

Parenting Without Punishment: A Humanist Perspective, Part 2

What are the best non-punishing ways of correcting a child's misbehaviors?

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What All Children Need from Their Caretakers



Source: Social Sharing of Emotions, wikipedia, used with permission

Before enumerating a considerable variety of non-punitive, humanist approaches to childrearing, it should be stated that humanists—first and foremost—desire that their children feel deeply cared for. To achieve this overarching goal, whatever disciplinary practices they employ to keep the child's misbehavior under reasonable control don't undermine their efforts to help the child feel:

- physically, mentally, and emotionally safe and protected;
- comforted, soothed, and reassured;
- supported and encouraged;
- appreciated and valued;
- nurtured—even cherished;
- worthwhile and important;
- competent, or smart enough;

- trusting—and trusted;
- empathized with;
- free to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of parental head-wagging or censure;
- guided and appropriately mentored;
- acknowledged for the unique individual they are, independent of any particular achievement;
- listened to and validated (i.e., regardless of how naive, even distorted, some of their viewpoints may be, they are still viewed as making “age-appropriate sense” and legitimized as such);
- honored and respected as human beings, regardless of how young they may be;
- given sufficient time and attention;
- treated fairly;
- given choices, within certain necessary parameters; and
- securely—and *unconditionally*—bonded with their family.

Punishment-Free Ways of Dealing with a Child’s Misbehavior

Again, it can hardly be overemphasized that, given any particular situation, children (like all the rest of us) are doing the best they can. Just as, for example, most adults can’t help but get more irritable and short-tempered when they’re overly hungry, or are in a state of fatigue, so, too, do most children become cranky and quarrelsome when they’ve gone too long without food or sleep.

So what would be some ways that parents might confront their child’s annoying, hazardous, or otherwise troublesome behaviors—without, that is, having to inflict punishment on them? For it’s hardly humane to punish *anyone* who’s doing the best that, at the moment, they’re capable of.

Following are some suggestions that should prove useful:

- **Focus on positive reinforcement.** Attending to and explicitly acknowledging a child for virtuous, or otherwise desirable, behavior will typically increase its frequency. Using your best judgment, seek to ignore (or withdraw positive attention from) behavior that's less positive or prosocial, yet doesn't really demand immediate correction either.

Moreover, praising a child to reward favorable behaviors is most effective when it's (1) done immediately following the behavior, (2) happens frequently, (3) is reinforced non-verbally (through smiles or touch), and (4) is specific to that particular behavior.

- **Set mandatory rules with the child's participation and input.** That is, as much as tenable, give the child a voice in decisions directly affecting them. Rule-setting is best done through actually consulting with the child, who will be far more disposed to follow regulations they themselves have helped set up—and agreed upon as fair. Further, age-appropriate limits and boundaries should be established *before* the child is tempted to engage in anything that might violate them.



Source: Family Reading Hour, Wikipedia, used with permission

- **Discuss problematic behaviors with the child and negotiate with them to find a mutually acceptable solution.** Just like adults, children can be ornery at times. But the parent can frequently get them to move beyond this obstinacy by asking them what *they* might do to resolve the issue. As much as feasible (i.e., depending on the child's age and developmental level), parents should seek to engage the child in the process of problem-solving whenever their behavior is unacceptable. And if positive incentives can be introduced to make alternative behaviors more rewarding to them, that also needs to be considered.

- **Encourage the child to verbally express, free of consequences, any negative feelings they may be harboring.** Parents who inquire about, and listen carefully and sympathetically to, their child's emotional expression can thereby dissuade them from acting out their feelings behaviorally—that is, through aggressive, passive-aggressive, or openly rebellious behavior. On the whole, children don't need to be agreed with or have their requests (or even demands) surrendered to. At least not anywhere as much as they need to feel heard, empathized with, and understood. So it's crucial for parents to let them know that *all* their feelings are important, and that they're at liberty to talk about their anger and hatred as much as they are their love, gratitude, excitement, or joy. Simply *being there* for a child emotionally is a powerful deterrent to their lapsing into forbidden behavior simply because they don't experience their feelings as being sufficiently attended to.

As an example (adopted from fellow *PT* blogger Laura Markham's excellent "[10 Alternatives to 'Consequences'](#)") that includes elements of most of the suggestions offered up till this point, the parent might ask: "I get that you don't feel like brushing your teeth tonight, and I can really sympathize with that. But because I still need you to brush your teeth—or else they'll get all "germy"—and I know you want me to read you a story before bed, which I won't feel right doing *until* you handle your teeth, what do you think we need to do here?" Such an approach actually contrives to put a positive spin on teeth brushing, and it certainly increases the odds that the child will, however grudgingly, end up complying. The important thing here, as elsewhere, is to be flexible and creative until you help the child arrive at a solution that's a "win" for both of you.

