rule breaking are clearly spelled out; where the expectations are realistic; where there is compassion and a general openness to grow and change on the part of all concerned; where those who are in charge are caring and interested enough to take the time to explain things to them, rather than to accuse them of wrong doing, without giving alternatives; where the children feel safe, comfortable and secure enough to make mistakes, and receive redirection.

In the absence of discipline and boundaries, punishing children often occurs after they have been misbehaving for a while, and we have been very tolerant, and letting them get away with it. Then suddenly, we can no longer tolerate the misbehavior, and down we come with a heavy-handed punishment, depending on our mood and what else is happening at the time. The children are confused, they don't know what hit them; what's more, they do not understand why the behavior that was acceptable a little while ago is no longer acceptable. They do not know what they did wrong, because last time they did it, chances are they were not punished for it.

The children have learned nothing, they just felt bad about themselves. The parents felt bad

about doing it, even though at the time they felt instant relief from the tension, but were not successful in letting the children know which part of the behavior was unacceptable, or why. More importantly, they were not able to help their children find alternative behaviors that work.

We tell ourselves as well as them, that they were asking for it, how long did they think they could get away with it, that they ought to know better, that they ought to be more understanding. We expect them to work out what our standards and values are without ever having articulated them in the cold light of the day, we have done it just in the heat of anger when no one hears what is being said anyway.

Thus punishment most often happens in a haphazard way with no previous warning, discussion, and more importantly there is no consistency with the behavior that children can expect from the parents. What they can get away with some days, they will not on others. Children then learn to become good at guessing what the parents will do, they learn to tell lies, to blame other people for their own misbehavior, not take responsibility, all in order not to get into trouble and not to get punished.

Some parents are surprised that their children still misbehave, in spite of the fact that, and even when they know they will receive severe punishment from their parents. What they don't understand is that their children believe that they can outsmart their parents, thus becoming good at manipulating, lying and cheating their way out of situations, not caring who gets the blame for it and how much destruction they cause for other people. All they care about is that they have managed to escape punishment and for now they are safe. They may need to be more resourceful and creative in their lying and manipulating next time around, but that's next time, that can wait; for now, they are safe.

Parents refuse to believe that their children can be like that. Even more importantly, they cannot accept that it is not the children's fault, because they are doing what comes naturally: protecting themselves. So parents start blaming other people for the way their children are and for the trouble they are in.

- They blame the school where the child is for not having any discipline.
- They blame other children who do not seem to understand their children and who are bad anyway.
- They blame the teachers who lack understanding, compassion and caring.
- They blame the country for being too advanced.
- They blame the government for having such liberal rules about youth.
- They blame the so-called rights of children, that get in the way of parents doing their jobs properly.
- They blame friends, neighbors, wives, husbands, in-laws, heredity, the kids down the road, drugs, television, the media.

In fact they do a lot of blaming instead of looking at the problem and seeing it for what it is. This way, children learn from the parents the art of blaming others and not taking responsibility for themselves. The real secret is that, if parents stop blaming and start looking, they will need to

accept some responsibility for the way things are. And when this happens, they may need to accept their part in the whole process, and they may need to change. We all know that it is a lot easier to blame than to change.

***Well then what's the answer?***

***Who is to blame for all this trouble that the children get into?***

Before we start pointing the finger and starting to do any blaming, it is important for us to realize that this exercise is not about blaming, accusing, judging or criticizing parents, or children, or society at large. It is about trying to understand what's happening in order to improve the lot of our children, and in the process make things easier for us. It is about giving our children the best opportunity possible to make them into functional and useful members of society, ones we can be proud of, and they can be proud of themselves.

After all, we all agree that our children are our greatest assets and the most important thing in the world for us. Let's then look at what we can give them apart from the material things that we seem to hold so very dear in our lives. One of the most precious things we can give our children is high self-esteem. One way this can be achieved is by their ability for self-discipline.

Self-discipline is not something that comes naturally to children. They are not born with it. On the contrary, they are born with the natural tendency to create havoc and get all their needs met without any consideration for anyone in the world. Have you ever heard a baby cry when hungry? Does s/he care for anyone in getting her/his needs met? But children are slowly socialized to start caring. This socialization depends very much on what the parents have to offer, and what their values are. Children never stop wanting to meet their own needs (the pleasure principle), but soon learn that they cannot get what they want, when they want it.

