

The goal of parenting is to raise children who will do the right thing simply because it's the right thing to do. A clear sense of knowing right from wrong is what we hope guides our children when they are no longer under our close supervision.

But how is this internal moral compass developed? When children make choices motivated out of avoidance of negative consequences, is this evidence of morality or evidence of obedience? When children make choices based on whether they might be caught, is this morality, or just risk assessment?

Here's two approaches to guiding children's behavior. One encourages obedience and risk assessment (doing what you're told whether it is right or wrong, or asking, "Will I get caught?"). The other encourages morality (doing what is right despite what you are being told, or asking, "Will this cause harm?").

PUNISHMENT

Punishment is based upon the belief that a person must feel pain and shame in order to do better and learn lessons. When parents punish, they are often unconsciously taking out their anger on their children in unintentionally hurtful ways.

Common forms of punishment

- Physical pain:** spanking, slapping, pinching
- Shaming:** "You know better!" "How could you?"
- Removal of privileges:** no dessert, no screen time
- Time out:** sit in a naughty chair for 5 minutes
- Isolation:** silent treatment, sent to room,
- Emotional pain:** angry outbursts, blaming, "You're a brat!" "Look what you did!"

Punishment

- puts adults in the role of being responsible for supervising and controlling children's behavior which is exhausting, impractical, and unsustainable over time
- is designed to make children PAY for the past, but the effectiveness is short-term
- mistakenly develops "external locus of control" (making choices based on what others say to do)
- causes children to miss the lesson and focus on the adult's disrespectful treatment: "Mom's so mean!" "Dad's a jerk!" as opposed to "I have new ideas of how I can choose differently next time."
- often happens when emotions run high. Regretful things are said and done



Four common reactions to punishment

- Resentment:** "You're unfair. I can't trust you."
- Revenge:** "You may be winning now, but I'll get even."
- Rebellion:** "You can't control me, so I will do the opposite."
- Retreat into:** Sneakiness "I'll just get better at not getting caught next time," and Low Self-esteem "I'm not a good or valuable person."

Punishment looks like it works if the child complies, but there is a long-term cost. Children can feel fear, undervalued or disempowered. They become disconnected from their parents due to disrespectful and humiliating treatment. Parents slowly lose a positive influence in their children's lives and children then turn to others when seeking guidance.

DISCIPLINE

Discipline, however, is focused on guiding and teaching. The root word is "disciple"—to learn and be a student. Parents take on the role of teacher/guide with understanding and compassion for their children who have much to learn and many years to develop into their full potential.

Discipline

- is a consistent practice, provides structure, and involves accountability that is **kind AND firm**
- puts kids in the role of being responsible for their behavior
- is designed to help children LEARN effectively long-term
- develops the "internal locus of control" (looking within to make good choices)
- invites parents to see disobedience as an opportunity for children to learn boundaries and life/social skills versus seeing disobedience as alarming signs of a bad child
- helps move from problem-naming to problem-solving
- allows the lesson to be highlighted because the adult remained respectful and fair

Differentiating Punishment from Discipline: 4 Rs and an H

Practicing discipline means getting a “Yes” answer when asking these questions:

Is it Related?

NO: Disruptive behavior at dinner means no TV time
YES: Removal from dinner table

Is it Respectful?

NO: Yelling, shaming
YES: Neutral, clear tone of voice focused on the issue

Is it Reasonable?

NO: Permanent removal of a privilege
YES: Temporary restrictions, opportunities to re-earn privilege

When possible, Is it Revealed in advance?

NO: Deciding consequence during angry moment
YES: Before entering a challenging situation, state expectations and actions that may follow

Is it Helpful?

NO: Write “I will never do that again” 20 times
YES: Cleaning the mess that was made

A simple equation to follow:

With every privilege in life, responsibilities follow. If you own a bike, a computer, or a car, care and up keep is necessary. If you're borrowing items, or going out to eat, respecting boundaries, and social rules are required. When children demonstrate lack of responsibility, they are not ready for the privilege. The privilege can respectfully be removed but coupled with opportunities for children to demonstrate readiness for responsibilities in the future.

Privileges = Responsibilities

Lack of Responsibilities = Lack of Privileges

Other discipline ideas to practice:

1. Speak respectfully. Do not respond to immaturity with immaturity.
2. Involve kids in deciding limits and solutions; they are more willing to follow limits and solutions they helped create.
3. Cool-off time; no solutions or corrections can be made when brains are flooded with emotions. Take time for cooling off and then return to follow through where you left off (see Tantrums and Positive Time Out tip sheets).
4. State expectations clearly without sarcasm or judgement.
5. Establish routines together (see Routines tip sheet).
6. Use skillful communication: “I” statements, empathy, ask questions to gain understanding, speak confidently without begging or rewarding to gain compliance.
7. Redirect young children or relocate them to a different setting if needed.
8. Focus on what you are willing and not willing to do, not what you want to MAKE others do. “I’m willing to give you a ride when chores are done.” (for more ideas see [Positive Discipline A-Z](#), Nelsen, Lott, Glenn)

Resources: *Positive Discipline*, Jane Nelsen
Adapted by Colleen Murphy

Going Deeper

Is disobedience a good thing? How would you like children to handle social pressure to be unkind, dishonest, and unsafe? What if another authority figure told your child to do something that is against your values?

Your child may have to face a situation when saying “no” will be morally correct, but will be seen as disobedient by peers or by adults. Our best hope is that we raise children to be critical thinkers, not mindless joiners. “They told me to do it,” should never be an acceptable excuse to cause harm.

See children’s resistance to authority as an important part of a healthy developing sense of morality, not as something to eliminate. Your task is to respond respectfully, appropriately, and with skill when facing children’s natural desire to test. It is possible to say “No” with kindness and confidence.

Positively recognize children’s decision to resist social pressure. Ask insightful questions for children to ponder in order to develop their internal moral compass when they are facing moral decisions (e.g., “What feels right to you?” “How would you like to be treated if the tables were turned?” “Who do you respect and what would they choose?”).

Key Steps

- Avoid Punishment. Punishment focuses on blame and “Who’s in control?” It makes adults responsible for kid’s behavior, inspires misbehavior, fear and shame. Success is only short term but adds long term problems. **Win/lose.**
- Choose Discipline. Its focus is on teaching and “What went wrong? What life skill can be taught?” It makes children responsible for their actions. Inspires change in behavior, and mutually respectful parent/child relationships. Success may take time but it gains long term lessons. **Win/win.**
- Focus on Solutions. Go beyond the problem. Ask, “How can this be solved?” “Do you or I need to fix, buy, replace, apologize?” “What would help you next time?” Include child in finding solutions, if appropriate.
- Respond to misbehavior AFTER initial stages of anger passes. Calmer brains make better choices.
- Base your response to misbehavior by asking 4 R’s and an H questions.
- Focus on what you will do, not what you will MAKE someone do.



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