



"Naughty Kitty." The angry child with raised hand, the dead bird, the unrepentant cat...a perfect example of why punishment doesn't work. I inherited this picture from Ricky Wylie; it was painted by her great-aunt sometime before 1900.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Why Punishment Doesn't Work

by Karen Pryor¹

The kids are fighting, or making too much noise in the car; your toddler deliberately runs out into the street; your teenager flouts the household rules. And you have to put a stop to it. Whether the problem is dirty words, dirty clothes, or dirty tricks—in every household there are some behaviors that just cannot be tolerated. What do we do when these behaviors arise? We punish. We threaten, we coerce, we scold, we deprive. We may even strike out. When pushed hard enough, nearly every parent on the planet has felt the urge to slap and yell; and most of us have done it at least once.

Did you ever notice that it does not really work? Behavior that is punished may stop for an instant, but it will not necessarily stop forever. Nevertheless, punishment is humanity's favorite method of stopping behavior. We scold the child, beat the dog, dock the paycheck, fine the company, torture the dissident, invade the country. Yet, the child goes on whining, the dog still chases cars, the employee is tardy, the company is dishonest, the dissidents still protest, and things are not serene in Afghanistan.

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And what happens when we punish someone and then they go out and do the same thing again? Do we say, "Hmm, punishment isn't working. Let's try something else?" No. We punish harder. If a little scolding or penalty does not have an effect, why not try a bigger one. If whipping doesn't convert the heretic, try thumbscrews, or the rack. The worst thing about the escalation of punishment is that there is absolutely no end to it. The search for a punishment so intense that "maybe *this* one will work" has preoccupied humans since history began, and probably before.

Why Punishment Doesn't Work

One of the rules that psychologists have discovered about behavior is that whatever you do to change behavior must occur *during* the behavior, and not afterward. For example, a positive reinforcement, or pleasant consequence of an act, must be timed right in order to produce learning. Suppose you are in a hotel room and trying to turn on an unfamiliar TV. You touch all the likely-looking buttons and knobs until one of them produces a click and a picture, or at least a hum. From then on, this is the one that you will probably use. But what if each button took 15 seconds to work? You would have a difficult time figuring out which one produced the picture, and might have to continue trying them all every time you wanted to catch the news.

We can also change behavior with undesirable events, or negative reinforcement. Here too, the event must coincide with the behavior in order to produce learning. Suppose you are cooking in someone else's kitchen. The negative reinforcement of pain from the heat will quickly teach you which pan handles require a pot holder. From this experience you will develop learned behavior to protect yourself from the handles that get hot. If you could not feel the heat at the moment of contact, you would not know that you had been badly burned until later, when the blisters develop. So, without the immediate sensation of pain, you would have a hard time learning which objects on the stove are safe to touch and which ones are not.

Punishment is an unpleasant consequence of a behavior. But, like a burn that is not noticed until it blisters, it often does not

coincide with the behavior closely enough to produce learning. Spanking a roaming toddler after he returns to the sidewalk may intimidate or frighten him, but he will be more likely to connect the spanking with the sidewalk than with the traffic. Even if the child understands the verbal message explaining why he or she is being punished, the desired improvement may not take place. For example, a child who is punished for a bad report card cannot mitigate the punishment in the present. This is because people cannot change their actions of the past; one cannot do anything about a bad report card that one has already received. Furthermore, punishment teaches the child nothing about how to achieve better report cards.

The most any punisher can hope for is that the child's motivation will change, and that the child will try to alter future behavior in order to avoid punishment. That is a lot to ask, even of intelligent adults. We know that society's punishments and threats do not prevent adult misbehavior. Moreover, if a child's behavior is strongly motivated—snitching food when hungry, being part of the gang in adolescence—what the child does learn is to try to not get caught. Evasiveness increases rapidly under a punishment regime—a sad situation in a family setting, and not so great in society either.

How The Punisher Gets Reinforced

One reason why we keep thinking that punishment works is because sometimes the punished behavior stops, at least temporarily. *Punishment has the best chance of halting behavior if the subject understands which action is being punished, if the behavior is not well-established, and if the person can control the behavior in the first place.* (For example, punishment does not cure bedwetting.) The punishment is also more likely to be effective if it is a novel experience for the subject, a shock to which the person has not become hardened. A child who is scolded sharply the first time he or she crayons on the walls may stop defacing the house. A citizen who gets caught and fined for cheating on his income tax may not cheat again.

My parents punished me exactly twice throughout my upbringing. They scolded me once at age six for pilfering and

once at age fifteen for skipping school, which caused everyone to fear I'd been abducted. The extreme rarity of the punishment experience contributed vastly to the effect. Both behaviors stopped instantly.