Thus parents, teachers, religion, schools, society all play their role in helping the children to get out of, or stay in that stage of wanting to meet their needs at all costs. On the one hand, we can have well-adjusted children who will consider other people as well as their own needs while finding a way to meet both. These children are highly popular and happy. On the other hand we can have others who will not care for anyone and get whatever they want, no matter what the cost to themselves or others. These children are not as popular or as happy.

Whichever way children develop as they are growing up, is a product of, and learned from their experiences in combination with their temperaments. Let's become good observers and find out just exactly what it is that our children do, and how it is that they get their needs met. Just watch how good they are at manipulating situations and people to get exactly what they want. And what do we parents do? We see all this and we think that they are very clever, we tell other people and we boast of it. See what s/he did? S/he is so clever, knows exactly what to do and when to do it to get what s/he wants. Did you see how s/he did that? Knows exactly when to come, when to ask for things and how to go about them. And we chuckle, and our children see that. They get a double message, a mixed one: first that it is clever to do what they are doing (in other words, there is a sense of misplaced pride in what they are doing); and next that it is not OK to do it. No wonder that they end up confused! They are always trying to work out the rules to the game of life: the non-existent rules, the unspoken rules, the ever-changing rules.

While the parents are boasting of their children being very clever, the children are learning the parent's weaknesses, and taking notes for future times. The very things that amuse us at times are the very things that will make us mad at other times, mad enough for us to punish our children; depending on our moods and what else is going wrong (or right) in our lives, adding to the confusion they already feel. Now they start asking themselves what did I do differently this time that got me into trouble or got me punished? I did exactly the same thing as I did last time, but it didn't work. They will not know quite what it is, because the unspoken rules change all the time. Before long though, they will work out about our moods and how to approach us to get their needs met. This does not mean that these needs will always be beneficial for them!

While this is all very good, and our children seem to be learning a lot, they are not learning essential skills especially that of self-discipline. What is so very special about self-discipline, you might rightly ask? Well, it is what we need to get on in life, to understand ourselves, to achieve what we want, to discover ourselves, to reach our potential, to be the best of who we can be. It is a fact that self-discipline cannot be acquired by just good luck or with time, just as it is a fact that children need some healthy discipline by parents, to reach to the highly coveted self-discipline.

It is in fact essential to cut out the word punishment from the vocabulary we use regarding our children. The word punishment in itself is negative, and nothing positive can come from negative interactions. When we think of the word punishment, we think of: Someone has done something wrong and now s/he is going to pay for it, it is pay back time, we have to teach him/her a lesson. We feel the need to exert our control over the person, thinking that by doing so, we are controlling the situation. I have actually heard many parents say this. I have also watched these so-called lessons fail over and over again, because the same children seem to be getting punished for the same thing.

The only thing that punishing children achieves is making the parents feel good about doing something about the problem, or even dealing with their own anger. Punishing children is exercising power over them; it is definitely not teaching them how not to repeat the offensive behavior. Punishing hurts children in more ways than we can begin to imagine, and the hurt lasts and produces very negative results. It is definitely not the effect we want it to have.

There is an alternative to punishment, which will produce desired effects, improve parent-child relationship, help the children take responsibility for their own actions and create healthy and happy children with high self-esteem and a positive outlook on life. It is called discipline.

Discipline is not just another word for punishment, it is the product of having healthy boundaries set up by parents and fully communicated to the children. Discipline is the children's awareness of what will follow if those boundaries are crossed or broken. The boundaries are set up to protect the children, to keep them safe from their own self-indulgence, and from other dangers that might threaten their healthy development. They are kept safe while they learn to develop common sense and discover what their own limitations and strengths are. As long as the boundaries are sensible and not too severe the results ought to be very positive.

### ***Why is it necessary to set up boundaries?***

#### ***What are boundaries?***

Boundaries are limits within which we operate. Limits that keep us safe.

