

Alternatives to Punishment

Adapted from

How to Talk so Kids will Listen & Listen so Kids will Talk

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Dr. Selma Frailberg says, *“A child needs to feel our disapproval at certain times, but if our reaction is of such strength that the child feels worthless and despised for his offense, we have abused our power as parents and have created the possibility that exaggerated guilt feelings and self-hatred will play a part in this child’s personality development.”*

Discipline means education; it requires mutual respect and trust. Punishment requires external control or force, and can lead to feelings of resentment, anger, unworthiness, or revenge. These can prevent a child from *internally confronting* their own misbehavior. Punishment can be seen as ‘cancelling’ the behavior, and inhibits the beneficial process of self-reflection. Punishment is a distraction.

Instead of Punishment:

- Point out a way for the child to be helpful
- Express strong disapproval (without attacking character)
- State: expectations and what you see
- Show the child how to correct the situation. This helps the child restore his good feelings after behaving badly
- Give a choice
- Take action
- Allow the child to experience the consequences of his behavior
- Teach problem solving skills

When a problem persists after using these alternatives to punishment, it is usually more complex than it originally appeared.

Shift in Attitude:

The hardest part of moving to an alternative to punishment is learning to view one’s child not as a “problem” which needs correction, but as someone who needs education.

We are giving our children the tools that will enable them to solve problems now in school and home, as well as later in life as adults with their families and at work.

We can stop worrying that we are not “tough enough.” We are not our children’s enemies. We are their mentors, teachers, and supporters.

Problem Solving:

Teach your child to be an active participant in problem solving. If these steps below are difficult for you, ask yourself how well you have learned to solve problems.

Step 1. Talk about the child’s feelings and needs.

Example: "I imagine you might be feeling..." Only when a child is understood can he or she consider mom or dad's feelings.

Step 2. Talk about your feelings and needs.

Example: "I am feeling ... about what happened." Keep it short.

Step 3. Brainstorm together to find a mutually agreeable solution. Allow child to offer several.

Example: "Let's think about ideas on how we can solve ... (the problem)."

Step 4. Write down all the ideas – without evaluating or criticizing. All ideas go on the paper.

Step 5. Decide together which solutions you like, don't like, and which you plan to do.

Example: "I wouldn't be comfortable with ..." Or "I'm not sure how that would work."

The whole process may not be needed every time. Problems can be solved at any step.

To prepare for the problem-solving process, remember these points:

- Be accepting of your child and listen for feelings and ideas you may have never heard before. Consider new ideas. Even unlikely ideas can lead to creative solutions.
- A child needs to feel understood and not rushed. Talk briefly and clearly about your own feelings.
- Do not evaluate, judge, lecture, or persuade your child to see things your way. When evaluating ideas, talk about *your reaction* to them rather than using put-down statements.
- Avoid implementing a solution, let them work through it themselves with a plan that ensures follow-through. Focus on the future, not the past. You may need to repeat the process.
- Do not let your child blame or accuse you at any point. State firmly that there is no accusation or discussion of the past. The goal is to focus on a solution for the future.
- Acknowledge your child's negative reactions and feelings and allow them to come up with their own choices rather than it feeling a forced choice or undercover threat. An immediate solution is not always obvious. Going away from the problem and coming

back to it can sometimes trigger the solution and help you to be more sensitive of the other's needs.

- Life is about continual readjustments. Most people want to be part of generating solutions.

Consequences:

Punishment is a deliberate infliction or deprivation by another party, whereas **consequences** are the natural results of behavior.

Examples of natural consequences:

When a sweater is returned unlaundered and the owner doesn't loan it the next time because of the need for reassurance that it won't happen again.

When tools get rusty because they were left outside the owner is displeased and locks them up.

When the chips are spilled on the carpet the child learns the responsibility to clean them up.

Reality itself provides the feedback.