

Cultural Differences

Culture plays a role in the moral values that individuals internalize and the sanctions or punishments that result from violations. Many other cultures emphasize helping and sharing behaviors more than the American culture, and children in other cultures are frequently found to show more helping behavior than American children.⁹²

Elliot Turiel emphasizes that although a culture may present a set of values and approved ways of behaving, individuals within that society may struggle against the values even though they abide by them in their behavior.⁹³ He cites studies of Bedouin women who occupy a subservient position in a traditional, patriarchal society, yet who, nevertheless, find ways to resist husbands' and society's demands and are able to get an education and avoid arranged marriages. Within our own society, inequalities exist between men and women, different racial groups and social classes, but some individuals refuse to accept these inequalities and seek to change them. Turiel states, "Distinctions need to be made between cultures as publicly conveyed ideologies or as social practices and the ways individuals interpret and make judgments about social experiences. Social and cultural practices embody multiple messages and are carried out in multiple ways."⁹⁴

Connecting Children with Spiritual and Religious Values

A value system provides children with a framework for understanding life experiences. Children who feel that there is an order to the world and that they have a definite place in that order feel more secure. If parents participate regularly in a church program, it is easy to incorporate children in services and activities that present a worldview that is meaningful to all family members. If parents do not belong to any spiritual or religious group, they can have discussions with children as they get older about what they believe and how they translate beliefs into actions. It is important to include children in the activities that parents carry out to make their community a better place. Children learn social responsibility in this way. It is important that actions mirror values; otherwise, children feel values are just so much talk if not backed up by action.

TOOL CHEST FOR DEALING WITH PROBLEM BEHAVIORS

No matter how skilled the parent or how good the parent-child relationship, problems arise, and parents must deal with them. Verbal strategies of dealing with problems are preferred because they enable children to learn the reasons behind consequences and to understand principles that can be used in other situations. For example, if parents talk about why it is important for children to be ready to go to school in the morning, they can then generalize the importance of promptness to other situations in school or with friends.

We give a number of strategies for parents' use depending on the situation and their values. These tools should all be used in a family atmosphere in which good

behavior receives attention and appreciation. Attention alone is enough reward for some children to increase the positive behaviors you want. Sometimes in the rush of everyday life, parents rush from one problem to another and pay attention only when the child is not doing what is requested. Thus, the child hears only what requires changing. Parents must be sure they are giving attention to the many ways their child follows their requests.

When actions are required, the following choices exist. We begin with natural and logical consequences because it requires primarily that parents let children learn from the consequences of their actions.

Natural and Logical Consequences

Rudolf Dreikurs described the method of natural and logical consequences as an alternative to parents' use of power and punishment. The terms *natural consequences*⁹⁵ and *logical consequences* are used jointly and interchangeably but have slightly different meanings. Natural consequences are the direct result of a physical act. For example, if you do not eat dinner, you experience hunger. If you do not get your dirty clothes in the laundry, they are not washed. Parents mainly have to stand aside and let the natural consequences occur—let the child remain hungry until the next meal or wear dirty clothes.

Logical consequences are events that follow a social act. For example, if you lie, other people will not believe you. If you misuse the family car, your parents will not trust you with it. Natural and logical consequences are directly related to the act itself and are not usually imposed by others. Exceptions exist, however. If a natural consequence presents a risk to a child—for example, running out into a busy street could result in being hit by a car—parents generally use a logical consequence. If a child starts toward the street, the child is restricted to playing in the house.

Logical consequences differ from punishment in several ways. Logical consequences are directly related to what the child has done—no clothes in the laundry basket results in having no clean clothes. A punishment may have no logical relationship to what the child has done—a spanking is not the direct result of being late for a meal but is the result of the parent's authority. The method of logical consequences does not place moral blame or pass moral judgment on the child. The child has made a mistake and pays the price. The parent stands by as an adviser rather than a judge.

When a parent establishes a logical consequence, it has to be one that he or she can accept when the child experiences it. For example, if a teen is told that the logical consequence of not getting homework turned in on time is that she will have to stay in on the weekend and complete it all even though there is a desirable party on Friday night, then the parent has to stand by the consequence even though the child is sad and angry, and the parent would like to see the child go to the party.