- **Allow natural—vs. externally imposed—consequences to teach the child what they can best learn for themselves.** The more a child is prompted to personally figure out what choices will most benefit them, the more likely they'll become effective, autonomous adults with good internal controls. And the more they'll be prepared to make intelligent, informed decisions that will assist them in meeting the various challenges life will surely confront them with.

On the other hand, punitive consequences meted out by a displeased parent are more likely to backfire, leading to endless power struggles, or to a child who feels depressed, angry, or resentful because they were given no opportunity to take part in the many regulations to which they're expected to adhere. When they view consequences primarily as threats, they're likely to experience the parent not so much as teacher or

guardian but as a punitive authoritarian. And perceiving their parent in such adversarial terms hardly contributes to a loving and trusting child-parent relationship. In fact, such ongoing tensions can end up detracting from the parent's ability to positively influence their child's choices later on in life.

Rather than, punitively, playing "take-away" with the child when they're not conforming to family rules, it's much better to focus on *educating* them beforehand about the negative outcome of their questionable behaviors. For example, if it's chilly and they want to leave the house before putting on an overcoat, let them know that once outdoors they're likely to feel uncomfortable—and may even wind up catching a cold (and remind them how miserable they felt the last time *that* happened). Then let them decide what to do.

Either way, they're likely to learn whatever they need to. However indirectly, this approach is typically the most efficient way of teaching them to become responsible for themselves. And if they act counter to your recommendations, odds are that they'll realize all *by* themselves that what you're telling them is for their own good and ought in the future to be taken more seriously. You're also teaching them that if they're to act independently, they need to do so with care—or, however unwittingly, they'll end up punishing themselves.

- **Counsel the child through methodically encouraging them to explore the rationality of their behavior.** So, directly ask the child: "Do you believe this behavior is really to your advantage? Do you think it will help you get what you want?" . . . "What do you think you *should* have done—vs. what you *did* do?" . . . "Can you think of a specific plan that might help you change this troublesome behavior?" . . . "How do you think your behavior might be 'turning off' your friends?—or maybe even keeping you from *making* them?" etc. If/then statements can also be useful here in helping the child think more logically about the ramifications of their acts.

- **Model the behavior you wish your child to emulate—and do so *consistently*.** And teach *yourself* patience, for given the age of the child, you really can't expect them to value things like cleanliness, orderliness, promptness, or frugality anywhere as much as you do. In time, however, if they're continually exposed to such advantageous behaviors, they'll be all the more likely to follow suit. Such conduct will begin to feel

sensible to them—as long, that is, as they don't feel *pressured* to take your lead (which could impel them, reactively, to resist precisely the behavior you wish to instill in them).

- **Remove the child from any situation they're not yet physically, or psychologically, prepared to handle.** And do so as lovingly as possible, explaining why they can't, for instance, take part in something that interests them. And promise that later on they *will* be able to. In such circumstances, be firm but kind and compassionate, so that the child, though disappointed, can still appreciate the “fairness” of your decision.

- **Let the child know that a privilege is just that—and can be lost if abused.** Here again, children are “coaxed”—through consequences they themselves have triggered—to develop better self-control. They learn that by training themselves to adhere to the *limits* of their privileges, they ensure that they won't get suspended or revoked.

- **Redirect misbehaviors in ways that make them more acceptable and, at the same time, soften the negative emotions the child is likely to experience in having such behaviors altered.** Here inappropriate conduct is diverted into more considerate, prosocial behavior. And done well, the child can feel they've exercised some choice in the action that the parent has in fact alternatively selected for them.

Note that in all the suggestions above, the goal for humanistically inclined parents is to teach their children how to be more thoughtful and self-disciplined without having to threaten, or administer, punishment. These methods represent a fundamental humanist *ideal*. In reality, they may be quite challenging to execute—at times, frankly impossible. For even humanist parents are certainly not beyond having their patience exhausted and thereby afflicted with sudden amnesia for childrearing procedures they'd totally committed themselves to earlier. (Which is one reason that parents may occasionally need to apologize to the child—and sometimes call a “time out” for themselves!)

But whether these more enlightened methods of raising children are always doable, or even *practical*, they nonetheless represent what current research has shown to be not only the most caring, but also the most effective, way parents can act—and react—toward their young.

Until children are ready to strike out on their own, they'll remain dependent on their caretakers' love, guidance, and support. And if parents are up to the task, they'll indirectly be encouraging the child to espouse, and from their own *independently derived* viewpoint, the same values they themselves cherish: Values that represent their highest ideals about living a joyful and fulfilling life. And, in doing so responsibly, also advancing the happiness and well-being of others.

Note 1: [Part 1](#) of this post centered on all the reasons that punishing children for their (age-appropriate) misbehaviors isn't simply ethically questionable but also ineffective. The final segment, [part 3](#), will present a large variety of reading resources for those who'd like to learn more about this important—if not crucial—subject.

Note 2: For anyone who'd like to review other articles I've written for *Psychology Today* online—on a broad variety of psychological topics—click [here](#).

Note 3: If you learned anything useful from this piece and believe others might as well, kindly consider sending them its link.

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