

## **SPANKING OUR CHILDREN – HOW DO I DISCIPLINE MORE EFFECTIVELY**

**David Lowenstein, Ph.D.  
Psychologist**

Many parents seem to have significant difficulties with being consistent and structured in dealing with problems in their family. The presentation teaches ways to use consequences and problem solving as alternative approaches to handled conflicts. Information and techniques to move the focus of the problem to make the child/adolescent responsible for their actions and not the parent(s).

Widespread parental misconceptions about discipline and behavior may result in a growing number of overly aggressive, easily frustrated children, according to experts who surveyed more than 1,000 parents with youngsters 6 and younger. This nationwide survey, released last week, found 61 percent of the parents condone spanking as a regular form of punishment for young children, despite research indicating corporal punishment can be harmful. Fifty-seven percent of the parents said even a 6-month-old child can be spoiled, a belief the survey coordinators said is incorrect.

The parents who were surveyed parents showed an encouraging grasp of some key principles that emotional closeness is of vital importance and that experiences even in the first few months of life can have a significant effect. However, there is concern among mental health professionals about findings that suggested many parents had unrealistic expectations of behavior for example, expecting that a child of 15 months should be able to share toys.

Parents may be potentially raising overly aggressive children who react to situations with intimidation and bullying, instead of cooperation and understanding; children who won't be able to tolerate frustration, wait their turn or respect the needs of others.

Parents are consistently faced with the challenge of managing their children's behavior.

You can almost hear yourself saying these phrases:

"My child never listens to me!"

"She won't pick up her toys!"

"He won't clean his room!"

Such frustrated exclamations are all too familiar to many parents. This seem to be the major area of concern for all parents – BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT. When considering behavior management, adults often tend to focus on how children control (or do not control) themselves. However, by observing effective managers in a business setting, for example, we realize that effective management is implemented by the

individuals in charge, not by the people being managed. Effective behavior management is not so much about what children do. Instead, it involves adults' behavior, and research shows that adults vary in both discipline and caregiving styles.

### **Discipline Styles**

One common misconception about discipline is that discipline is synonymous with punishment. The Latin root of the word discipline, however, means "instruction" or "knowledge." Thus, discipline is really a process by which adults teach children and convey knowledge about appropriate behavior for various situations. However, some methods of discipline are better at achieving this than others. Research suggests that there are at least three discipline styles. The first, Power Assertive Discipline involves such adult behavior as spanking, withdrawal of privileges, and threats of punishment or physical harm. Children respond to adults' requests out of fear, rather than respect. Consequently, children's motivations for appropriate behavior are external, and they conform to expectations to avoid punishment. However, when children find themselves in situations where they will not be "caught," they are likely to engage in inappropriate behavior.

The second discipline style, Love Withdrawal, involves such adult behavior as refusals to speak or listen to children, threats to leave children, or expressions of dislike and disappointment. Adults who practice this discipline style often give children the proverbial "cold shoulder" when inappropriate behavior occurs. As a consequence, children conform to expectations because they fear abandonment or the loss of adults' love and affection. Like power-assertive discipline, love withdrawal produces external motivation for appropriate behavior.

The third discipline style, Induction, incorporates the true nature of discipline: teaching. Adults who practice induction provide children explanations for appropriate behavior as well as reasonable consequences for inappropriate behavior. Because children understand WHY certain actions are expected of them and others are prohibited, they internalize reasons for these behaviors. As a result, children's motivation to behave appropriately comes from within, and they are more likely to engage in expected behaviors even when they are in situations where they are not being watched and thus will not be "caught." An additional benefit of induction is that children will be more likely to understand the effects of their behaviors on others and exhibit empathy.

Research on discipline and caregiving styles indicates that cooperative communication is crucial in adults' interactions with children. Effective caregivers clearly convey high expectations to children and provide reasons for expected behaviors, while remaining receptive to the perspectives, suggestions, and needs of children. Additionally, effective caregivers are nurturing and responsive to children, even when mistakes occur, because they view discipline as a teaching and learning process.

Of course in some families children are more difficult and tend to be very aggressive. It has been found that when it comes to aggressive behavior, the foremost role models for

children are their parents. Despite the outside influence of the media and their peers, what kids see at home is the biggest determinant of how they behave.