Mutual Problem Solving

Thomas Gordon describes mutual problem solving as a useful technique when parents feel a situation must change.⁹⁶ Using an I-message, described in Chapter 4, parents describe their feelings of frustration or worry and identify the problem

behavior from their point of view. A mother may say, "I get frustrated on weekday mornings when I am driving the children to school and they are not ready to go on time, because I am late for work and my supervisor yells at me. What do you think can be done to solve the problem?" Children can then give their suggestions—one might say he cannot get in the bathroom because his sister stays in there so long blow-drying her hair so he is always late and even if he gets up earlier, he won't be able to get in the bathroom. His sister may agree that it is she who slows things down for him, and she volunteers to shower and then eat breakfast so he can get in the bathroom before she dries her hair. They all agree to try this solution for a week and see what happens. The aim of problem solving is to find a win-win solution agreeable to all concerned. There are six steps to the problem-solving process:

1. defining the problem, both parents and children send I-messages
2. generating possible solutions
3. evaluating possible solutions
4. deciding on the best solution
5. implementing the decision
6. doing a follow-up evaluation

When an agreed-upon solution is not followed, parents must send a strong I-message of disappointment and surprise as soon as possible. Perhaps the child can be helped to keep the agreement. Or perhaps another problem-solving session is needed. Gordon advises against the use of penalties to enforce agreements. Parents should assume children will cooperate instead of starting with a negative expectation expressed in the threat of punishment. Children frequently respond well to trust.

Parents can also use a behavioral contracting system. Just as parents want children to perform certain behaviors, so children want to attain certain objects, activities, and privileges. Parents offer desired rewards in exchange for the performance of certain activities. For example, if a child does his chores (making his bed, clearing the table) without reminders, he earns an extra 15 minutes of time for playing. Likewise, an older child may be given use of the family car on the weekends if she maintains acceptable school grades and arrives home at the prescribed times. Contracting is similar to mutual problem solving but differs in that parents are more authorities who agree to dispense privileges and rewards in exchange for actions rather than joint problem-solvers.

Negative Consequences

Recall our discussion of learning theories in Chapter 2. Negative consequences are used to decrease behaviors that are not desired. If attention to positive behaviors and the preceding methods have not worked, parents can institute a negative consequence to decrease the likelihood of the behavior's recurrence. There are six general principles for using negative consequences:

1. Intervene early. Do not let the situation get out of control. As soon as the rule is violated, begin to take action.

2. Stay as calm and objective as possible. Sometimes parents' anger and frustration are rewarding to the child. Parents' emotions can also distract the child from thinking about the rule violation.
3. State the rule that was violated. State it simply and do not argue about it.
4. Use a *mild* negative consequence. A mild consequence has the advantage that the child often devalues the activity itself and seems more likely to resist temptation and follow the rule in the future.
5. Use negative consequences consistently. Misbehaviors continue when they are sometimes punished and sometimes not.
6. Reinforce positive social behaviors as they occur afterward; parents do not want children to receive more negative than positive consequences.

The following negative consequences range from mild to severe. First, ignoring might seem the easiest in that the parent simply pays no attention to what the child says or does. It requires effort, however, because the parent must keep a neutral facial expression, look away, move away from the child, and give no verbal response or attention to what the child says or does. Ignoring is best for behaviors that are not harmful to anyone. For example, children's whining, sulking, or pouting can be ignored.

A second is *social disapproval*. Parents express in a few words, spoken in a firm voice with a disapproving facial expression, that they do not like the behavior. When children continue disapproved behavior, parents can institute a consequence—removing a privilege, using the time-out strategy, or imposing extra work. When families have contracts, children agree to carry out specified chores or behaviors in exchange for privileges. When certain behaviors do not occur, children lose privileges.

Finally, *time out* is the method best reserved for aggressive, destructive, or dangerous behaviors. It serves to stop the disapproved behavior and to give the child a chance to cool off and think about the rule violation. The time-out method has many variations. The child can be requested to sit in a chair in the corner, but many children get up. If the child is required to face the corner, parents can keep a young child in the corner for the stated time. With older children, parents may want to add the rule that if the child does not comply with time out for one parent during the day, making the presence of both parents necessary, then the child will spend twice the amount of time in time out. The time need not be long. For young children, the number of minutes in time out should equal the number of years in age. It is best to have only two or three behaviors requiring time out at any one time. Otherwise, a child may spend a great deal of time in the corner for too many different things. Furthermore, both parents and all caregivers need to agree on the two or three things that will lead to time out so the child receives punishment consistently.

When children get older and have many toys and recreational pleasures in their rooms, such as stereos and computers, restriction to their room is not an effective punishment. For these children, it is better to substitute extra work or chores that have a constructive outcome such as cleaning the garage or devoting time to a community activity.

Ineffective Forms of Discipline

A review of over three hundred studies⁹⁷ identifies four kinds of problems in disciplining children: (1) inconsistent discipline, referring to inconsistency both on the part of one parent and between two parents; (2) irritable, harsh, explosive discipline (frequent hitting and threatening); (3) low supervision and low involvement on the part of the parent with the child; and (4) inflexible, rigid discipline (use of a single form of discipline for all transgressions regardless of seriousness). All four forms of ineffective discipline are related to increases in children's aggressive, rule-breaking behavior that then frequently leads to social difficulties with peers.

