



Discipline and Punishment

Can We Improve Behavior by Punishment?

Many parents who come to consult me have the same stories to narrate to me.

“Our son is too naughty and stubborn; he does not listen to us: it is not because we don’t punish him. Beating is no use; it does nothing to change him. We are tired of punishing him in many different ways. We don’t know what to do now. Can you do something to take out the ‘filth’ from his mind?”

The trouble with being “always right”: Parents everywhere have something in common. Like the proverbial “boss” they are always right. Perhaps this sense of being always right is the learned “misbehavior” that comes with the care-giving behavior that makes parents what they are. This learned “sense of being right” makes us very intolerant when it comes to disobedience. As the “always right” bosses we expect the small human beings (children) to comply with our wishes. Often we define good behavior as ‘full compliance with our wishes and expectations’.

The vain glory of being a strict parent: We have stories of parents beating up the child so much that the child had to be hospitalized. In my childhood I had a friend whose father had such a bad reputation for his strictness. He would beat up his children most cruelly and tie them up to a pillar for several hours. Those who visited their home used to feel sick of this type of child-abuse. There are parents who have accidentally beaten up their children to death in the course of punishing them.

Kicking them around to elicit good behavior: I remember this incident that I witnessed outside a busy shopping center in Al Ain, U.A.E. in the summer of 1994. A father was trying to “discipline” a three year old child. He was slapping and kicking a child as the child kept crying and crawling in desperation. The father’s anger kept increasing because the child did not stop crying. He was so furious that he began to kick the child like a football while the child desperately tried to run to the mother who was carrying another baby in her hand. You might have witnessed many such extreme cases of parental cruelty committed by parents under the pretext of disciplining the child.

Our strange logic about punishment

Strangely enough even this father was probably acting out his belief that: “If you don’t beat your child and make him/her obey what you say, he/she will be spoiled”. So goes the favorite story of parents. Stories about punishment are so pervasive that most of

our families are affected by this hereditary disease. Stories about punishment are handed down from generation to generation. The sickness of one generation is justified and perpetuated by the following generation. These stories carry their own peculiar logic by which they are infected. This logic goes as follows:

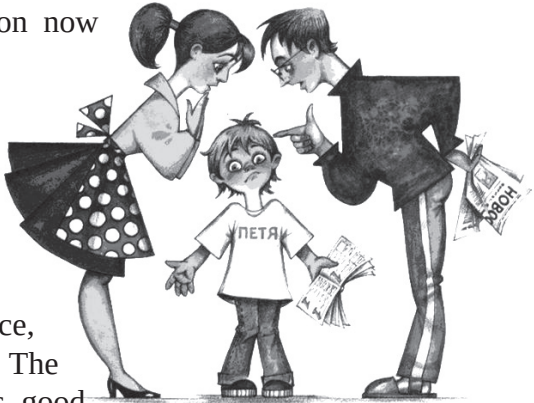
My parents were very strict and they beat me up while I was a child

I am a good person now
and I am successful.

