

# **Discipline and Punishment**

## **A Fact Sheet developed by the Beach Center on Families and Disability**

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Undesirable behavior makes it hard for children with disabilities to be integrated into the community. These behaviors (e.g., hitting, self-injury, arm flapping, etc.) also restrict learning and relationships, besides providing extra stress on families.

Various methods can reduce challenging behavior. One way is positive behavioral support, a method that tries to find "why" the child demonstrates the behavior, then teaches a more appropriate behavior to meet that need.

Another method is aversive conditioning. This method often uses quick applications of discomfort or pain in response to challenging behavior. Applications may be a sharp criticism, slap, spanking, offensive sound, removal of a desired object, isolation, an offensive spray, or another unattractive response.

While some people support this method (in different degrees), others do not. They say it does not teach what to do, only what not to do. Often-mentioned flaws are:

- Aversive conditioning is not effective over time. It may work for a short time, but unwanted behavior re-emerges.
- When a teacher yells or hits, then the child is taught that yelling or hitting is an acceptable reaction to an event.
- Basic learning comes from imitation.
- A child often learns only not to do the behavior when the punishing person is present. In essence, the child learns not to "get caught."
- Punishment can act as a reward. Some children may enjoy seeing an adult get upset and lose control. The children may like the attention (even though it is negative) they receive.
- Challenging behaviors frequently become worse. Children can become more aggressive, withdraw, redirect their frustration and strike out at others, or escape the setting to avoid punishment.
- Children who receive aversive conditioning may learn to fear or dislike the person applying the punishment. They also may dislike the setting, objects, and events associated with the punishment.
- Children's self esteem generally decreases dramatically when punishment is applied.
- The person applying punishment often may resort to harsh discipline more than he or she needs to because of its immediate effect and not use other methods. Worse, the applier may use heavier doses of punishment or become addicted to applying pain.
- Risk of injury exists when aversive conditioning is used. The person applying punishment may also be charged with assault or child abuse.
- Application of harsh punishment does not examine "why" the behavior occurred and try to prevent the behavior from occurring.

Positive behavioral support methods recognize that challenging behaviors have been found to stem from attention needs, sensory stimuli, biochemical factors, escape, crowding, staff change, exercise, task repetition, and other well documented reasons. Besides eliminating the cause, positive behavioral supports offer alternatives to aversive conditioning in reducing challenging behavior, including:

- Teaching new skills so behavior is not needed
- Changing the environment to better fit individual
- Ignoring behavior (if not dangerous)
- Letting the behavior (if not harmful) be done repeatedly until person tires of it
- Substituting constructive activity
- Removing the person from stimuli and giving the person time to relax

These nonaversive behavior strategies are humane, effective, socially accepted, legal, practical, and contribute to positive attitudes toward people with disabilities.

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