



By Gregory Ramey, PhD, child psychologist at Dayton Children's and *Dayton Daily News* columnist

## Punishing Your Children

A frustrated mom recently told me she threatened her 7-year-old son with “I’m going to call Santa and tell him to return your gifts.” “I really don’t like to punish my kids, but I really didn’t know what else to do!”

Parents and mental health professionals are uncomfortable with this idea of punishment. We like to keep the focus on rewarding appropriate actions rather than punishing bad behavior. When we do use punishment, we typically use code words like “negative consequences,” “penalty” or speak of kids making “choices” that result in them going in time out or being restricted to their rooms.

Punishment is good for kids, and parents shouldn’t be reluctant to prepare kids for the real world in which punishment for bad behavior is an integral part of our society. We get fired for poor performance at work, get tickets for speeding or incarcerated for violating society’s rules. While kids are punished, it is often done inappropriately. The frustrated mom had good intentions in wanting to discipline her son. However, threatening something that she would never do was ineffective and counterproductive, diminishing credibility with her child.

**Here are some guidelines to punish children effectively.**

1. **When you punish bad behavior, be sure to reward good behavior.** Punishment tells a child what not to do. It’s important, particularly with young children, to teach them alternative ways to act. It’s fine to use time out to stop aggressive behavior with your toddler, but also be sure to praise cooperative behavior. If your child has a problem with yelling and screaming when she is angry, teach her acceptable ways to express those feelings.
2. **Never threaten what you can’t deliver.** In moments of frustration, we all say things we really don’t mean. Good parenting is all about credibility, teaching your child that you mean what you say and say what you mean. You lose that trust when you fail to follow through with your promises or threats.
3. **The punishment should occur soon after the misbehavior.** Here’s one of many problems with threatening to withhold Christmas presents. Kids just don’t connect some misdeed performed today with a consequence that is delayed by weeks or even days. For children

younger than 5 years or so, the punishment should occur virtually immediately after they misbehave.

4. **Connect the punishment with the misbehavior.** If your teenager gets caught drinking alcohol while driving, the logical consequence would be to restrict his driving privileges. If your daughter is performing poorly in school, restrict TV or other diversions so that she spends more time studying.
5. **Don't talk so much.** I don't understand the need that many parents seem to have to explain, justify, discuss and defend their punishment with their kids. Say it once and keep it simple. Have enough confidence in your own parenting skills and don't overwhelm your kids with explanations they neither want nor need.
6. **Individualize the punishment.** This is tricky, as what may be negative for one child may be neutral or positive for another. A punishment is anything that a child doesn't like, so you first need to answer the question "What is important to my child?" There are some types of punishment that I really don't like. I urged parents to stay away from hitting their kids or taking away participation in sports or activities (eg, Boy Scouts, church youth groups, working after school, etc.) that generally have positive effects on youngsters.
7. **Stay the course.** Punishment, like rewards, will not instantly correct misbehavior. Be consistent and prepared to maintain your discipline plan even when you don't see an immediate improvement in your child's behavior.

Effective discipline is a matter of arranging positive consequences to encourage good behavior and punishing bad behavior when it occurs. Both are critical to raising happy and mentally healthy children.

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