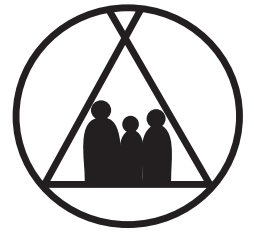




Principles of Child Rearing



Something Better Than Punishment

*Adapted from
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(Alabama A & M and Auburn University)
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When we think of discipline, we may think of threats, and punishment.

They may be the most common ways that parents/caregivers deal with their children's misbehavior.

What is wrong with threats and punishment? They teach children bad things. Can you think of some bad things that are taught to children by the use of threats and punishment?

Consider threats. It is common for parents/caregivers to get frustrated with their children and yell at them. "If you do that one more time, I'm going to whip you, young man! "I've told you a thousand times. If I have to tell you once more . . ." These types of threats are bad because they might insult children. They are likely to make the child feel dumb and put-down. The child may feel angry with the parent for treating him that way. Threats are also bad because they may tell the children that we yell a lot but we never do anything. Consider the following story.

A mother was loading her children in the car to go to the store. Just as she got them all in

the car, the neighbor came over to talk to her. As the two ladies talked, the children became restless. One of the boys began to climb out the car window. The mother yelled for him to get back in the car. Then she returned to talking with the neighbor. The boy sat in the window and played. The mother yelled at him to get in the car and threatened to spank him. He sat still while his mother yelled at him, but as soon as she returned to talking, he climbed out the window onto the hood of the car. The mother continued to talk to the neighbor.

This boy did not think his mother was very serious. She yelled a lot. But she never did anything unless she became really angry. It's common for parents/caregivers to be yelling, "Don't touch that!" "Leave her alone." "Go away." Using threats may teach children that parents are unkind and that they don't mean what they say.

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There are also problems with punishment. Sometimes parents punish because they are angry. They may spank their children in anger. What does spanking teach a child? For many children it teaches them that the world is a cruel place. It may also teach them that parents are mean. It may teach them that it is all right for big people to hurt little people. That's not what we want to teach our children. The most effective parents/caregivers rarely or never use spanking.

When you spank a child for inappropriate behavior, you may believe making the child suffer, teaches him or her not to repeat those inappropriate behaviors. Usually, it results in the child feeling angry or unsafe. Or it may teach the child not to behave inappropriately when the parent is present. It does not teach the child to be helpful, have self-control, or feel safe.

There is something better than making children suffer. It is teaching. We want to teach our children that rules are important, that people can work together and solve problems without using physical punishment.

Teaching is more than talking. It includes how we act. In this publication, there are some ideas to help you more effectively teach children respect for rules. You can use these suggestions to find better ways to discipline your children ways to be sure you are helping, never harming your children. You can help your children develop into strong, caring people, of whom you will be proud.



Be careful about the rules you make

Sometimes we make too many rules. For instance, the lady who yelled at her children to stay in the car while she talked to the neighbor might have been wiser to talk to the neighbor later, or to give the children something to do while she talked, or to let the children play for a few minutes on the lawn until she was really ready to go. Those would have been better rules than just asking the children to sit still while she talked.

Another place where parents/caregivers have trouble is the grocery store. Sometimes parents (and children) are tired and frustrated as they enter the store. Mom may ask her one-year-old to sit in the grocery cart, be quiet, and not touch anything while she shops. Is that reasonable? Or would it be more reasonable to give the child a toy to play with, or to talk with the child, let the child hold purchases that will not break as she sits in the cart? The child may enjoy holding the broccoli and talking about it as mother selects other purchases. An older child may be sent to get the milk or corn flakes for the family.

Another example: We sometimes ask our children to sit quietly with nothing to do while we visit. This may not be reasonable for most children. Maybe a child could play with a doll, look at a book or draw. Can you think of other things we ask children to do that may not be reasonable?

If we make rules that are sensitive to children's needs,

it will teach them to respect rules and to see their family's world as a safe place.

Sometimes the best rules are a result of a discussion between the parent/caregiver and the child. A parent/caregiver might say to the child: "I feel frustrated when you don't take care of the dishes right after dinner because the table doesn't get cleared and we can't use the table."

What do you suggest?" The parent/caregiver and child might work on the rule together until they agree. Perhaps the child should be allowed to do some chore other than dishes. It may be that their favorite television show comes on right after dinner and they should be allowed to watch television for 30 minutes before doing the dishes. If you cannot agree on a rule, the parent may have to say, "Let's go by my rule until we can think of a better one."

Emily wanted to go to a high school dance. We felt that she was too young. We proposed that she has a non-alcoholic party with her friends at our house instead of going to the dance. She thought it was a dumb idea. But she couldn't suggest anything that all of us felt good about. She had the non-alcoholic party at our house. She and her friends had a good time.



Enforce rules consistently

I remember seeing a mother tell her boy to stop picking at the cake that was on the table. But he kept picking. She kept shouting. He kept picking. She kept shouting . . .

The mother could have given the boy a piece of cake right away. Or, if the rule is important, it should be enforced.

When parents make rules they don't enforce, children get the idea that we are not serious about rules. The mother might not be wise to leave the cake on the table in front of a hungry child. But if she asks the child to leave the cake alone and he does not, she might move the cake to the cupboard and distract the child with a different activity: "Son, please help me get out the plates." If the child insists on trying to climb to the cake, then the parent either needs to get him some dinner or take him to his room.

Being consistent in enforcing rules does not mean that the parent/caregiver cannot adapt to circumstances. We make allowances for tiredness, age, influence of other children, and so on. Consistency means that when we make a rule that we think is reasonable and when a child violates that rule, the child will normally experience the promised result.

One mother found that when she went to the grocery store her children would whine and cry for candy. Sometimes she would give them candy. Sometimes she would get mad. She decided to be more consistent. She made the rule that when she took a child to the grocery store she would get the child a small box of animal cookies to eat while they were in the store but she would not buy them any candy. She consistently held to the rule. The kids stopped begging for candy.



Use consequences

Consequences are different from punishment. Punishment hurts children. It makes them angry. Consequences teach children. They show the child that when she does certain things, certain things will happen.

Each of the children has assigned chores. If the children have not finished their chores by the time we sit down for dinner, they may not join us until the chores are finished. If they start to whine, we ask them to go to their rooms until they can get along with the family.

Consequences must not be used when a child is in danger. It is not appropriate to teach children the dangers of a hot stove or busy traffic by allowing them to touch the stove or wander into traffic. But in many things we allow our children choices.

We like our children to have clean rooms. Our son likes a messy room. We finally decided that the reasonable consequence for a messy room is for him to live with the mess. We close his door if it drives us crazy. Once in a while we make a request that he clean.

Using consequences can take a lot of wisdom. The objective is to allow children to see how their choices affect their lives. "Consequences" should not be used to punish.

Beth had a hard time getting up on time for school. We were always shouting at her and threatening her. Finally we bought her an alarm clock and

told her that if she missed the bus she would be walking to school. She almost immediately became very good at getting herself up on time.

Learning to use consequences effectively is very difficult. Think of problems you often have with your children. Can you think of appropriate consequences for them to teach them the importance of following the rule? Are the consequences you have chosen a natural and reasonable result of their choices? Do the consequences allow you to avoid nagging and punishing? Learning how to use natural consequences may be one of the most important skills that parents can learn.



Give children real choices

If a child kicks the puppy, we can offer the child a choice: "We don't kick dogs. Would you like to kick a ball or play with the puppy? Either choice is fine."

Sometimes children resist us because we try to force them to do things. When we do not give them choices they are more likely to rebel.

We used to have trouble getting Sara to go to bed. It helped to give her a choice. We asked, "Would you like Daddy to tuck you in or would you like Mommy to tuck you in?" or "Would you like to pick a storybook for me to read to you, or would you like me to pick one?" If she said that she did not want to go to bed, we repeated the same question.

We should give children choices only when we feel that either choice is acceptable. We do not let a small child decide to play with knives or do something dangerous.



Keep it positive

Sometimes children act up because they want us to notice them. They are especially likely to act up if it seems that it is the only way they can get attention.

Tommy was always whining and pulling on his dad's pant leg. The dad would get angry because it seemed that his little boy always wanted his attention. One day he decided to take more time for his son. When his son would pull on his pant leg he would pick him up and talk to him, take a walk with him, or play a game with him. He found that his son whined far less.

Sometimes we get so caught up in enforcing our rules that we start to use force.

Sarah could not get Melissa to take her nap. Sometimes she would yell at her or lock her in her room to get her to take a nap. But that only made Melissa

angry. Gwen felt bad about the conflict she and her daughter were having about naps. Sarah found that she could read Melissa a story or start her watching a movie on television. Melissa would fall asleep without any battle. Or Sarah could ask her to play quietly on her bed during rest time.

This mother learned how to get her daughter to get a rest without fighting with her. A mother should also be sensitive to the age at which a child no longer needs to take a nap. Distracting a child can also be a very useful way to redirect the child.

Tommy was playing on the floor with pans, making a lot of noise. Normally I can stand the noise. But one day it was driving me crazy. Rather than jerk the pans away from him, I got out the play dough, went to the table and started to make things with it. He became interested and left the pans to join me.

Behavior problems with children can be divided into two groups: the once-in-a-while problem and the frequent problem. Once-in-a-while problems can be dealt with by using the five suggestions in this publication. If your child has a frequent

behavior problem that you cannot control with these ideas and seems to get worse in spite of all your efforts, you should talk to a professional such as a counselor or social worker. It is wise to get help before a problem becomes so big that it affects your relationship with your child.

To teach our children to behave well we must work at it. We can learn to make reasonable rules, enforce them consistently, use consequences appropriately, teach children to make good choices, and keep the relationship positive. Because child rearing is so challenging, we should continue looking for better ideas for interacting with our children by talking to other parents, reading about child rearing, and taking a class on child rearing. It is worth all the effort to develop loving relationships with our children while teaching them to become strong, caring adults.

For more information, contact your county office of the NDSU Extension Service.

Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.



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