

Why Punishment - Based Systems Don't Work: Yet we're stuck with them

by Kathie F. Nunley

<http://help4teachers.com/punishment.htm>

Research tells us that punishment is ineffective. Psychologists are in agreement that punishment does more harm than good. Thousands of studies and years of practice show what punishment does teach - fear aggression and avoidance. People who are punished do not quickly learn to stop a behavior - what they quickly learn is next time don't get caught, or let's just avoid the whole situation if at all possible.

So why does punishment persist in our society, in our homes and in our schools? Is it because it's easier? Goodness- no. Everyone knows if your number one goal is to change a behavior, punishment would be the last thing you'd choose.

However, in situations where punishment is used, changing the behavior is not usually our number one goal - taking care of some uncomfortable or unpleasant emotion generally is.

We punish in anger. We punish in frustration. We punish in an attempt to establish dominance. At the moment, changing the behavior is not the priority.

So, if "non-aversive" (without punishment) methods are better, quicker and more efficient, why are we not seeing them in every classroom in the country? Just the opposite is true. In fact nearly all classrooms use some variation of the biggest punishment-based system of all - (the one where the game is to see how many times your name gets on the board and how many checks get next to it before you are out the door).

Those who are concerned with violence and aggression in our schools should look to one of the big causes - the widespread use of punishment - based management systems. How can we, who are so genuinely concerned about children and America's future allow such systems to persevere? Three main reasons:

1. In order for non-aversive techniques to work, the environment inside the classroom must be more desirable than the environment outside the classroom.

This is a tough issue but at the very heart of the matter. Ask yourself, "do students want to be here?" If I send them out, has their situation improved or worsened, in their mind?

Being in the classroom should be the reward. Students who show respect, participate and follow rules are "allowed" to stay. If this thought causes you to chuckle, then you may want to go back to the last question. If students feel like being in a school classroom is punishment, then any behavior they can exhibit to get out of that environment is being reinforced when you "force" them to leave. Imagine how you would feel if someone "forced" you to get rid of a bad headache.

2. Tradition tells us that rules come with punishment, not rewards. Look at the rules in your classroom. Do you have rules, and then a list of what happens if you don't follow the rules? When was the last time you saw a list of rules and then a list of benefits that come to those who follow them. Sometimes I've seen lists of rewards but they are sitting next to the list of punishments and I know from personal experience as the mother of 4, that even in those classrooms, my children never experienced the things listed in the reward category (despite them following the rules). What would students think if all that was listed were rules and benefits?

3. Punishment is negatively reinforcing to the punisher.

That means that the actual act of punishment makes us, the punisher, feel better. Generally punishments are given out when someone under our control has gotten out of our control. A child breaks curfew, a student talks while we're giving instruction, our dog chews our favorite shoes, etc. We are angry. Angry is O.K. It is a natural, normal emotion. However, it is generally uncomfortable and an emotion most of us seek to get rid of sooner rather than later. So, punishment does that for us. When we punish, we feel an immediate decrease in the anger emotion - instant relief. And so, who has learned? The punisher has learned. The punisher has learned, next time I feel this way, just punish and I'll feel better. The punishee has learned, next time don't get caught, next time don't come, this is not a place I want to be.

What does all this mean for the classroom teacher? Should we never get angry, never lash out, always make sure the classroom is full of fun at all costs so students are thrilled to attend? Well that would all be nice in a perfect world. But that is not our world. We are human. We get angry sometimes and so be it. Classrooms can't be all fun. Work is not always fun, and learning is work. But I think an important first step is an awareness of these relationships and principles of classroom management. Awareness helps us share these realities with students. Awareness helps build and preserve the learning relationship. Classrooms should be welcoming. Classrooms should be places where students always feel valued and encouraged, not belittled and degraded. When these relationships are solid, then students understand us and we can better understand them. And things will begin to improve - a lot.

Kathie F. Nunley is an educational psychologist, author, researcher and speaker living in southern New Hampshire. Developer of the Layered Curriculum® method of instruction, Dr. Nunley has authored several books and articles on teaching in mixed-ability classrooms and other problems facing today's teachers. Full references and additional teaching and parental tips are available at: <http://Help4Teachers.com>

(originally written in 2002, this article may be used in any non-profit print publication so long as it is used in its entirety including the bottom author credit paragraph).