

## **Discipline versus Punishment**

by Kim Olver

Do you know the difference between discipline and punishment with their Latin roots? Punishment implies inflicting pain, while discipline means to teach. Parents who use punishment are missing important opportunities to teach their children better behaviors and help them self-discipline. Children can actually be taught responsible behaviors to help them get the things they want without breaking the rules.

However, when parents are only interested in compliance, they often impose strict and severe consequences to stop or prevent the behavior. This generally leaves the child not thinking about how they were wrong and need to develop more appropriate behavior, but leaves them instead thinking about how unfair their parent is.

Punishment generally teaches children to become better at not getting caught, rather than stopping the undesirable behavior.

All behavior is purposeful. We don't engage in behavior—responsible or not—for no reason. Everything a person does is that person's best attempt to get at least one of his or her needs met in the best way available at that time. Children do not set out to be intentionally "bad." The "bad" behaviors they engage in are helping them to meet a need they have, which is why they do it.

Punishing children for attempting to get their needs met does not stop them from needing to get their needs met. If a child is attempting to get their need for freedom met by being with people of whom the parent doesn't approve, that freedom need does not go away by punishing the child. In fact, often punishment restricts the freedom need even further, making it more likely that the child will engage in more severe and desperate ways of meeting their freedom need.

For example, if the child is grounded for being with people the parent disapproves of, then they may end up disrespecting the grounding and attempting to go out anyway. Then, it will become necessary for the parent to become more severe in their punishment to attempt to gain control.

The interesting thing about control is that we really don't have control over our children. We cannot be with them 24/7 and thus, we really don't know what they are doing when they are out of our site. We may think we are controlling them by grounding them, but are they sneaking out? If not, what happens when the grounding is lifted?

Instead of punishing, let's look at what it might be like to teach self-discipline instead. Let's say your child has a habit of not abiding by his or her curfew. The child agrees to the curfew and then chronically comes home late espousing sincere apologies. Naturally, you want to ground them or make them come home even earlier the next time to make up for the infraction.

What do you think would happen if you had a different conversation? What would happen if you attempted to learn what the child was doing that prevented them from being home on time? What would happen if you believed your child when he said he really lost track of time because he got so involved in the game of basketball he was playing with his friend? Your child tells you he meant to be home on time but simply lost track of time.

If your goal is to help teach self-discipline, wouldn't it make sense to help your child find a way to independently remind himself of his curfew. Perhaps he could get a watch with an alarm on it. Or if he has a cell phone, have him set the alarm on it with enough time for him to get home at the agreed upon time.

Maybe in your conversation, you learn that your child no longer believes his curfew is appropriate. Perhaps he thinks because he is older, he should be permitted to stay out later. You may review your expectations and realize that he is right. The curfew you have set may be too early for his age. In this case, you might be willing to adjust the curfew to a later time as long as there is compliance with the new curfew.

There are several solutions for every situation and remember every child and every set of circumstances is unique. Take the time to talk to your child to determine why they are breaking the rules and then help them figure out a way to honor the rules and still get what they need in their lives.

When you do, you will have a much more harmonious home and your children will be learning self-discipline skills so that by the time they no longer live with you, you can be reasonably assured that they will be able to take care of themselves. After all, isn't that what you REALLY want?