

Instructive Discipline is Built on Understanding

by David Elkind

My dictionary gives two major definitions for the term discipline. One of these is “training that develops self control, character or orderliness, and efficiency.” The other is, “treatment that corrects and punishes.” These definitions start from two quite different conceptions of the child and of childrearing. The first begins with the idea that children are born neither social nor anti-social and have to be trained to acquire the rules and routines of healthy interpersonal exchange. In contrast, the other definition starts off with the idea that children come into the world with anti-social pre-dispositions (original sin, if you will) that have to be extinguished. One idea of childrearing and discipline is, therefore, *instructive*; it is a matter of teaching children social skills and attitudes. The other conception of childrearing and discipline is *punitive*, a matter of stamping out misbehavior through punishment.

The difference in our starting conceptions of discipline is important because it determines how we look at, and treat, what we as adults label *misbehavior*. First of all, and most importantly, when we view discipline as a learning experience we will look at so-called *misbehavior* as an opportunity for instruction. Secondly, we will also appreciate that discipline presents a creative challenge for which there are no ready-made solutions, only a number of possibilities. Finally, when we view discipline as a teaching moment, we will also

appreciate that children learn differently at different age levels and that we need to adjust our instruction accordingly. We cannot teach infants and young children about prejudice in the same way that we would approach this issue with adolescents. Instructive discipline is developmentally appropriate.

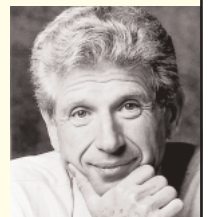
From an instructive discipline perspective, therefore, a child who hits another child presents a problem to be solved, not a behavior to be punished. