Parents typically love their children and are deeply concerned for their well being. However, parents rarely have any formal training concerning how to raise children; too many go into parenthood with significant questions unanswered: What is the best way to teach children? How do we help them avoid life’s pitfalls? How do we help them develop high standards, values, social skills, and other characteristics needed for success? How do we discipline them in a loving, positive manner? If parents do not know how to respond to misbehavior, they sometimes revert to coercive methods such as harsh punishments or threats. Unfortunately, too many children grow up in an environment where coercive, punitive disciplinary practices have unintentionally become the family norm. We need to think seriously about the consequences of such environments.

A Perspective for Viewing Punishments and Environments

For a moment, think of threats and punishment as electric shocks. Most of us have experienced an electric shock. We immediately pull away, trying to escape the pain. As a result of the pain we instinctively try to avoid future shocks. Some shocks are mild and have little effect beyond mild irritation; others deliver a firm jolt. It’s not necessarily the effect of a few mild shocks or a single strong shock that causes concern, but the frequency of occurrence. If we have regularly experienced shocks under certain conditions or in particular situations we develop automatic negative reactions to those circumstances.

Similarly, punishments may be mild—lightly stinging little reminders that some boundary of safety has been crossed or some
An unwise action has been performed. Some punishments deliver a firm jolt—a sign that repetition of the behavior can be dangerous. Such mild or occasional shocks have been shown by research to be effective in reducing troublesome behavior. However, repeated incidences of harsh punishment might result in serious long-term effects: e.g., an aggressive teenager, a depressed and withdrawn child, or a dysfunctional family situation. Associating the family, particularly the parents, with pain, the child may avoid or defy, or both, anything related to the family situation. Even mild shocks such as criticism or reprimands, if experienced regularly over months and years, may cause negative associations resulting in negative attitudes: e.g., feelings of fear, guilt, stupidity, lack of self-confidence, hostility. Rather than creating home environments that invite youth to us, we may send them running away to escape and avoid shocks.

Identifying Risks

People think about and define punishment in different ways. When punishment is mentioned, some parents think about how they “grounded” their teenager last week. Others might think of spanking their 10-year-old son. Still others would focus on beatings or deprivations that might be classified as child abuse. We must consider the wide range of actions that come under the label punishment before generalizing about the effects of punishment. Most caring adults abhor the use of harsh, abusive punishments, but have varied reactions to the effects and effectiveness of milder forms of punishment.

Psychologists often define punishment as the delivery of an aversive stimulus following a specific behavior, resulting in a decrease in future incidents of that specific behavior. Many psychologists recommend that parents respond to behavior problems with mild aversive stimuli—e.g., timeout, response cost or fines, loss of privileges—in connection with positive reinforcement for correct behavior. Studies have affirmed their effectiveness. But unfortunately, the use of punishment may be seductive because punishment often has an immediate desired effect: that is, it may temporarily stop the offensive behavior. When parents are successful in stopping a child’s misbehavior, even temporarily, the act of punishing that behavior is reinforced, and they are likely to continue to use punishment and threats of punishment in the future. And punishments may escalate in frequency and severity, particularly when administered by angry parents without any attempt at positive reinforcement.

Research done by Murray Sidman and others has demonstrated that instead of producing positive outcomes, punishing a child on a regular basis often produces undesirable side effects. Many adults fail to understand that children who are managed through punishment that is either continual or unduly harsh will often respond with antisocial behavior, including aggression. Typically these children attempt to escape and avoid the person delivering punishment. Not understanding how to avoid the shock within the situation, the child avoids the situation altogether. This side effect is potentially toxic because a loving, concerned parent may inadvertently drive the child away and lose future opportunities to have a positive influence on the child’s life. Such children often become non-compliant, aggressive, deviants. They escalate the contention that already exists in their homes.

The damage of the negative home environment soon extends beyond the home. The two major side effects of punishment, escape and avoidance, extend to school and on to society. Children who have become suspicious and fearful of their parents become suspicious of others as well. They don’t form or maintain friendships, and when they attend school their misbehavior creates negative relationships with teachers and peers. Parents, teachers, and other youth either avoid the contentious child or react negatively—reactions that only compound the problem. The child becomes more anti-social, avoiding caring individuals—such as parents, teachers, or counselors—who could assist in positive behavior change. These children gravitate to other anti-social youth.