What has consistently been found is that children who lived with both parents had significantly lower aggression scores. The better students got along with their parents, the less likely they were to fight. The more parents monitored students' activities and friends, the less aggressive their behavior. They noted a strong correlation between a student's aggression and how he perceived his parents felt about fighting. It has also been found that even though students who lived with both parents had the lowest aggression scores, low parental monitoring, poor relationship with parents, and perceived parental support for fighting were more predictive of aggression than family structure.

Some parents use physical punishment as a mean of behavior control. What has been found is that children spanked by their parents are twice as likely to develop drug and alcohol problems in adulthood. What has also been found through continued research is that children who were spanked or slapped had increased rates of anxiety disorders, anti-social behavior and depression.

#### **Ten Reasons Not To Hit Your Kids:**

- For the past several years, many psychiatrist, psychologists and social workers and parents have recommended that we seriously consider banning the physical punishment of children. The most important reason for this is that *“all people have the right to protection of their physical integrity, and children are people too.”*

##### ***1. Hitting children teaches them to become hitters themselves.***

- Extensive research data is now available to support a direct correlation between corporal punishment in children and aggressive or violent behavior in the teenage and adult years. Virtually all of the most dangerous criminals were regularly threatened and punished in childhood

##### ***2. Physical punishment gives the dangerous and unfair message that “might makes right.”***

- This may suggest that it is permissible to hurt someone else, provided they are smaller and less powerful than you are. The child then concludes that it is permissible to mistreat younger or smaller children. When he/she becomes an adult, he/she can feel little compassion for those less fortunate than he/she is, and fears those who are more powerful. This could hinder the establishment of meaningful relationships so essential to an emotionally fulfilling life.

##### ***3. Because children learn through parental modeling, physical punishment gives the message that hitting is an appropriate way to express feeling and solve problems.***

- If a child does not observe a parent solve problems in a creative and humane way, it can be difficult for him/her to learn to do this for themselves. For this reason, unskilled parenting often continues into the next generation.

4. ***“Spare the rod and spoil the child”, though much quoted is in fact a misinterpretation of Biblical teachings.***
  - While the “rod” is mentioned many times in the Bible, it is only in the Book of Proverbs that it is used in connection with parenting. One must remember that the Bible discusses the fact that children were seen as being close to God and it was urged never to unjustly punish or harm them.
5. ***Punishment interferes with the bond between parent and child, as it is not human nature to feel loving towards someone who hurts us.***
  - The true spirit of cooperation, which every parent desires, can arise only through a strong bond based on mutual feelings of love and respect. Punishment, even when it appears to work, can produce only superficially good behavior based on fear. In contrast, cooperation based on respect will last permanently, bringing many years of mutual happiness as the child and parent grows older.
6. ***Many parents never learned in their own childhood that there are positive ways of relating to children.***
  - When punishment does not accomplish the desired goals, and if the parent is unaware of alternative methods, punishment can escalate to more frequent and dangerous actions against the child.
7. ***Anger and frustration, which cannot be safely expressed by a child, becomes stored inside and may come out at a later point in the child’s life.***
  - Anger that has been accumulating for many years can come as a shock to parents whose child now feels strong enough to express this rage. Punishment may appear to produce “good behavior” in the early years, but always at a higher price, paid by parents and by society as a whole, as the child enters adolescence and early adulthood.
8. ***Spanking on the buttocks, an erogenous zone in children, can create in the child’s mind an association between pain and sexual pleasure thus leading to difficulties in adulthood.***
  - If a child receives little parental attention except when being punished, this will further merge the concepts of pain and pleasure in the child’s mind. A child in this situation will have little self-esteem, believing he deserves nothing better.
9. ***In many cases of so called “bad behavior,” the child is simply responding in the only way he/she can give their age and experience.***
  - Children want their parents undivided attention. In these busy times, few children receive sufficient time and attention from their parents, who are often distracted by their own problems and worries to treat their children with

patience and respect. It is surely wrong and unfair to punish a child for responding in a natural way to having important needs neglected.