When a punishment effectively halts a behavior, the sequence of events can be quite reinforcing for the punisher. The punisher may tend to sally forth confidently to punish again. I have seen punishment exhibited and defended by disciplinarian school teachers, bullying athletic coaches, domineering bosses, and well-intentioned parents. Often they reenact old harsh methods despite meager successes and many disappointments. And often they tend to neither notice nor accept the good results of others around them who are not using punishment at all. The repeated use of punishment by such practitioners can produce nasty side effects in the punished ones: fear, anger, resentment, resistance, and even hate—mental states definitely *not* conducive to learning improved behavior!

Alternatives That Work

One promising way to change behavior without punishment is to reinforce behavior that you *do* like. Sometimes this requires a lot of self-discipline. It is easy to call out "I told you not to slam the door!" every time the children come home with a bang; but it is another matter entirely to alert yourself to notice and say "thank you" when they come in quietly. Sometimes the behavior that needs reinforcing can be subtle and easily misunderstood. For example, a teen-ager who is testing the limits of family rules may really be trying to participate in family life in newly adult ways. Youngsters in this transition stage need to be responded to for making conversation, for being helpful, for the good things that they do.

All too often, parents assume that because doing chores pleasantly is expected of their children, the behavior deserves no comment or attention. Eventually the behavior may dwindle. After all, the child reasons, if I love my parents and want them to notice me, and if the only comment or attention I get is for being horrible, then this is the way I will be.

Three negative ways to change behavior, besides punishment, may occasionally be appropriate. The first, the "Shoot the

Animal" method, is to get rid of the doer, temporarily or permanently. Send the child to his room if he is disrupting company; tie up the dog so that it cannot chase cars. This method stops the undesirable behavior, but it does not teach desirable alternatives. Negative reinforcement can also provide a solution. With a load of cranky, tired, noisy kids in the car, I have been known to pull off the road and park on the shoulder until everyone is quiet enough to permit me to drive safely again. Simply ignoring the misbehavior until it goes away by itself is often the easiest way to cope. Parents sometimes tend to correct every annoying little thing that their young children do, without realizing that some behavior is self-limiting and will disappear on its own.

Of more value are the ways in which you can use positive reinforcement to get rid of behaviors that you do not want. For example, you can *substitute and reinforce permissible behaviors to take their place*. One mother told me that her 18-month-old son developed the habit of splatting his hands in his food on the high chair tray when he'd finished a meal, thus sending food all over the kitchen. Naturally, this brought his mother on the run—but always too late to prevent the mess. So, she watched him carefully and soon arrived at an incompatible behavior. She taught him to throw his arms in the air and cheer when he was finished eating. This brought Mama on the run too, but with laughs and hugs instead of a cross face and a washcloth. The substitute behavior turned out to be easier on the baby, the mother, and the kitchen.

You can also *reinforce the absence of the undesirable behavior*. When I have to spend time with children who have developed bad (parent-trained) habits such as whining or teasing, I pay a lot of attention to the times when they are quiet or pleasant. This way, they tend to be quiet and pleasant more and more often.

Finally, the most fundamental method of changing behavior without punishment is to *eliminate whatever is causing the behavior in the first place*. Take, for example, the familiar disaster of the toddler having a tantrum in the supermarket. Frequently, the underlying cause of the tantrum is hunger. The child may be

specifically yelling for the brightly displayed candy, but what he or she needs is food—and the sight and smell of all these edibles, now that the toddler is old enough to recognize them, is more than he or she can handle. Solution: Feed the children before you market.

The laws of how reinforcement changes behavior were worked out in psychology labs by research scientists. Applying these laws in real life, however, is a task for creative and imaginative teachers and parents. It requires imagination, thoughtfulness, self-discipline, and attention to your children. Good parenting always did, but reinforcement theory adds a few new tools to the problem-solving kit. Using reinforcement is fun, too. And, properly used, reinforcement always works; you need never revert to punishment in the hope that maybe just this once it will not backfire. Perhaps this generation of parents will really work out ways of using reinforcement to supersede the old and regrettable traditions of force and punishment—once and for all.

The behavioral viewpoint...

I wrote this about ten years ago. If I were writing it now, I wouldn't change anything, but I might add another definition of punishment. My definition of punishment, in *Don't Shoot the Dog!*, was something unpleasant that happens too late to do anything to change it. That is not the official behaviorist definition of punishment, which is something that *stops* behavior, rather than generating alternative behavior. In my opinion, that's part of it too, if not all of it; and the fact that punishment (sometimes) stops behavior in its tracks can make it highly reinforcing for the behavior of the one doing the punishing.