Once the pattern of misbehavior, shocks, and escape or retribution followed by additional shocks has been established, it continues. Think of the many ways schools can deliver punishing shocks: Students are often laughed at and ridiculed, teachers may yell at them or make disparaging remarks, a child who doesn’t understand or can’t do the work receives a paper with a failing grade.
marked in red, or a discouraged and misbehaving student is sent to the office. The natural response is to avoid school. Go late, stuff, get sick—anything to keep away from the “shocks.” Suspension from school is a welcome relief for some students, and may be for the teacher who gets her “shocks” from the misbehaving students.

But what is accomplished? Instead of learning how to handle life’s shocks by adapting and problem solving, the student learns to distrust and avoid all sources of pain. According to Murray Sidman, we escape by tuning people out or by dropping out—dropping out of school, dropping out of the family, dropping out of society, or even dropping out in its ultimate form—suicide.

Creating a Safer Environment

If the home environment is rich in love, praise, and support, occasional use of reasonable punishment can help parents teach and direct a child. If the shock is mild, the child is reassured that the error resulting in the shock can be easily corrected. If someone who obviously loves the child soothes the pain, the brief pain is bearable and can be instructive.

Ezra Taft Benson suggested some of the components of this safe environment:

“Praise your children more than you correct them. Praise them for even their smallest achievements. Encourage your children to come to you for counsel with their problems and questions by listening to them every day.” If children’s interactions with their parents are predominantly positive, they do not automatically associate a shock with the parents’ presence, nor do they avoid the relationship as one that inevitably results in pain. To establish this positive overall tone to the relationship, adults should try to have at least four to eight positive interactions with their child to offset each incident of criticism or punishment.

Tracing the Consequences of Unsafe Environments: A Case Study

Children’s typical anti-social behavior patterns developed in harsh, negative environments can be seen in the following case study of a 13-year-old girl who casually announced to her school counselor, “I’m going to get pregnant.”

“Why?” the counselor responded with a startled expression. Then the pain flowed from the troubled youth: “I hate school. The students make fun of me. I don’t have any friends. The teachers yell at me and tell me I’m stupid. I’m always getting in trouble. But they won’t let me drop out of school. If I get pregnant, they’ll have to let me drop out.”

And what about the home? Are “shocks” experienced there, or is home a refuge from pain and frustration? Ideally the home should be a refuge, but for many students the home is the place where the punishment began. The 13-year-old girl said to her counselor, “I hate my home and family. I can never satisfy my parents. They are always yelling at me. Sometimes when Dad drinks, he hits me. No one loves me or cares about me. If I get pregnant, I’ll get married, leave home. Then I’ll have someone to love me.” Will life improve? Will the pain go away if this young woman gets pregnant? No, most likely it will increase. Are her perceptions of how painful school is and how unloved and abused she is at home accurate? Perhaps or perhaps not, but that doesn’t really matter because she believes they are true. She feels the pain and wants to escape. She has neither the skills nor the inclination to handle the shocks in any other way.

Positive Alternatives

There are positive alternatives to
coercive parenting: ways to teach about electricity without administering deliberately abusive shocks. Even extreme, challenging antisocial behavior has been changed radically through positive approaches. Children rarely learn socially appropriate behaviors by being punished for misbehavior, particularly if the punishment is harsh or unreasonable. To correct misbehavior in positive, lasting ways, children need to be taught in a caring, nurturing manner. Reasonable punishment may be included with the teaching if it is appropriate to the situation and if the environment is positive. Children need to learn to handle the situations that result in shock so that they can deal constructively with such circumstances and do not need to avoid or withdraw from them.

There are many alternatives. We have selected three proven, powerful parenting strategies to discuss here: building relationships, teaching correct behavior, and strengthening behavior through positive feedback. These parenting strategies may be used alone or accompanied by mild forms of punishment administered without anger or coercive purposes.