Therefore-

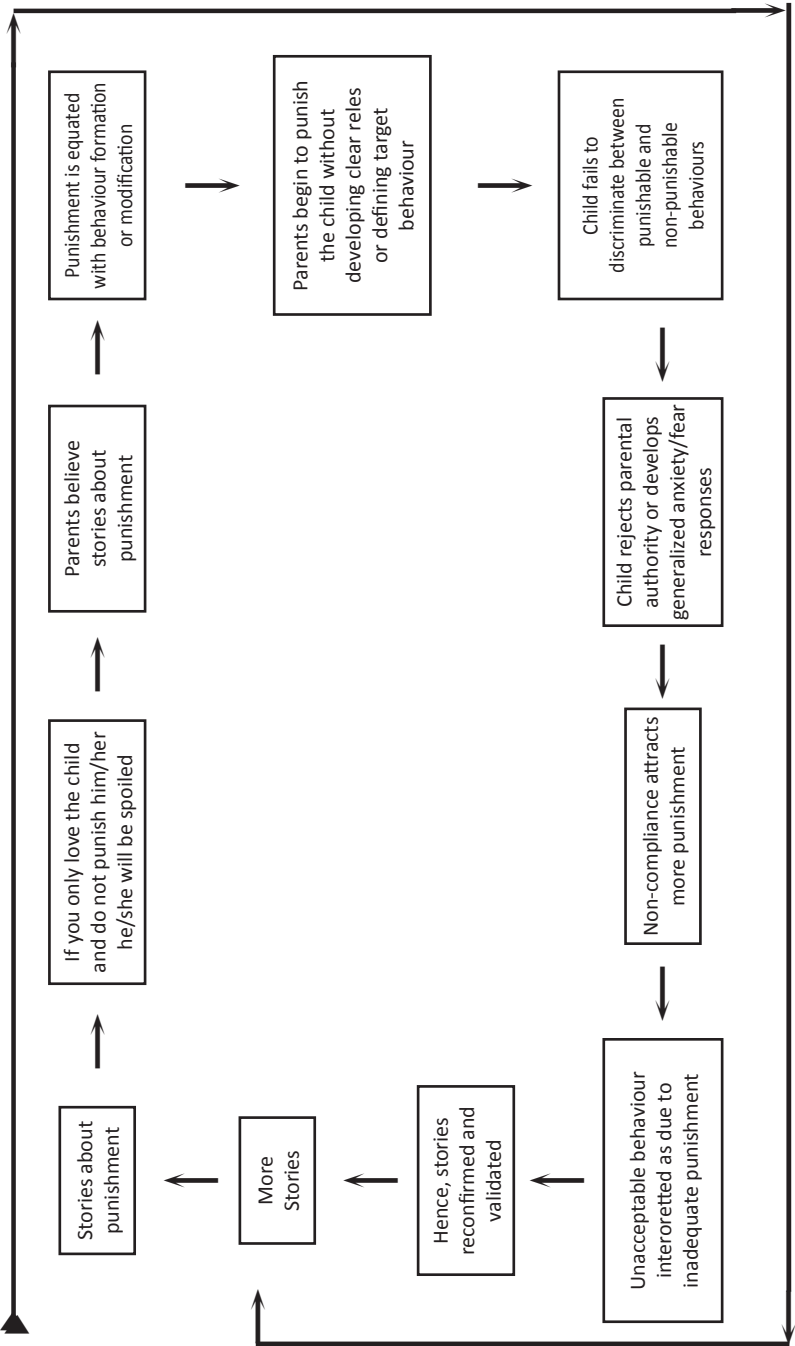
“I am good and
successful because
my parents beat me
up.”

As you may notice, it is not good logic. The fact that the person is good and successful does not follow directly from the fact that he/she was beaten up in his/her childhood. There is no cause-effect relationship between the two. One may be successful due to hundreds of psychological or social factors which has nothing to do with “punishment.” But somehow we link our goodness to the cruelty of our caregivers. This is what we are made to believe; this is what we want our children to believe. That is because this is the only story that we know.



But in fact, truth is far from it. Scientific research has repeatedly shown us that physical punishment is psychologically damaging to the child and does not have a positive effect in the long run. Moreover, they are proved to be inefficient methods of shaping a behavior in the child. Take a look at the following statement by the British psychologist, Penelope Leach, in her article in “The Psychologist” (May 1993):