Every room, by its very definition, has walls that specify what that room is to be used for. For instance, we cannot use the bathroom as lounge room, nor can we use the lounge room as toilet. The walls serve as boundaries that keep each area separate from the other. And when we are in that area, we can feel safe that the other one will not intrude on it. There are rules that govern each room and its use. There are taps and sinks and bathtubs or shower areas in bathrooms, but not so in lounge rooms. There are comfortable chairs and sofas and television sets and music equipment in lounge rooms, but not so in bathrooms. We do not wash in the lounge area. The rules are all there, and understood because they are very clear, and there are consequences if we do not follow them. Imagine what would happen if these rules kept changing all the time!

Every backyard has a fence that keeps it safe, that gives it privacy, and that contains it. In a contained backyard, we can plant what we want, and do what we want, and we also know that we cannot go beyond that boundary, because if we do, chances are that we may get into trouble with the neighbors, and sometimes a nasty one. There are rules that govern the use of backyards. Some rules are unspoken but understood, for instance we do not use the backyard as a bedroom, but a specific room designated for sleep. Some other rules are more specific like the rules set out by council for building houses and drains and where to place the drains. We feel safe when we know where our fences (boundaries) are with the neighbors. We know exactly how far we can go before we will get into trouble, and it feels good. It gives us freedom within our own little world. What would happen if the fence kept changing its place every so often? It would cause us a lot of confusion, frustration and a lot of hard work trying to readjust to the changing limits!

It is the same concept that we use when we put limits and restrictions on our children. We are creating safe boundaries for them within which they can feel free to explore and understand themselves, and learn how to socialize and like themselves, finding their strengths and weaknesses. We have to remember that our children are as much of a mystery to themselves as what they are to us. So the boundaries set up for discipline help both parents and children.

#### ***Now let's look at the issues of setting up boundaries.***

Each family has its own set of rules, regulations and expectations, as well as its own systems of communicating them to each other. Some of these are spoken, and some are not. Through these rules and regulations we teach our children the values we want them to have in their lives, the values we hold very dear to us. It is not only through some rules that we teach our children but also through the way we live our lives. And hopefully we live our lives according to the rules we set up for ourselves and for our children to follow. So it is important to make sure that the rules we give them are in keeping with the ones we keep ourselves, for if they are not, our children will be very quick in seeing the difference and will not hesitate in pointing it out to us. Even if they do not point it out to us, they will become confused about them. Therefore the more consistent we are, the better for all concerned.

Already the concept of rules and communicating them and consistency are on the agenda. Here then we have the most important three concepts to consider when thinking of discipline:

- ***Clear rules***
- ***Communication***
- ***Consistency***

### ***Clear Rules:***

As stated above, rules are very important. Whether we know it or not, we have rules that are probably never spoken. That's what we refer to as the way things are done in our household. For instance: there are some households where swearing is not acceptable; some, where gossip is a "nono"; some, where only the kitchen and dining rooms are used to eat in; some, where no one is allowed to eat in front of the TV set; some, where every one eats in front of the TV set. There are many more rules about the way things are done, about the way we dress, about the way we communicate. In some households raising your voice is not allowed, some where things only get done if someone yells it at someone else, and so on with countless other things. A lot of the above rules are unspoken but communicated silently to the other members of the family, and as children grow up, they pick it up as they go. If we are serious about a rule, it is imperative that we are able to model it for our children. They will never learn by simply being told!

Within these rules, spoken or silent, are contained the values that we give to our children.

If we are going to do it right, it is not enough to have unspoken rules, but very open, clear rules which are easily put into words and understood by the children. For each stage of life, there are different ones that are relevant and applicable. Our children give us a lot of opportunities to clarify these rules and we must take them and use them to our advantage and for their benefit. Each family has its own set of standards and rules, and it is in careful consideration between husband and wife that these need to be clarified. It is also important to be in agreement with each other, otherwise clarify where the disagreement is, and learn to compromise. It will never do if father says one thing and mother says the opposite, since this will be very detrimental to the child as well as to the relationship between the parents.

### ***Communication:***

Once clear rules are set up, the next step from this is communicating them to the children. This could be done in many different ways. I know some families who have weekly meetings, which they use to let the children know what they expect from them, as well as to find out what the children are up to. Some families set them up as they go, some others wait for the children to misbehave and then tell them what the rule is about that particular behavior. Some families make a point of having regular meals together on a daily basis, and use that as a time for communicating what they wish to the children. Communication is not one way. For it to be successful, it must be two ways. We must talk to them, and we must listen to them too. When the rules are set out clearly, then it is as important for the parents to let the children know what to expect if these rules are broken.

