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Columnist

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Annie Keeling: Change a child's behavior, attitude without punishment



Childhood Days

This week on a popular parenting podcast, the educator talked about consequences.

He gave the example of his two kids bickering in the car's back seat.

He asked them to look out the window and not at each other.

If they didn't do that, he was going to pull over, get his wooden spoon, and spank them.

Wait, what?

Children learn manners and character through our modeling.

What is the educator in the podcast really showing — that people are for hitting; that it's okay for one person to use power over another to get that person to do something; that children need threats and fear to learn and grow?

Punishment

Providing an unpleasant, even painful, experience — like threats, yelling, removing privileges, humiliation, or isolation — are ways that parents attempt to get children to change their behavior.

The punisher causes the child to suffer in order to teach her a lesson.

I am always surprised when parents say, "No hitting," to their child as they take a swipe at him — or yell at a child to be quiet.

Showing one behavior to our children while expecting them to do another undermines our effectiveness.

To be clear, using punishment produces immediate results.

That's why its use continues.

But one parent recently asked me, "If punishment is so effective, how come I have to keep doing it over and over?"

It's true. Those results are short-term.

And at what cost?

Children who are punished often become calloused to the pain and defiant against the one who punished them — or internalize the negative experience in unhealthy ways.

How does this help the child learn to problem-solve from the inside, and how will she learn to be reliable with her behavior when the punisher is absent?

Since 1857, there have been numerous studies that prove punishment doesn't work even though it is the traditional parenting strategy of our culture.

I am fortunate that my father has made it his life's work to develop another way and teach it to myself and others.

Emotional Regulation

First, even very young children can begin to learn emotional regulation.

Someone who can't manage their emotions can't manage their behavior.

Many feelings feel yucky.

Kids may try to stuff the discomfort but feelings like worry, shame and fear bubble up and out.

Then the reptilian survival brain goes on high alert and children check out, run away or fight.

We can help our children by building our connection rather than tearing it down.

Coach children to identify emotions as you offer empathy and understanding. (More on this next month.)

Stop Their World

Misbehaviors — I prefer “off-track behaviors” — must be dealt with in some way by responsible parents.

It's possible to do this with respect and connection. The use of consequence is part of this, but one kind works better than others.

Four types of consequences

1. Natural: The direct results of our own actions like tripping on shoelaces if we don't tie them.
2. Punitive: Administering physical or psychological pain in order to change a behavior.
3. Logical: Delivered as a result of logical thinking, for example, a child is late and misses dinner. She is sent to bed without eating as a reaction to her being late. This can seem justified as logical, but still relies on the child's suffering to create behavior change.
4. Educational: Off-track behaviors are viewed as teaching opportunities with chances for practice and learning. The parent stops the child's world (current desire or activity comes to a halt) and supports the child in making a behavior change from the inside — as opposed to the parent imposing the change from the outside.

Educational consequences

1. A Good Problem: The child's behavior clearly shows you what he needs to learn and you need to teach.
2. Not in Trouble: The child is not in trouble or “bad.” He or she needs to learn a new behavior within the range of his or her ability and development.
3. Integrity: Model the 3R's — respect, responsibility, and reliability — in your daily life.
4. Intervention: You do not have to wait-and-see for a behavior change or hope someone else evokes that from your child. You can learn to intervene by stopping the child's world and providing pro-active practice opportunities in order to teach a new positive behavior.
5. The Child is Responsible for His or Her Own Learning: The child is given an opportunity to start up his world again by showing the new behavior that he's learned.

Let's revisit the car and the recurring behavior of backseat bickering.

Planning ahead, the parent lets the kids know the new plan.

They will practice a looking-out-the-car-window game in the driveway. (Making things fun helps kids learn.)

When everyone shows they can do that, then it's off to the park.

If they start fighting, then it's time to go home and practice.

“Oh no, we’ll play the game. We want to go to the park,” say the kids. And they get a chance to show what they’ve learned.

The kids’ world (getting to the park) will start up again when there is improvement.

Even when children are pushing our buttons and there are feelings spinning around inside us, we can use the self-control we want to model for our kids and respectfully teach behaviors.

A child’s changes in attitude and behavior can be taught without punishment.

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