**10. *Punishment distracts the child from learning how to resolve conflicts in effective and humane ways.***

- A punished child becomes preoccupied with feelings of anger and fantasies of revenge, and is thus deprived of the opportunity to learn more effective methods of solving the problem at hand. A punished child learns little about how to handle or prevent similar situation in the future. Gentle instruction, supported by a strong foundation of love and respect, is the only truly effective way to bring about commendable behavior based on strong inner values, instead of superficially “good” behavior based only on fear.

**Twenty Alternatives to Spanking**

**1. *Look for underlying needs:***

- (example) Give your child something to play with while waiting in line

**2. *Give information and reasons:***

- (example) If your child colors on the wall, explain why we color on paper only

**3. *Look for underlying feelings:***

- Acknowledge, accept and listen to feelings

**4. *Change the environment:***

- This is sometimes easier than trying to change the child

**5. *Find acceptable alternatives:***

- Redirect your child’s behavior

**6. *Demonstrate how you want your child to behave:***

- (example) If your child pulls a cat’s tail, show her how to pet a cat.
- Do not rely on words alone

**7. *Give choices rather than commands:***

- Decision-making empowers children; commands invite a power struggle.
- (example) Would you like to brush your teeth before or after putting on your PJ’s.

**8. *Make small concessions:***

- (example) I’ll let you skip brushing your teeth tonight because you’re tired.

**9. *Provide for a period of preparation:***

- Tell your child how you would expect him/her to behave
- Be specific
- Role-playing can help prepare for potentially difficult situations

**10. *Let natural consequences occur:***

- Don't rescue too much
- (example) a child who does not hang up her bathing suit and towel may find them still wet the next day

**11. *Communicate your own feelings:***

- Let your children know how their behavior affect you

**12. *Use a action when necessary:***

- (example) If your child insists on running across streets on your walks together, hold their hand tightly while explaining the dangers.

**13. *Hold your child:***

- Children who are acting aggressively or obnoxiously can benefit from firm but loving holding that allows them to channel their pent up feelings into healing tears

**14. *Remove your child from the situation, and stay with them:***

- Use the time for listening, sharing feelings, holding and conflict resolution

**15. *Do it together, be playful:***

- Many conflict situations can be turned into games

**16. *Defuse the situation with laughter:***

- Laughter helps resolve anger and feelings of powerlessness

**17. *Make a deal and negotiate:***

- (example) If you're ready to leave the playground and your child is still having fun, reach an agreement on the number of times she may go down the slide before leaving.

**18. *Do mutual conflict-resolution:***

- Discuss ongoing conflicts with your child, state your needs, and ask for their help in finding solutions
- Determine rules together
- Hold family meetings

**19. *Revise your expectations:***

- Young children have intense feelings and needs and are naturally loud, curious, messy, willful, impatient, demanding, creative, forgetful, fearful, self-centered and full of energy.
- Try to accept them as they are

**20. *Take a parental time-out:***

- Leave the room and do whatever is needed to regain your sense of composure and good judgment

- There are several ways that we can make children behave. One is by using force, another is using fear and a third is punishment. Unfortunately, these three methods imply that the caregiver is superior and should overpower the child. Rather than leading to a child with inner control, they make the child angry, resentful, fearful, and dependent on force.
- There is another way to discipline children. Though it may not appear to get the immediate results we might like, it is safer, more natural and humanistic. It is based on the assumption that children are by nature good, fair and honest and ultimately capable of responding to that, which is good, fair, and honest within us. This method is to treat the child with respect. It is treating the child as if he/she is as important a human being as you are. It is treating him/her with the same respect with which you wish for him to treat others, you and him or herself.
- Some researchers claim that every act of violence by an adult towards a child, no matter how brief or how mild, leaves a permanent emotional scar. The effect of these scars is cumulative. To some extent we can demonstrate this from personal experience. Most of us admit that the most indelible and most unpleasant childhood memories are those of being hurt by our parents.
- A 2001 Canadian research study funded by the Federal Government found that corporal punishment of children is associated with the following:
  - Increased level of aggression by the child
  - Increased frequency of child delinquency
  - Increased frequency of violence and crime in later life
  - Increased chance of child abuse
  - ✓ Institute for the Prevention of Child Abuse found that 85% of all cases of physical abuse resulted from some sort of over-discipline through the use of corporal punishment (spanking)