The Use of Physical Discipline

Parents do not like to spank, and they do not consider it effective discipline.⁹⁸ Children believe parents have a right to spank, but they do not like it; it hurts their feelings and makes them feel angry and upset.⁹⁹ Health-care professionals and social scientists recommend against it.¹⁰⁰ Yet, the majority of parents have spanked children at one time or another.¹⁰¹ How can we decrease or eliminate this behavior that no one wants to continue?

Definition of Levels of Physical Discipline First, we must distinguish among forms of physical discipline. Physical discipline is often divided into two categories: (1) mild spanking, defined as a slap or two with the flat of the hand on the buttocks or extremities without causing any physical injury to the child and normatively used with young children between ages two and six, and (2) abuse, including beating, kicking, and punching that results in injury to the child.¹⁰²

Even though these two categories seem clear-cut, researchers face difficulties in classifying parents with regard to their use of physical discipline, and therefore, understanding of its use is more difficult than we would like.¹⁰³ First, as self-reporters of physical discipline, parents may not be accurate. Second, parents are often asked only whether and how often they spank within a specified period of time, such as the preceding week, and the behavior that week may not have been typical. Although researchers think that these errors cancel each other out, they do not know for sure. Third, parents are rarely asked how severely they spank their child, so whether the physical punishment is mild, harsh, or abusive remains unclear.

Prevalence and Frequency of Physical Discipline When asked whether they have ever spanked their child, between 63 percent and 94 percent of parents say they have.¹⁰⁴ While spanking has decreased over the past three decades, the vast majority have still spanked a child.¹⁰⁵ In two large-scale studies, about two-thirds of parents of preschoolers aged three to five had spanked their child in the previous week, with an average of one to three spankings, depending on the sample and subgroup.¹⁰⁶

In a survey of parents of children five to fifteen years of age, 63 percent said they had used physical punishment. In a telephone survey, caregivers for 60 percent of children reported that they used physical punishment and minor physical violence

(pushing, grabbing, shoving, and slapping), and 10 percent reported one or more instances of physical abuse or severe violence, consisting of kicking, biting, or hitting with a fist.¹⁰⁷

Spanking starts early in life. About 50 percent of parents report that they had spanked their child of under one year of age one or more times in the preceding week.¹⁰⁸ Spanking increases in the years from two to five, when between 60 and 65 percent of parents report having spanked a child. Beginning at age five, spanking decreases, so only about one-third of parents report having spanked their child in the previous week; by ages nine or ten, that number drops to about 20 percent. Parents also report giving preschoolers, on average, more spankings per week (three) than they give older children (two).¹⁰⁹

Characteristics of Parents Who Use Physical Discipline

Parents who are young, single, and under financial stress are more likely to spank than are older, married parents who have financial resources.¹¹⁰ Parents who experience daily frustrations with children and have psychological problems report more spanking, and, as noted, 83 percent of middle-class parents in one study and 94 percent of middle-class parents in another used physical punishment.¹¹¹

Mothers are more likely to use physical means of discipline than are fathers, perhaps because they do more of the daily child care.¹¹² African American parents are more likely to use physical punishment than are European American or Latino parents.¹¹³ People who live in rural areas and in the southern part of the United States are more likely to use physical means of discipline than are parents in urban areas and the northern part of the United States.¹¹⁴ Parents who identify themselves as religiously conservative report more frequent physical discipline than do those who do not identify themselves as religious conservatives,¹¹⁵ and Catholics report less spanking than do Protestants.¹¹⁶ Physical discipline is more likely, then, when parents are under stress or when they hold more traditional or conservative values.

Characteristics of Children Who Receive Physical Discipline

As noted, preschool children are more likely to receive physical discipline than are elementary and high school students. Boys are more likely to be spanked than girls—in one study, 67 percent of boys received spankings, compared with 57 percent of girls.¹¹⁷ Children described as having difficult temperaments and being noncompliant received more spankings than did other children. Spankings also occurred more frequently in families in which parents and children argued and in which parents had fewer supports.

Reasons Given for Spanking Parents were most likely to use spanking and hitting when children were out of control, disobedient, or disrespectful.¹¹⁸ Four factors related to parents' use: (1) parents' belief in its usefulness, (2) parents' own experience with it as a child, (3) an authoritarian style of parenting, and (4) children's problems of aggressiveness and acting out. Although 93 percent justified its use,

85 percent of those who used it said they would rather not. They felt they were angry when they did it and that it upset the children; they wished they had alternatives.

