PRESENTATION

Unintended Consequences of Punishment

Joan McCord, PhD

Because punishments are intended to control children's behavior, many people assume that the major—and perhaps the sole—consequence of punishment is teaching children to behave as they ought. Yet the use of punishment is (I will argue) counterproductive. Furthermore, the use of punishment has additional unintended consequences. I will attempt to demonstrate how children perceive punishments and what those unanticipated consequences are. These illustrations rest on the nature of reasoning itself, although they are bolstered by empirical evidence.

Although this conference is about the use of corporal punishment, most of what I have to say applies to using any type of punishment—including, of course, physical punishment.

First, punishments give pain and therefore teach children that at least under some conditions, it is all right to give pain to others.

The law of excluded middle asserts that things must be either of one class or not of that class. I believe this law is fundamental to rational thought. Even very young children come to understand it and can therefore reason that parents are either good or not good when they punish.

Let me begin with the assumption that children believe their parents are good. If good people do good things, then if they punish, it must be good to give pain. If good people do bad things, then even if giving pain is bad, it is all right to do some bad things. That is, if a parent uses punishments, then either the parent is doing something right and it is right to give pain or the parent is doing something wrong and it is all right to do something wrong. In either case, the use of punishment appears to permit giving physical or mental pain to others.

The above reasoning rests on the typical view that children believe their parents are good. The alternative would be for children to believe that parents who punish are not good. If the parents are not good, however, then the child has reason not to do as the parents say he ought.

Empirical evidence shows a consistent correlation between the use of physical punishment and misbehavior, suggesting that even if some punishment is generated by the misbehavior, its use has failed to curtail the misbehavior. Evidence from a longitudinal study suggests that punishment actually increases the likelihood of conduct problems among children. Cohen and Brook(1985) retracted children 10 years after their parents' discipline had been measured. They summarized their study by noting that "...the magnitude of the estimates and the fact that the influence begins so early in life leads us to conclude that the predominant influence is from punishment to conduct problems. Once begun, punishment has a more potent negative effect on the temperamentally vulnerable."

Second, punishments reduce the ability of punishers to influence the behavior of children.

Other things being equal, children prefer to be in pleasant surroundings. To the extent that fear of punishment makes an environment unpleasant, children will attempt to escape that environment. Often, punishments are effective only in teaching children not to misbehave "in full view" of the punishers. Parents have at least a difficult (if not impossible) task if they hope to teach a child that what they are punishing is an action rather than getting caught for an action. If a child who will be punished for, say, breaking a lamp has broken other things for which he was not punished, it will be hard to show the nature of what it is that differentiates the two classes other than that he was caught by a punisher.

Parents who punish their children for aggression may be successful in moving aggression outside the home, but not in stopping the aggression itself.

Evidence about delinquency shows both that delinquents have received a good deal of punishment from their parents and that they spend more time unsupervised than do their nondelinquent peers. Children who are punished frequently can be expected to try to escape their punitive home environments, thereby making it more difficult for parents to supervise them or teach them the kinds of behavior parents would like to promote.

Third, punishment enhances the value of what is being punished.

It is reasonable to assume that what requires punishment must be attractive. The use of punishment signals the value of something that is being punished, thereby teaching children to want what is prohibited.

During the process of learning about the environment, children learn that punishment is used to try to make people stop doing something they would like to do (even as rewards are used to try to get people to do what they might not otherwise do). Children see that no one is punished to stop them from doing
unpleasant things. For unpleasant things, a warning about unattractive features is typically sufficient.

If a parent wants to stop a child from eating a bitter fruit, he need only be sure the child understands what being bitter means and point out that the fruit will not taste good. Adding a punishment to forbid eating the fruit implies that there would otherwise be grounds for eating it. Punishments are used to stop people from doing attractive things.

Children, who are beginning to form appetites and tastes, can be influenced by punishment to desire forbidden objects. An experiment demonstrates how this works.

Aronson and Carlsmith4 asked children in preschool to rank five toys. After a child had done so, the experimenter put the toy that child had ranked second on a table. The children had been randomly assigned to one of two groups. If the child was in the first group, the experimenter said “if you play with this, I’ll be annoyed, but you can play with this and this...” If the child was in the second group, the experimenter told the child not to play with the toy on the table and “if you played with it, I would be very angry. I would have to take all of my toys and go home and never come back again. You can play with all the others...but if you played with the ___ I would think you were just a baby.” All children were asked to rank the toys approximately 45 days later. Whereas only a minority of the children who were merely told not to play with their second preference (or the experimenter would be annoyed) increased the ranking of that toy (4 of 22 children), a majority of those who were threatened with punishment had done so (14 of 22).

Conversely, what is used for punishment is likely to take on a negative valence in the eyes of a child. Children as well as adults know that punishments are designed to give pain. They therefore learn what adults believe to be painful by noting what is used for punishment.

