
Leader Resource

Discipline, Punishment, and Abuse

Discipline

- Expresses concern in a firm but warm manner: “*You must not touch that, because you could get hurt.*”
- Focuses on the behavior that needs to change, not on the child’s personality: “I will listen to you when you stop whining and tell me what you want” instead of “You are such a whiner. Be quiet!”
- Teaches successful behavior through close, warm interactions: “I will help you pick up your toys this time, so that next time you will be able to do it yourself.”
- Gives a child a second chance to try behaving correctly: “You need to go to your room now, but you can come back and try again when you are able to calm down.”
- Is difficult in the short run but easier in the long run, as the child learns appropriate behavior and self-discipline.

Children learn ways to control their own behavior and to manage conflicts with others. (Children under the age of three or four are usually not capable of controlling their own behavior. They still need their parents to guide and protect their actions.)

Some good ways to discipline children include: making your rules and expectations clear in advance; ignoring negative behavior; setting clear limits; talking and explaining; letting the child experience natural consequences; distracting the child; holding the child; helping the child master a task; using rewards (positive consequences for doing the right thing).

Punishment (A negative consequence for doing or not doing something)

- Expresses anger and power. (The parent uses force to make the child behave, which can lead the child to fear the parent.)
- Is usually inconsistent, because it depends on the parent's mood. (This confuses children. They learn that they have to be concerned about what parents will do, instead of learning how to control their own behavior.)
- Can easily lead to physical and emotional abuse of the child. (The more the child is punished, the more he or she begins to "tune out" the parent. This often leads the parent to make an even more forceful response.)
- Is negative and focuses on failure. (The parent attempts to stop the child's behavior but doesn't provide opportunities for the child to try again.)
- Is easy or convenient in the short run but has short-lasting effects. (The child often learns how "not to get caught"; thus, behavior is often repeated when the parent is not present.)

Punishment should never be violent and should be used only as a last resort, when children do not respond to guidance. Other techniques such as time out, loss of privileges, and being grounded are far more effective in changing children's behavior.

Abuse

Abuse or neglect of children can be physical or emotional. Physical abuse occurs when a parent or caregiver inflicts pain or injury on a child. Emotional abuse occurs when parents or caregivers refuse to give children love, attention, protection, and encouragement; or when parents degrade, insult, or ignore their children. Abuse is *never* OK. Children who are abused learn that the people who love you hurt you, and that the world is a dangerous place. When people who were abused as children become parents, they tend to abuse their own children.