Again the results of breaking the rules must be clearly set out and are decided by the family. These must be fair, in keeping with the offence, and not abusive. There is never ever any case that warrants abusive behavior towards the children. Abuse is counterproductive, will always create problems later on for the children, if not immediately. The effects of abusive behavior are felt long after the behavior is forgotten, and well into adult life.

It is important to make sure that we pull our children up when they go beyond the boundaries they are set. Simply point out to them that it is not acceptable behavior in the family. And mean it! Children will keep testing the limits and we must be patient, repeating the rules and the fact that the present behavior goes against them, and that it is unacceptable! It may be necessary to repeat this process countless times. Children will not give up, ever! We have to be strong enough to outlast them. And of course this all depends if we think the process is worth it. It is not an easy ask, it is one of the hardest things to do, and we may find that we revert to the old ways of doing things at times. We must not despair, nor give up, nor stop. The battle is worth it. The effort is worth it. We must start all over again.

When we abuse our children, we are saying that we are not coping, it does not teach them how to do it right the next time. When we feel overwhelmed with our emotions in view of a particular behavior, the best thing to do is to buy time and cool off before we deal with the situation and the child. Sending the children off to their room could work very effectively, leaving the room or going for a walk to think things through could also give the space needed for both parents and children. Then it is easier to deal with the behavior instead of attacking the person. Simply tell the child that we will deal with it later since right now I am too angry, too tired, too distressed or too mixed up to do it. And come back to it later, after having given yourself the time needed to think and calm down. But do come back to it and deal with it— hopefully more calmly and logically, with the interest of the child in mind.

Nothing ever justifies abusive behavior

If we cannot do it better for our children, then we cannot expect our children to do any better, for they are the product of their environment and they learn what they live!

### ***Consistency:***

It is of no value at all if we do all the above perfectly but only do it some of the time. For it is of paramount importance to be consistent in our approach to discipline. If our children knew what the rules were, and knew that each time they were to be broken what they can expect, it would make the task of their growing up easier. But if they knew that the rules would change all the time, and the consequences would depend very much on the parent's mood of the day, then they become very confused. This is called crazy making behavior, where rules change without notice.

Through creating clear rules, communicating them to our children, and being consistent in our approach, we create boundaries for them where they can feel safe to explore their personalities, to discover who they are, as well as grow in confidence and independence, becoming assets to their families and communities.

Safe and clear boundaries help parents create discipline in the household: discipline that is humane, fair and conducive to growth; discipline that makes life easier for everyone and makes children feel good about themselves. When children feel good about who they are, and when they are encouraged to think for themselves and are clearly shown the consequences of their actions to be of their own doing, they will learn to take more responsibility for themselves and their actions.

If parents control the actions of their children, then they, the parents are responsible for them, but if the children are taught to take responsibility for their own actions they learn SELF-DISCIPLINE.

With self-discipline also comes self-control: the most coveted, the most desired, and the most admirable quality to possess, whether male or female. When children display self-control they have nothing to worry about, for it is not what happens in their lives that then matters, but how they respond to what happens that will decide the outcome of any given situation.

### ***Some tips that work:***

- ***Show respect, ask questions to make your child think***
- ***Never accuse, always ask for explanations***
- ***Accept what the child says, asking for further clarification***
- ***Understand the feelings, think two steps ahead***
- ***Have the child's interest in mind***
- ***Do not put the child down***
- ***Do not discipline in front of guests, their friends***
- ***Never discipline when angry, depressed or worried***
- ***Make sure you refer to the rules and the consequences***
- ***Show the child that it is a choice s/he made and the natural consequences of their actions must follow***
- ***Always use your secret weapon. Keep it handy:***
  - ***Keep your cool***
  - ***Don't ever attack the child but the behavior***

***When children are punished, all they learn is how to avoid being punished.***

***When children are given healthy boundaries, they learn self-discipline.***

***What will it be, haphazard punishment, or some hard-thought-out and hard-worked-at discipline?***