

# How to Punish Without Punishing Yourself

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## **Explain and enforce the punishment**

It was late in the afternoon on July 4. We had planned to go to the evening fireworks display. Our children were arguing more than usual. I threatened them, hoping they would stop: "If you don't quit arguing, we are not going to the fireworks." What a foolish thing to say. If they did not go, we did not go; there was no way we would have found a baby-sitter at 5:00 p.m. on the Fourth of July, as every teenager in town was going to the fireworks. The children did not stop, and we did not go. We were punished along with our children.

A better punishment would have been to separate them when they started arguing, and make them play alone. I did not think. I got angry and made a foolish threat that ended up costing me more than my children. Think carefully before talking. Anger can get you in trouble. Think about how the punishment will affect you and the rest of the family. Will this punishment disrupt me? If you have a child who likes to control you or others in the family, choose his punishments carefully. Be sure that the punishment only affects your child who misbehaved and not anyone else. Do not say, "We are not going until you clean your room." If you are going somewhere he wants to go, this threat may work. If he does not want to go, you have just given your child a lot of power. No one can go until the room is clean. You are giving this child control over the entire family. Who is being punished?

What do you do with your child who is not permitted to go somewhere with the rest of the family? Get a baby-sitter and then go and have a good time. You may want to have your child pay for some or all of the cost of the baby-sitter. Your child will learn that his misbehavior will not prevent the family from having fun. Select punishments that impact your child, not you. Your other children will learn something, too. Misbehavior only affects the one who misbehaves.

Parents often wonder how to take TV privileges from one child. If they have to shut off the TV, the other children will be punished. That's true. Do not shut the TV off because one child is restricted. That punishes everyone. Watch TV as usual. The child who is being punished has to go in another room. That's the true punishment. If no one can watch TV because he cannot watch TV, you are giving your child control over the entire family. Who is being punished?

## **Use Punishments That Are Easy to Enforce**

Choose punishments that you can enforce easily. This will enable you to follow through. If a punishment is inconvenient or laborious, you will be less consistent. A father told me that he would lock up the video game for three hours whenever his son would disobey:

"How often do you lock up the game?"

"Once or twice a week."

"Does your son obey all the other days?"

"If he did, would I be talking with you?"

"Why don't you lock up the game every time he disobeys?"

"If I locked that game up every time he did not do what he was supposed to do, I would be locking that thing up ten times a day."

"Why don't you do that?"

"It would take me forever with all those cables and plugs."

Dad is using a punishment that is inconvenient, so he does not follow through consistently. His son is not learning to obey; he is learning that he can disobey as often as he likes and only lose his game once or twice a week. Dad has probably identified an effective punishment-taking away the video game-but he needs to be more consistent. He needs to lock up the game every time. If the video game cables make this punishment cumbersome, then Dad needs a more effective way of administering the punishment.

### **Explain the Punishment**

Tell your child the purpose of the punishment. When you explain punishment, you increase your child's understanding and cooperation. Explain that you are on his side. You are not the enemy. You are trying to help him make better decisions in the future:

"I am not trying to hurt you or make you angry. You are being punished because you made a poor choice about your behavior. I want you to learn from this so you will think differently next time. I do not want you to think I am out to get you. I am not. I am out to help you."

Explain that you are not trying to get even. Ignore irritating comments such as, "You expect me to believe you are doing this for me. Sure you are." Only explain it once. Do not become caught in lengthy explanations and arguments.

### **Use Punishments That Are Realistic**

Select punishments that fit the crime. Use reality consequences. A child who makes a mess cleans the mess. A child who pees in the refrigerator should clean the refrigerator. A child who carelessly breaks something should fix it or work to pay for it. A child who comes home late should not go out the next day. A child who does not put his dirty clothes in the laundry basket does his own wash. Children who can operate CD players, VCRs, and computers can operate a washing machine. These examples illustrate consequences that are relevant to the misbehavior. They have more meaning to your child. They help teach a lesson.

Some children can be trusted to choose their punishment. This helps them learn more quickly. It shows them that you want to be fair, and it encourages them to be mature and responsible:

"Your behavior has been very good until this incident. I am going to trust you to choose your own punishment for this misbehavior. I know you will be fair and just. Let me know what you decide."

### **Bigger Does Not Mean Better**

Mild punishments are usually more productive than harsh punishments. Keep things in perspective. Don't bring out a cannon to get your children to hang up the towels. Punishments that are short and sweet teach better lessons. Large punishments often create feelings of anger or revenge. When your child feels angry, little learning takes place. When your child believes that you have been unjust in your use of punishment, your child often retaliates or argues. This can start a negative cycle. You punish, your child becomes angry and retaliates by misbehaving again, maybe worse than before. You punish again, perhaps a little more severely, just to make your point. Your child becomes more angry and retaliates by misbehaving again. I have worked with families where the parents were punishing their children for things that happened months ago.

### **Using Restriction Constructively**

Restriction is a useful punishment for children and adolescents. Being grounded is a type of restriction. Restriction means loss of one or more privileges for a specific length of time. You will have to determine what the privilege should be. Some examples are loss of TV time, going to bed early, being restricted from seeing friends, no telephone, no video games, no toys, and so on. Choose a restriction that is easy to enforce and that impacts the offender and no one else.

Restricting children for misbehavior is a popular form of punishment. Unfortunately, few parents use restriction effectively. Most parents begin with a period of time that is too long. As adults, we forget that a week or two can be forever to a child. Long periods of restriction are often the result of an argument, hurt feelings, or anger, and they can backfire, causing your child to feel persecuted or picked on. This can turn into feelings of revenge, and a cycle of retaliation begins.

There is a built-in problem with restriction. Many children who become grounded or restricted feel there is no hope. Without hope, there is little reason to behave: "Why behave? I can't go out for a week anyway." Then the child decides that everyone else should be just as miserable.

There is a workable solution to this problem. If you decide to restrict your child, choose an even number of days. Choose four, six, eight, or twelve days, depending on the seriousness of the offense and the age of your child. Twelve days is usually the maximum effective period—anything longer, and you run the risk of retaliation. Next, explain that each good day will result in one day taken off the end of the restriction period. Let's assume that you have restricted your child for six days, Wednesday through Monday. If your child has a good day on Wednesday, then drop Monday. If Thursday is a good day, then drop Sunday. If things go well on Friday, then drop Saturday. Friday is the last day of restriction. You may want to draw a chart or calendar so your child can cross off days and see his progress.

This technique works extremely well. It lets your child know that you want to be fair, even though you mean business. It also lets your child know that you expect proper behavior even while he is restricted. Being restricted is not a license to be uncooperative. Most of all, this approach gives your child a strong incentive to behave immediately—no sitting around the house being miserable for a week.

The success of this strategy depends on how well you define a good day. Then stick to what you say. It helps a great deal to write down what you require.

Be sure that a good day is truly a good day. Do not drop a day unless it is deserved. If you drop days too easily, you will be defeating the purpose of this approach. Your child can be restricted and still earn other activities. For example, your child could be restricted from the telephone and still be earning a contract for a new CD. I have worked with preschool teachers who have modified this technique. They use minute restrictions. When a child misuses a toy, the child is restricted from the toy for ten minutes. If the child behaves, he can earn the toy back in five minutes.