Recognizing that Parents are Teachers
All parents are teachers. In fact, they constantly teach their children whether they recognize it or not. All of us teach by our actions, our example. Our teaching is more effective when we follow a few basic principles. First, we must treat those we teach with respect, especially our own children. We should speak to them in an appropriate tone of voice and make sure that our messages are clearly and precisely explained. Third, we should remember that learning best occurs under pleasant circumstances. When there is a positive relationship between a parent and a child, the child is far more likely to listen to the parent, value what the parent has to say, and accept the teaching. Positive relationships are the foundation for successful parent-child interactions and effective parental teaching.

Building Positive Relationships
Mutual trust, respect, and consideration characterize a positive parent-child relationship and create a home environment in which learning readily occurs. If a parent-child relationship is negative, possibly based on intimidation, power struggles, or manipulation, family members may spend most of their time and effort battling each other rather than engaging in positive interactions. Teaching and learning are not likely to occur under these negative conditions. Strong relationships facilitate learning in many ways. If a child feels comfortable in the presence of the parents, he or she will want to spend time with the parents and will naturally want to please them by doing what they request. A home environment that is positive will most likely increase opportunities for parental teaching, as children have more of a tendency to adopt the values of their parents when they trust and respect them.

Some people think that positive relationships occur naturally, and sometimes they do, but in most cases relationships require effort. First, the foundation for all relationships must be time: time spent together. It is crucial that parents spend time with their children, not just "quality" time but "quantity" time. Family time is important, but individual one-on-one time is essential for developing and maintaining positive relationships. As parents we have to make sure that we are available when children want to talk and share their thoughts, not just when we feel we have time or when a period of time is convenient for us.

Parents must also be conscious of their attitudes and behavior patterns during time spent with their children. Research has demonstrated that certain adult behaviors destroy positive relationships...
while others build positive relationships. For example, when a young person shares experiences with an adult who displays anger, uses accusing or blaming statements, makes mean and insulting remarks, acts bossy, makes demands, and talks only about mistakes, relationships are quickly destroyed. On the other hand, when an adult speaks in a pleasant tone of voice, offers to help, compliments performance, treats the youth with fairness, shows concern and enthusiasm, and treats the child politely, relationships are strengthened. One of the most important positive behaviors is the way in which we listen to our children and pay attention to what they value and feel. As we spend time with them working, talking, playing, listening, and so forth, we should always be positive and provide caring, nurturing feedback. And of course humor is important in building relationships. We should joke and have fun, but we should make sure that our humor is free of put-downs and sarcasm.

Teaching Correct Behavior
Children need discipline. Specifically, they need clear expectations and standards provided by responsible adults to help guide and direct their lives. How do we effectively discipline? An important start is to think of discipline as teaching rather than punishing. The word discipline comes from the Latin word disciplina, meaning “teaching, learning.” Discipline shares a common root with the word disciple: “one who accepts and helps to spread the teachings of another.” Webster’s dictionary includes phrases such as “training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character” and “to train or develop by instruction and exercise, especially in self-control.” Roget’s Thesaurus lists the following synonyms: (nouns) self-control, self-restraint, diligence, drill, exercise, practice, training; (verbs) instruct, train, teach, educate, school, tutor, prepare, drill, practice. The best discipline for misbehavior is to teach alternate positive behaviors.

Once parents have recognized the importance of their teaching and have begun building positive relationships with their children, it is helpful for them to learn some teaching strategies to be more effective with their children. Modeling is an important way of communicating to our children which behaviors we hope they will learn. By using a skill ourselves, we show our children that the skill is natural and is important and useful to us. Modeling occurs constantly throughout the day, in all of our interactions. When we are teaching specific skills, we should model what we want our children to do and then ask them to practice what we have demonstrated. Having children role play or practice allows us to check the child’s understanding of what has been taught and assess his or her ability to use the skill correctly. Going through the skill as we watch also provides an opportunity for the child to ask questions that may make aspects of the skill easier or clarify ways the skill may be modified for different situations. As the child practices the skill following our example, we can provide additional feedback and correction if the skill or behavior is weak or incomplete in some ways.

In introducing a new skill, a parent must plan the process and allow sufficient time. Remember that learning doesn’t come through lecturing but through doing. So teaching interactions should be kept short and to the point. The following steps can be helpful when planning to directly teach a child a new social behavior.

1. Name and describe the skill.
2. Give the child a reason why the skill is important.
3. Model the skill.
4. Have the child practice the skill.
5. Give feedback and praise for engaging in the practice activities.