Information about values is conveyed when children are given school work, chores, or isolation as punishments. Unfortunately, the use of valuable activities as punishment diminishes the value of those activities in the eyes of children who have been punished.

Deprivations, too, affect values. Thus, parents who take away dessert as punishment enhance the value of eating dessert. Those who forbid watching television increase the desirability of TV.

Fourth, the use of punishment introduces an option or alternative to the action that is desired.

When punishments are used in training, they must be linked to forbidden behavior. The link sets up a conditional relationship such that the child is taught that if he does x (the forbidden act), he will receive y (the punishment). This conditional relationship is equivalent to “either don’t do x or y will happen.” That is, the statement means that if a child does what he has been told not do, then he will be punished. Alternatively, he will be punished unless he refrains from doing x. This equivalence has undesirable consequences.

In the first instance, parents who intend to teach children not to x are teaching them, instead, to choose between taking a y or not doing x. Let me use an example.

Suppose that parents want to teach Jimmy not to tease his sister Susie. If he teases Susie, they say, Jimmy will not be allowed to go to the movies. Jimmy can scan his choices. Perhaps: “I could tease Susie and watch television instead of going to the movies,” or “I wonder if the movie is as much fun as teasing Susie.” In other words, introduction of a punishment has allowed Jimmy a legitimate choice that includes doing what is putatively forbidden.

In the second instance, Jimmy may figure out ways to avoid painful consequences from what is deemed by the punisher to be painful. He may well accept the choice of teasing Susie and not going to the movies. That is, Jimmy may find attractive alternatives to going to the movies.

Another option for Jimmy is to become accustomed to punishment so that such punishment will not hurt. This he could do by deciding not to like movies. If punishments include being sent off alone, he could decide to enjoy solitude. Children learn to repeat behaviors that result in “reinforcement” through such negative attention as being told they are wrong.5,6

Physical punishments are not an exception. Children can learn to ignore physical injuries.7 In fact, pain-giving consequences seem to acquire positive value through exposure.8,9

There is reason to believe that those who expect to receive pain may actually seek it. For such children, punishments may enhance the attractiveness of forbidden behavior.

Some experimental evidence lends credence to this possibility. Walster, Aronson, and Brown10 randomly assigned students to one of two conditions. In one, they were led to believe that they would be required to eat terrible foods consisting of caterpillars, grasshoppers, and squid. In the other, the students were led to believe they would be fed cream puffs, pie, cookies, and fruit. Individually, the students participated in an experiment during which they gave themselves shocks. Those assigned to the painful food condition administered more shocks to themselves.

A consequence of punishment, then, seems to be that children come to expect pain and become immune to its deterrent effects. That immunity seems to make them care little about pain, whether it is their own or that of others.

Fifth, the use of punishment teaches children to be egocentric.

Punishments can be effective only if the child is taught to care for consequences to himself. A parent who uses punishment in teaching children implies that the child should be concerned to avoid his own pains.

Hoffman11 found negative correlations between the use of power-oriented punishment and consideration of others. My own longitudinal study was based on retraction, as adults, adolescent boys for whom there had been direct observations of families decades before. This study indicates that those
whose parents used physical punishments were least likely to be altruistic and most likely to be self-centered.13

Let me summarize my main points:

1. An unintended consequence of punishment includes the fact that punishment serves as an endorsement for giving pain. Although children may know that they can not give pain under all circumstances, if they accept the punisher’s legitimacy, they must acknowledge that giving pain to control others is sometimes acceptable.

2. An unintended consequence of punishment includes the fact that punishment reduces the probability of influencing a child by example or discussion. Yet we know that a good deal of socialization is carried out by showing children how to act and by helping children understand what is expected of them.

3. An unintended consequence of punishment includes making the forbidden more attractive. Punishment adds covert value to misbehavior.

4. Punishments also reduce what might have been prohibited to behavior that can be chosen. By providing choices, rather than enforcing desired actions, the use of punishment dilutes the messages parents would like to convey.

5. Egocentrism, too, is an unintended consequence of punishment. This fact makes it particularly difficult to teach children to be considerate of others while using punishment in the process.

REFERENCES


RESPONSE

How Can Generative Theories of the Effects of Punishment be Tested?

Patricia Cohen, PhD

For a number of us at this conference who have concluded on the basis of the substantial literature1–7 and their own empirical data8,9,10 that punishment is a serious risk for poor child and adult outcome, the relative sparsity of studies that provide unambiguous evidence of negative effects of spanking specifically, and corporal punishment as compared with noncorporal punishment,11 comes as a shock. By unambiguous evidence we require longitudinal investigation with appropriate controls for potential confounding variables, particularly the child’s behavioral elicitation of the punishment. Dr. McCord has provided a series of theoretically coherent reasons why we would expect such negative outcomes. I would like to focus on some of the reasons why research is still needed on this topic.