Of concern to the researchers was the fact that parents continued its use despite their discomfort with it and its doubtful value. Parents seemed to rely on it as a continuation of their own childhood experience of physical punishment rather than to institute change and learn new methods. The investigators were concerned that the children in the sample would continue the practice for the same reason.

Effects of Physical Discipline There is no doubt that physical abuse is related to many difficulties for children (see Chapter 16). Here we focus on the effects of mild physical discipline.

Diana Baumrind believes that the effects of a spanking, which she defines as a slap or two with the flat of the hand on the buttocks or the extremities, depends on the context of the parent-child relationship.¹¹⁹ Much research supports this position. The most recent study involved data collected from 1,990 children over a six-year period as part of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. It included a sizable number of African American and Latino parents as well as European American parents.¹²⁰

In this study, mothers were categorized into three groups—no spanking in the last week, spanking once in the last week, and spanking more than once in the last week—when their children were four years of age and at two-year intervals over the next six years. When children were four, there was no relationship between the use and frequency of spanking and the child's behavior problems. Some children with few behavioral problems received many spankings, and some children with many behavioral difficulties received no spankings.

Spanking, however, increased behavioral difficulties over time. Although the behavior problems of all children increased from age four to ten, those whose mothers continued to spank had more behavior problems than those who had not been spanked, unless moderating influences were present. When parents increased their spanking in these years, the increase in problems was greater than when spanking decreased or stayed the same. The findings were the same for all groups, so the effects of spanking did not differ as a result of ethnicity.

Children's mothers were also described in terms of their emotional warmth and supportiveness. Children with warm and supportive mothers had fewer behavior problems. Furthermore, as the authors concluded,

Although spanking can have a negative impact on children's socioemotional functioning over time, this effect is moderated by the emotional context in which such spanking occurs. When spanking occurs in the context of strong overall emotional support for the child, it does not appear to contribute to a significant increase in behavior problems.¹²¹

Although a large review of studies in 2002 revealed difficulties with aggressive behavior and social relationships, that review included moderate and abusive physical discipline that led to more serious concerns.¹²² When that review focused on mild physical punishment, the connection with difficulties disappeared. We can conclude then that parents who have positive, warm relationships with their

children and use reasoning and mild physical discipline with young children from ages eighteen months to about five years do not appear to be placing these children at risk of long-term harm. Physical punishment in the absence of a warm relationship appears to contribute to an increase in children's behavior problems. Beyond age five, parents are well advised to find other disciplinary strategies.

Should We Ban or Outlaw Physical Discipline? Social scientist Murray Straus wishes to ban physical discipline in schools and at home because of the potential for abuse and because it is related to aggressiveness among children and to a more violent society.¹²³ He cites statistics from a national, representative sample of children revealing that the more corporal punishment a child receives in middle childhood and early adolescence, the greater the probability of the child's being a delinquent. Other social scientists such as Baumrind believe that research does not support a blanket injunction against spanking, as there are "no documented harmful long-term effects."¹²⁴ Furthermore, she points out that in Sweden, where physical punishment was outlawed at home and at school in 1979, both parental physical abuse of children and violent acts by teenagers increased.

How Can We Decrease Physical Discipline? Gerald Patterson and Philip Fisher describe a vicious behavioral cycle that physical discipline reinforces.¹²⁵ When children do not comply, parents argue and then use physical discipline. When children comply, parents see that such discipline "works" and are therefore encouraged to use it again. Sometimes though, during arguments, parents threaten physical punishment but do not carry it out because of children's loud protests. Thus, children are encouraged to protest loudly in the next encounter. In this way, parents and children train each other to escalate to a maximal level of protests and punishments. So, ending physical punishment relies on changes in both parents' and children's behavior.

Parents start the process of change by using positive disciplinary techniques that create a collaborative family atmosphere, as described in Chapter 2 and earlier in this chapter. Parents pay attention to children's positive behaviors and devote time to playing games. When parents discipline children, they use nonphysical means of contracting, earning privileges, and time outs for behaviors that must be stopped. They use these techniques consistently, without anger or criticism or belittling the child, and they supervise children to make sure children follow through with behaviors. Even if children protest loudly, parents persist with nonphysical discipline. Gradually, parents and children emerge from their vicious cycle of escalating conflict and physical discipline.

Discouraging the use of physical discipline, while a useful first step, does not automatically put in place the strategies of supportive parenting unless parents follow Patterson and Fisher's suggestions. Pediatrician Robert Chamberlin identifies the use of physical punishment as just one risk factor related to poor outcome for children. Because the accumulation of risk factors is what causes the most damage, he believes that communities and professionals need to join with parents to promote the "affectionate and cognitively stimulating types of parenting behavior that appear more directly related to positive developmental outcomes rather than focus