

School-wide Discipline: Limitations of Punishment

Over thirty years of research supports the effectiveness of a positive, proactive approach to discipline (as opposed to a punitive approach) not only in the prevention of behavior problems but also in their correction. Effective and successful educators hold high expectations, and enforce rules in a firm, fair, and consistent manner.

Focusing more on the use of positive, proactive techniques for increasing the likelihood that students will exhibit appropriate behavior creates a positive, and safe school environment.

Schools implementing Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) promote quality teacher-student relationships. Teachers strive to develop positive relationships with students, and create a sense of community among the students themselves. Implementing PBIS with fidelity will create a classroom and school-wide climate in which students follow expectations for appropriate behavior out of respect for the teachers and one another.

Over thirty years of research has supported a preventative approach to school discipline. Effective educators guide rather than control students. They view disciplinary encounters not merely as situations that may require punishment as a means of correction, but as opportunities to teach appropriate behavior and help develop self-discipline while preventing future behavior problems. Similar to their approach to prevention, effective educators respond to misbehavior by showing support and caring, while remaining firm, communicating clear expectations of appropriate behavior, and imposing fair consequences.

When responding to misbehavior, educators tend to use one of two general types of behavioral techniques: punitive and replacement.

Replacement techniques

These strategies are intended to achieve the same goals as punitive methods, but focus on teaching or strengthening desired behaviors that might replace the undesired behavior. Common replacement techniques include direct instruction, positive reinforcement, modeling, social problem solving, social emotional learning, conflict resolution, and anger management training.

Punitive techniques

Events that serve to decrease an individual's behavior are considered to be punishers. Punishment may range from mild forms of punishment (e.g., unpleasant verbal reprimands, taking away privileges, taking away reinforcers) to harsher forms of punishment such as, suspension, removal to an alternative program, or expulsion. Educators should understand the pros and cons about using punishment, as schools frequently build punishing, or aversive, consequences into school-wide and classroom plans designed to help manage student behaviors.

Adapted from: Bear, G. G. (2008), *Best practices in school psychology V* (pp. 1403–1420). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists

“What Every Teacher Should Know About Punishment Techniques”, www.interventioncentral.org

Punishment: Limitations and Alternatives

It is not unreasonable to use mild forms of punishment as part of the discipline process in schools. Most educators who are effective in correcting misbehavior use both punitive and replacement techniques. Research indicates that punishment is sometimes accompanied by significant negative side effects. Students who are regularly the object of punishment may over time begin to show a drop in positive attitudes toward school (resulting in poor attendance and work performance), have a more negative perception of teachers, and adopt a more punitive manner in interacting with peers and adults (Martens & Meller, 1990). Teachers sometimes find punishment to be effective as a classroom behavior management tool, especially in the short term. Because punishment tends to rapidly stop problem behaviors, the teacher in turn is positively reinforced for using it (Martens & Meller, 1990). On the surface, punishment may appear to be a powerful and attractive behavior management strategy. But using punishment as a strategy can come at a significant cost. Simply put, punishment techniques of any kind are strong behavioral medicine and should be used with care and compassion.

It is important to understand the limitations of punitive techniques and the power of replacement techniques

Limitations of punishment

Effective educators clearly recognize the limitations of punishment:

1. Teaches students what not to do and fails to teach desired or replacement behavior
2. Effects are often short term
3. Teaches students to aggress toward or punish others
4. Fails to address the multiple factors that typically contribute to a student's behavior
5. Likely to produce undesirable side effects (e.g., anger, retaliation, dislike toward the teacher or school, social withdrawal)
6. Creates a negative classroom and school climate
7. May act as a reinforcer (e.g., suspension may be more enjoyable than being in school)
8. May create negative emotional side effects (e.g., fear anxiety)
9. Person(s) issuing punishers may become conditioned punisher
10. Person applying punisher may be reinforced for doing so (teacher experiences immediate relief once student is removed from classroom)

Considerations before using punishment

Before using any punishment techniques, educators should consider the possible reasons for the misbehavior. Some of the potential reasons for the misbehavior may be due to lack of awareness, lack of ability, attention-seeking behavior, or oppositional behavior. Taking each of these reasons into consideration will allow educators to respond to the misbehavior in proactive ways. If a student's behavior is due to lack of ability or awareness, then teaching must be the response to the behavior. If the behavior is due to attention-seeking, and is not highly disruptive, planned ignoring may help to reduce and eliminate the behavior. If the behavior is due to opposition and defiance, building staff should be trained in precision requests as an attempt to more effectively respond to defiant misbehavior.

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