It is hard, possibly even impossible, to study spanking or corporal punishment without contamination from the other variables with which it is moderately to strongly correlated, particularly the tendency to use punishment more frequently, and to use a greater variety of punishment methods. Current advocates of spanking propose considerable restrictions as to the age of the child and the circumstances, methods, and frequency of use that can be endorsed. Is it likely ever to be possible to determine whether punishment has positive or negative effects when used within these restrictions? It is useful to consider this question within current paradigms for determining the effects of any treatment on a particular problem.

EFFICACY RESEARCH

When determining the efficacy of a given medical, surgical, or other treatment on a disease or other problem, the preferred model is the randomized trial. Randomization provides the only clear guaran-
tee that the outcome has a specific effect that is not biased by selection into treatment, placebo effects, etc. With regard to the investigation of effects of spanking or any other punishment on children, it is widely agreed that research involving randomization of parental punishment responses to children's behavioral infractions is unethical except within very narrow limits, because of the risk of negative child outcome or side effects. These limitations mean that such research is confined to short-term minor variations in reaction to specific situations, usually within clinic populations. The limitation of efficacy research is that valid generalizations are restricted:

- to the population that was studied, including age, diagnostic, and other selective factors. These factors may be very critical if they include selection for or bias with regard to a particular history of spanking or punishment experiences;
- to the efficacy of the treatment technique under controlled experimental conditions;
- to the efficacy of the treatment when administered within protocol guidelines; and
- to the effects of the treatment within the typically short-term period being included in the study.

Effectiveness research involves research on the consequences of a given treatment as commonly administered in the community. This research, then, is population-oriented, which includes particularly the question of how the treatment or behavior being examined is embedded in the nexus of other influences. Thus, effectiveness research attempts to address the question of what the effects are, taking into account these related variables.

It is not possible to obtain a current estimate of the effects of spanking within the proposed guidelines (such as child age, frequency, and context). The reason is that parents who spank cannot be assumed to do so within those guidelines, and we are generally heavily reliant on what children or parents say they do as our measure of what they in fact do. In fact, some of the clear generalizations that it is possible to make from past research are:

1. that parents who spank are more likely also to use other forms of corporal punishment and more likely to use a greater variety of verbal and other punitive methods;
2. that more corporal punishment of a younger child is associated with more corporal and other punishment at an older age, and
3. that parents are more likely to use aversive techniques of discipline when they are angry or irritable, depressed, fatigued, and stressed, suggesting that it is often not a function of what the child does as much as a function of the parent's state. In addition, spanking is closely related to the parent's own childhood experience.

Thus, much of the observationally-based (as contrasted with experimentally-based) research uses the strategy of grouping these correlated parent behaviors to examine corporal punishment, harsh punishment, or power-assertive punishment as a set of behaviors on which parents vary. Using this sort of measure as an indicator, many studies have shown negative long-term effects on children, controlling for initial child characteristics.

Punishment as thus measured is also related to a number of other parenting variables, including low parental warmth and parent-child attachment, parental hostility and inconsistency in management, and inadequate monitoring. These correlates are likely to operate in complex feedback chains with punishment, making unambiguous attribution of effect extremely difficult. As is well-known, parents are also more likely to punish a child who chronically misbehaves, and we are just beginning to understand how this cycle begins.

For these reasons, studies in which interventions are not attempted are more likely to generalize to the population than are experimental studies. However, the consistency of observed nonexperimental data with generative theories regarding the influence of punishment, such as those presented here by Dr. McCord, may be assessed. Experimental evidence on these issues may be most usefully obtained with animal studies, where ethical issues are often thought to be less constraining. Although more expert opinion is needed, my reading of the animal literature suggests that punishment is much less reliable a technique than reward, and that it frequently has undesirable side effects. For this reason it is generally not recommended for use in the training of domestic pets. If this generalization is true, it is hard to see how we could recommend that comparable techniques be used on our children.

Finally, I would like to comment on measures of effect size. Observationally-based research on punishment may frequently show very small proportions of variance in long-term outcome to be associated with prior punishment. These variance proportions may be quite misleading, as they are consistent with substantial differences in the rates of extreme negative outcome. In addition, small associations translated into society-wide effects can account for large differences between societies, or large changes over historical time. One need only note that the association between a player's batting average and the outcome of a given at-bat is only marginally greater than zero. Nevertheless, we are happy to pay millions of dollars to hire a player whose average is a few percentage points higher. In a society in which punishment of children is so normative, it is reasonable to contemplate the possibility of non-trivial improvement of the quality of life of children and adults were this practice to be abandoned. Both research in learning theory and the experiences of millions of parents have shown that discipline without corporal punishment can be authoritative, constructive, and successful.

REFERENCES

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