

# Discipline

A discipline procedure (or punishment) is an event that is disliked by the child. Punishment sometimes comes in two forms: taking away something desired or presenting something unpleasant. “Grounding” is disciplinary because the pleasing event of playing outside is taken away. Chair timeouts (TO), room TOs, not getting to play with a favorite toy, and loss of TV privileges are all examples of discipline by taking away something positive. Spanking is a discipline procedure because it presents something unpleasant. Scolding or requiring extra chores are other forms of punishment by presenting something unpleasant.

Many of the rules that apply to reinforcement are also true for punishment. Reinforcement is most effective if it is given immediately after the behavior occurs. Punishment is also most effective if it is given immediately after the behavior occurs. You will need to punish only a few behaviors, however, while you are encouraged to socially reinforce a wide range of appropriate social activities. Reinforcement should be given every time new behaviors occur during learning. The same is true for punishment. Discipline must be used every time the undesirable behavior occurs. Unlike positive reinforcement, which can be reduced after the child learns a new skill, punishment must continue to be used every time the misbehavior occurs.

When a reinforcer follows a behavior, the behavior is more likely to occur again in the future. The opposite is true for punishment. When a behavior is punished, the behavior will be less likely to occur again in the future. Punishment helps the child learn which behaviors to inhibit (to avoid).

## When Should Discipline Be Used

There are three situations in which discipline is likely necessary:

1. **When the nature or intensity of the problem leads to questions of safety for the child or others.** For example, discipline may be used for fighting because it prevents a child from getting hurt. It may also be used for other dangerous behaviors, such as wandering away from home, or playing with matches. Just one occurrence of some behaviors could be fatal. A parent does not have time to wait for a child to learn to stay at home by positively reinforcing “permission-asking” and “checking-in”. The misbehavior could occur many times (and cause injury) while the child gradually learns through positive reinforcement. Punishment works fast. After all, the child only needs to discover and remember what not to do! In contrast, positive reinforcement and extinction work gradually and slowly. Learning complicated (many-step) new skills takes lots of time and patience.
2. **Punishment may be used when positive reinforcers are ineffective.** Other, more powerful reinforcers may cause the misbehavior. Remember reinforcement traps? For example, playing with toys may be more reinforcing than the praise that a child gets from a parent. When this, or something like it, is the case, you cannot teach with reinforcement. Punishment may be necessary when reinforcement from the parent isn’t as enticing as disobedience.
3. **Punishment may be used when extinguishing misbehavior is ineffective.** Tantrumming is an attention-seeking response. Sometimes, when it is ignored, it escalates. When this can’t be ignored, punishment is appropriate.

## Caution

The use of discipline can create problems. Punishing your child when you are out of control may make you punish more harshly than you intend. This can cause you to feel guilty, and it can cause your child to feel badly toward you.

Therefore, never discipline your child when you lack emotional control. Furthermore, punishment that is too frequent or too long may gradually lose its effectiveness; under these conditions more intense punishment will be needed to get the same results. For example, if you scold your child for every minor misbehavior (e.g. teasing, whining, and complaining) your child would become accustomed to being scolded. Psychologists would say the child has “habituated” to the unpleasant qualities of the scolding. Scolding no longer works! Ignore these misbehaviors. What if you “grounded” the child to his room for a week? It would not work (plus it would not be reasonable or humane). The Timeout would last so long; the child would forget why they were being disciplined and adapt to “life in the room”.

Physical punishment, which is very rarely recommended, may provide a model of aggression for the child. Physical punishment should be extremely limited and only used on the rarest and most necessary occasions.

Any form of punishment may cause the child to try to escape from the discipline situation, or avoid it all together. Some ways that children may try to avoid or escape from discipline are fighting, lying, being sneaky, tantrumming, running off, or becoming hysterical. It is important, therefore, that the child not be allowed to escape or avoid discipline when it is used. For example, a room TO back-up can prevent preschool children from running away from a TO chair. If you do not “back-up” your discipline procedures children will learn to avoid discipline and the procedure will not work.

Finally, discipline only teaches the child what “not to do”. Discipline must always be used in combination with reinforcement techniques.

## Using Discipline

How does one use punishment effectively? The following is an example of effective use of punishment:

Peter was playing with his little sister, Beth. When Beth began playing with his favorite toy, Peter hit her. Peter’s mom immediately intervened by telling Peter: “No, Since you hit your sister you will have to sit in TO”. She wanted to prevent him from trying to escape from TO. If Peter had gotten off the chair she would have marched him to his bedroom for one minute, saying, “Since you got off the TO chair, you will have to go to your room.” This had happened previously. Since then Peter remembered to stay on the TO chair. A “back-up” was no longer needed. After five minutes, plus a brief quiet period, Peter was told that he could get up from the TO chair. Then his mother had a little talk with him about why he shouldn’t hit and how he could cooperate instead. Peter went back to playing with his sister. As soon as he was playing nicely, his mother praised him. She gave him praise occasionally during the rest of the day, whenever she saw him playing nicely.

Peter’s mother used punishment effectively. She disciplined Peter’s inappropriate behavior while increasing the positive interaction between Peter and herself. Let’s look at what she did:

Instead of yelling and spanking Peter, she put him in TO. In TO, he could no longer get attention from his mother or his sister; he could no longer play; he had no toys. TO works because it removes desired events and things. She avoided becoming associated with strong, painful, or fear-producing punishers like spanking or harsh scoldings.

Peter’s mother provided a clear-cut way for him to earn back his privileges. He could earn back his mother’s and sister’s attention by staying on the TO chair for 5 minutes, and by being quiet for at least 30 seconds. TO calmed Peter down. She made sure Peter did not use avoidance or escape behaviors by using a back-up procedure to keep him on the TO chair.

Peter’s mother also did several things to reduce bad feelings associated with punishment. **First, she praised him often for cooperative play so that Peter received much more social reinforcement than punishment.** Being with mom was reinforcing, and positive contact with mom was increased. Even though Peter did not like it when his mother put him in

TO, he still liked Mom because she socially reinforced many other behaviors. He could be with mom again by becoming quiet on the TO chair, so he got quiet.

**Second, she taught him the right thing to do.** By talking to him, demonstrating, and praising his efforts, Peter's mom taught Peter to cooperate with his sister. Remember, discipline only teaches a child what not to do. If the child does not know how to do it right, discipline will fail.

**Third, she disciplined Peter immediately and would do so every time he hit his sister.** Remember, if you ignore behavior that coerces its own reinforcers (like fighting), it will get worse. That's what reinforcement traps are all about. If you discipline fighting only occasionally; the child is likely to fight more often. You have entered into a "partial reinforcement schedule" which is the strongest reinforcer.

**Fourth, she gave Peter a reason to avoid fighting.** Children seek out reasons for rules. If you give reasons repeatedly the child will eventually memorize and accept the reason as valid.