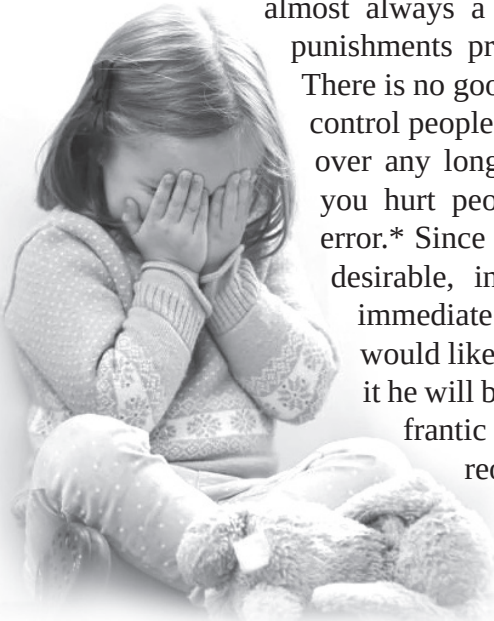
STORIES ABOUT PUNISHMENT



Corporal punishment harmful for children: “Data from psychology... suggests that physical punishment is unlikely to be effective in helping parents to shape their children’s behavior as they themselves wish, or in building the self-discipline (which) the society requires of all socialized citizens. On the contrary, the use of physical punishment frequently provokes or exacerbates behavior (that) parents and others wish to minimize. It may be harmful to children in a number of ways and increase their vulnerability to physical abuse. Literature from psychology and related professions provides clear evidence and suggests some explanations for the inter-generational continuance of physical punishment.”

William Glasser, a famous Psychiatrist and the founder of the method called Reality Therapy in his famous book “Stations of the Mind” made the following comments about punishment:

“Punishment is still the most widely used and advocated way to control others, probably because unlike reward, there is never any doubt that punishment will produce... pain, and almost always a change in behavior. But most punishments produce only short term control. There is no good evidence that punishment will control people to do what you want them to do over any long period of time, because when you hurt people, you always increase their error.* Since pain is generally not considered desirable, in most cases you provoke an immediate conflict between what the person would like to do and the fact that if he does it he will be hurt. As in all serious conflicts, frantic redirection and occasional reorganization will occur, but there is no reason to believe that it will be in the direction of the punished’s desire. He is



paddled severely and told if he does it again he will be paddled harder. If he dislikes the teacher strongly, he will be inclined to curse him..., but if he does, he will be hurt again. He may resolve the problem by stepping up to a higher order of resolve the problem by stepping up to a higher order of perception and vandalize the school, perhaps burn it down. At this order he resolves the conflict with the simple no-school, no-teacher, no-punishment route. Much vandalism and senseless destruction is redirection against the controlling establishment.” (p. 144).

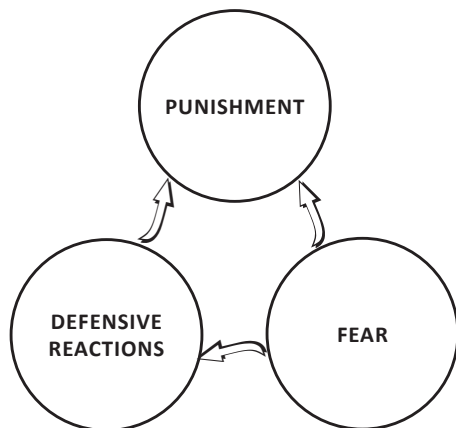
Many parents would readily recognize the vandalism and destruction manifested by children in their own homes. Objects broken or destroyed are visible; but the destruction is not so dramatic and easily noticeable when what is destroyed is of a psychological and social nature. For example, self-directed aggression is often manifested in the form of destruction of one’s own self-image and spirit of motivation, and the destruction of the valuable parent-child relationship.

“Power-assertive disciplining” causes psychological damage

Apart from damages (to bodily integrity) like head injury, physical punishment causes some psychological damages which will certainly be harmful to the child in the long run. Psychiatric literature and clinical case studies support the view that “power-assertive disciplining” and severe physical punishment in childhood may be partly responsible for a wide range of personality disorders and neuroses in adult life. This happens primarily because physical punishment and other techniques like “love-withdrawal” lowers the child’s self-esteem and produces fear/anxiety in him/her. As a result of fear the child becomes more “defensive” in his/her behavior. This irritates the parents even further and punish the child more severely.

