Discipline and Punishment

Concepts of discipline vary. The conventional elementary school concept of discipline is based on obedience (Gartrell, 1997). Many parents and teachers see punishment as a part of discipline. However, some educators view discipline as a "neutral" term that can exclude punishment (Marion, 1995). Discipline in this article is considered to be different from punishment both in its intent and consequences. It may be referred to as positive discipline or guidance.

Positive Discipline:

- is guiding and teaching;
- is done with a child;
- requires understanding, time, and patience;
- teaches problem solving and builds a positive self-image;
- develops long-term self-control and cooperation.

Punishment:

- is control by fear, power, and coercion;
- is done to the child;
- elicits anger, guilt, resentment, and deceit;
- impairs communication and wholesome parent-child relationships;
- stops undesired behavior in the specific situation temporarily, but behavior often is exhibited in other ways.

All parents discipline their children by teaching them appropriate ways to behave. However, discipline is interpreted by some parents as correcting or punishing children in order to stop the reoccurrence of unacceptable behavior. Discipline comes from the Latin word *disciplina*, meaning instruction or teaching to correct, strengthen, or perfect. Obviously, the leader models the ideas or principles to be followed. Disciples respect and care for the messenger. If parents want their children to behave in caring and appropriate ways, they must show them how. *The ultimate goal of discipline is to have children responsible for their own actions.*

Punishment is the use of physical or psychological force or action that causes pain in an attempt to prevent undesirable behavior from recurring. Scolding, threats, deprivations, and spanking are all forms of punishment. Physical punishment of children by parents and teachers is legal in most states and most countries. It is *outlawed* in Austria, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland (Straus, 1994). Back in the nineteenth century, Froebel wrote that the use of punishment was a good way for adults to make a child "bad." If the goal for the child is the development of morality, of making good choices on his or her own, then punishment should not be involved. Conditions should be created that not only allow but strongly induce children to be or become moral and disciplined individuals who can make good choices on their own (Bettelheim, 1985; Ramsburg, 1997).

Punishment teaches a child that those who have the power can force others to do what they want them to do (Bettelheim, 1985; Samalin and Whitney, 1995). In addition, punishment, such as spanking, does not teach a child an acceptable alternative way to behave (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1995). Punishment is the least effective form of changing behavior and may have long-term consequences. The child feels humiliated, often hides mistakes, tends to be angry and aggressive, and fails to develop self-control. Punishment stops behavior temporarily, but the behavior is often repeated in other settings.

Forms of punishment with fewer negative consequences than physical or psychologically demeaning punishment include ignoring the behavior, showing a mild disapproving look, the use of time out, especially to gain control of one's emotions, and taking away a privilege. Ignoring the behavior can be very effective in eliminating its repetition, especially if it is a new action and not reinforced by someone else. Time out has been overused in recent decades as a way to change children's behavior. Although

experts disagree about its use (Ucci, 1998; Schreiber, 1999), it can have negative effects such as embarrassment, anger, or confusion. More importantly, by itself it does not teach a child how to behave differently. It is more effective if time out is followed with a discussion of the actions and support to help the child learn how to behave appropriately. *Gartrell (2001, 2002) believes that time out should be replaced with teaching children how to solve social problems rather than punishing them for their behavior over problems they have not yet learned how to solve.*

If punishment is used, a number of conditions can increase its effectiveness. It should occur immediately after the problem. It is also more effective when the child is punished by a nurturing person (Baumrind, 1978). There should also be consistency in being punished for an offense. The punishment should include an explanation and allow the child some control over the situation. For example, in using time out, the child should be helped to decide when he or she is able to follow the rules and return to play. During time out the child must be removed from all forces reinforcing the unacceptable behavior.

Physical Punishment of Children

Physical punishment includes spanking, slapping, grabbing, shoving (with more force than needed to move the child), and hitting a child with an object (Straus, 1991). Spanking is the most controversial method of discipline and continues to be used as an acceptable form of "discipline." Some parents define spanking as slapping a child on the buttocks (Straus, 1995), while this and other reports use spanking to cover any corporal punishment that does not cause injury. Many parents believe spanking will teach children not to repeat forbidden behavior while other parents spank because they are not aware of more effective ways of changing behavior. Some parents do not believe that nonphysical forms of punishment, such as denial of privileges, are effective. In 1994, a parental opinion poll conducted by the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse showed for the first time that a majority of parents reported not spanking their children in the previous year. Denying privileges was used by 79 percent, confinement to a room by 59 percent, 49 percent spanked or hit their child, and 45 percent insulted or swore at their child. (Straus, 1995).

Does Physical Punishment Lead to Child Abuse and Later Violence?

Social science researcher, Murray Straus, and professor of criminology Joan McCord, agree that physical punishment during childhood often leads children to violence when they are teenagers and adults. However, McCord believes that all punishment accounts for later violence in adults (DelCampo and DelCampo, 1995). Straus reports that, as adults, the children whose parents spanked them, compared to children who were not spanked, have higher rates of juvenile delinquency, spouse abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, and lower economic achievements (Straus, 1994). McCord reports that a study on criminals found that the largest number of criminals came from punitive and unaffectionate homes. The next highest number came from punitive but affectionate homes and the fewest came from nonpunitive homes. McCord believes that the use of reward and punishment models the norm of self-interest over the welfare of others while Straus argues that the act of spanking sends a message that the use of violence is a legitimate way to solve problems (DelCampo and DelCampo, 1995).

Societal Norms Supporting Punishment and Violence

Physical punishment has always been a part of European American religious and legal traditions (Straus, 1991). One definition of violence is any act carried out with the intention or perceived intention of causing physical pain or injury to another person (Straus, 1991). Not only is some physical punishment legal, so is some violence. Society models violence in many ways.

One can legally use violence or force to defend oneself and, in some cases, one's property. The law in most states permits capital punishment. When violence increases in our society, the response is to increase punishment. For example, California enacted a law placing convicted third-time offenders in jail for life. It's known as "Three Strikes and You're Out." The age for trying youth offenders for specific violent crimes under the adult penal system has been lowered in many states and in recent federal legislation (Children's Defense Fund, 1998, 1999).