This initial teaching opportunity will probably be insufficient to make this new skill a natural, habitual behavior. Internalizing the skill will require a great deal of practice and feedback. Try to “catch” the child using the skill and reinforce with praise and feedback. In commenting on the specific steps of the skill, explain also why using the skill was important in that particular situation. Thus praise becomes additional instruction.

Perhaps an illustration will clarify this approach. After observing your child demanding things from other children or adults, you decide to teach the child to make a polite request. The first step is to check your own behavior: ask yourself if you are making polite requests or just issuing demands. If some correction is needed in your own behavior, start there before attempting to teach the child.

Once you are comfortable with modeling polite requests, schedule time to teach the child, even if it is only a period of five minutes. Begin your teaching by creating a pleasant environment: possibly commenting on several of the child’s positive behaviors or empathizing with the challenges of the situation. Then get to the point of the lesson. It might sound something like this: “John, I want to talk to you about making polite requests when you want something from someone else. The best way to make a request is to do these things: (1) look the person in the eye; (2) say ‘please’ using a pleasant voice; (3) ask specifically for what you want; (4) say ‘thank you’ after receiving it; or (5) if the person says ‘no’ or doesn’t do as you ask, accept the response and do not be rude. When we ask politely, people are more likely to agree to do as we ask.” Then model making a polite request using the steps you have listed. Following the model, ask the child to make a polite request. If the child successfully demonstrates the behavior, give specific praise: i.e., “I like the way you looked at me, used a pleasant voice, said ‘please,’ made a polite request, and said ‘thank you.’” If the child left out steps, first praise the parts that were correct, then point out the steps that were forgotten, and finally have the child practice again.

After teaching the child, watch for opportunities to give instructive praise. If you observe the child making a polite request of a friend, pull the child aside and say, “John, I liked the way you asked Bill if you could use his ball. You looked at him, you used a pleasant voice, you said ‘please may I see the ball,’ and then you said ‘thank you’ when he offered it to you. I am sure he lent you his ball because you made such a polite request.” This method of praise provides both sincere positive feedback and an indirect reteaching of the skill.

We should anticipate that after our children have been taught they will still make mistakes. We can use corrective teaching following an application that was not correct. If the child is seen making a demand after being taught the skill for a polite request, this can be regarded as an opportunity for another teaching moment. Briefly restate what you saw, then review the skill for making a polite request and have the child practice it. Follow this practice with positive feedback and encouragement to use the skill in the future. Using this teaching approach may initially take time from the parent, but the rewards are great. The child becomes socially skilled, makes friends, gets along well with adults, and is set for success in life.

**Strengthening Behavior Through Positive Feedback**

Although providing positive feedback
has been included among the other steps, further emphasis is placed here because many parents don’t use sufficient praise. According to Neal A. Maxwell,

“We should . . . without being artificial, regularly give desired, specific praise. One of the reasons for doing this is that we are all so very conscious of our shortcomings that it takes a persistent pattern of appreciation to finally penetrate. We are certain sometimes, we do not really have a particular skill or attribute that we severely discount praise. One of the reasons that we need regular praise from ‘outside auditors’ is to offset the low level of self-acknowledgement most of us have. Flattery is a form of hypocrisy to be avoided, but in overreacting to it, some close the door to commendation.”

Giving praise, or positive feedback, is an important component of effective teaching. This positive feedback may be as simple as a smile or pat on a shoulder. It may take the form of a sincere specific praise statement. You also strengthen relationships by letting your children know that you care about them and that you recognize their positive acts. A child is more likely to accept criticism or correction from a parent in the context of a relationship that is primarily positive. Each positive interaction between a parent and child further builds the relationship and reinforces the teaching. We should praise our children frequently, far more often than we criticize them.

In summary, successful parenting requires diligent effort. If we avoid the use of punishment, particularly coercive forms, and focus on positive interactions, we will build strong, positive relationships while we teach high values and appropriate social behavior. We strengthen these behaviors through a steady diet of sincere, genuine praise. This combination is successful in both preventing and remedying misbehavior. Rather than administering deliberate shocks to help children avoid electrocution, teach them how to handle the equipment.

Giving praise, or positive feedback, is an important component of effective teaching.

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