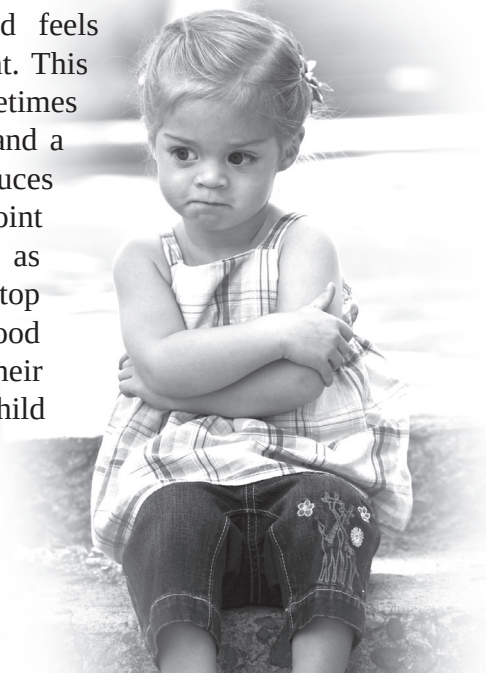
The figure below shows how punishment produces anxiety and defensive behavior which becomes a vicious circle from which it is difficult to escape.

PUNISHMENT-FEAR-DEFENSE

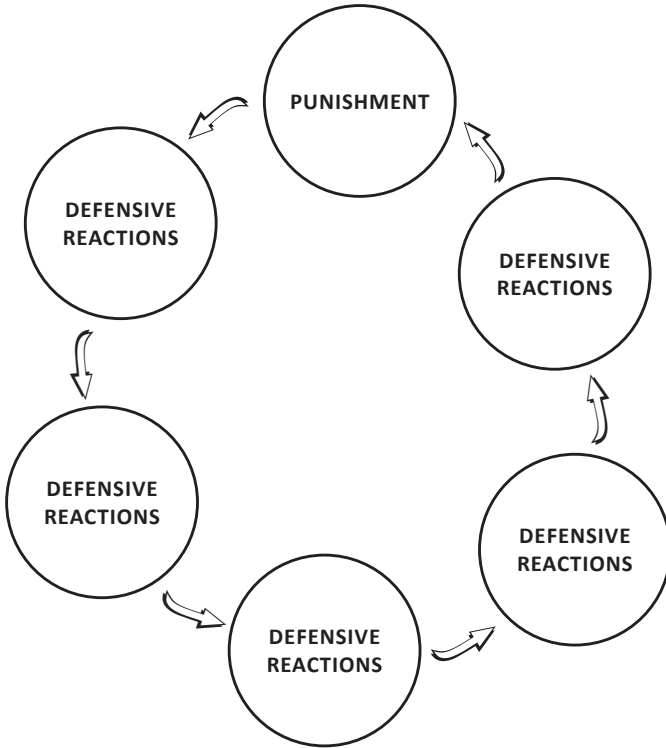


Severely punished children tend to become more aggressive: Moreover, psychologists believe that severely punished children may in turn develop aggressive and violent behavior in future. By being violent to the child the parents may be providing a model for aggressive behavior and making it appear legitimate to the child.

A third major disadvantage of punishment is that it affects the relationship between parents and children. The child feels rejected as a result of punishment. This makes him/her anxious and sometimes even rebellious. Due to anxiety and a sense of insecurity the child produces more “misbehavior.” At this point parents begin to brand the child as naughty or mischievous and stop appreciating him/her for his/her good behavior. Moreover deep in their hearts parents begin to reject the child as a problem case.



RELATIONSHIP BREAK-DOWN



It is rather easy for the child to feel or understand this rejection from the parents. The sense of rejection makes him/her misbehave even more and receive more punishment.

This process leads to a vicious circle resulting in a partial or sometimes total breakdown of “Parent-Child Relationship” as illustrated in the figure above.

They are Good... Not Because You Kicked or Abused Them...

We are at the portals of the Twenty-first Century, and the time has come for us to confront our stories and belief systems about discipline in general and about physical punishment in particular. We are good not because our parents spanked us or kicked us on our butts. In fact, as I would often emphasize in my

training programs “we may be successful in spite of the cruel punishments inflicted upon us by our parents and others.” But in spite of the inherent “fallacy”, stories about punishment spread from one culture to another, from generation to generation. It has become such an epidemic that major preventive and remedial measures are being undertaken in the form of legislation and landmark court judgments targeted against child abuse of this type. Many countries like Denmark, Norway, Finland and Austria have already brought in necessary laws to ban the use of physical punishment by parents and teachers. India enacted the following law as per the Gazette notification dated December 30, 2000.

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2000. Act No. 56 of 2000. Article 23: Punishment for cruelty to juvenile or child: “Whoever, having the actual charge of, or control over, a juvenile or the child, assaults, abandons, exposes or willfully neglects the juvenile or causes or procures him to be assaulted, abandoned, exposed or neglected in a manner likely to cause said juvenile or the child unnecessary mental or physical suffering shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to six months or fine, or both.”

Many other countries are actively considering such legislation.

Stop spreading “infected” stories: The time has come therefore for us to stop spreading the infected “stories” about punishment. Parents happen to be the main consumers and propagators of these stories. Teachers too, to some extent have acted as carriers of the dangerous belief that children will grow into good people only if you shame, beat, threaten or insult them. With this belief, disciplining had more in common with policing rather than benevolent nurturing or moulding. For generations we have been unknowingly validating these “infected” stories. The obvious losers were the helpless children. However, in the long run, most parents discover the bad effects of corporal punishment on their children. But by then it is too late, and the damage is already done.

Wanted! new stories on effective disciplining: Parents should focus more on facilitating skills for right decision-making by the child rather than focusing on external control of the behavior. Excessive control and rigidity will only harm the child. Parents who control the child too much may be also overprotective which prevents the child from making decisions independently and being self-confident.

Based on scientific studies on discipline and punishment we need to rewrite and retell our prevailing stories of punishment. We have to help each other to discard the old, pre-scientific, stories of punishment and help develop a new community that believes in scientific and effective stories about training our children.

The story of a transformed headmaster: Here is an example of one such “new story” told by a well-known educator in India, Fr C.P. Varkey SJ who was the Headmaster of a reputed boarding school in Trivandrum, India. In his book “Handle with Care”, Fr Varkey talks about his transformation with regard to disciplinary methods:

“As a child I was beaten pretty often. When I began my teaching career I too began to beat children. When I became Headmaster, I resorted to caning as one of the best ways of handling disciplinary and academic problems. There have been cases where I took the boy to the corridor and caned him so that he would be an object lesson to other students. Slowly, after a year or so a change began to take place in the school as a result of some workshops... We began to realize that caning was not a lasting solution to any problem. In about a year and a half, we abolished caning completely from the school... Did the new policy solve all problems? No. Far from it. There were all types of misbehavior in the school, probably all types of misbehavior one finds in any school. But their number and frequency were decreasing fast. Once one of the teachers who used to beat children often and who strongly disapproved of the new policy (remarked): “You are right, Sir... I’m happy that I tried out the new policy. I do not

cane any more. When I used to cane children there used to be six or seven who did not bring their home-work or class books. There are some now also. But the number is smaller. And what is more, there is greater peace and fun in the class. I am less tense too.”

I would recommend parents to read Fr Varkey’s book. It will prepare us better for a change ways and motivate us further to take full advantage of the systematic approach to behavior modification, and to value the psychological techniques that we will explore in Part II and Part III of this book.

The new story: Our new story on discipline should be child-centered rather than parent-centered and teacher-centered. The focus should be the personal growth of the child rather than control and suppression by parental taskmasters. It must be based on the shared goal of the right use of freedom and the right skills for decision making. Discipline is a training for internalizing values through selective reinforcement of “right behavior” (see Chapter 8).

Discipline: the process of developing the right conscience: Discipline is the development of a behavioral pattern which comes spontaneously when the person has internalized the values and norms of the society and has become capable of formulating one’s own values and goals, making them compatible with societal norms as well as the limits that one sets for oneself. This internal software is what psychologists would consider “conscience”.

Discipline therefore is the process of developing and installing this software, from which emerges “right conscience” which should help and guide the child in its future behavior in a wide variety of situations. It is in the family setting that the child first begins to form its conscience and it is the duty of the parents to facilitate this process of developing the right conscience. This is the final purpose of discipline. The right conscience (internal program or software) helps the child decide whether an action is personally, socially and morally right or wrong.

As illustrated in the figure below, the purpose of discipline is not to suppress the children or control their bad instincts, but to help them make the correct judgment about right and wrong and to help them in the process of social adaptation.

PURPOSE OF DISCIPLINE HERE

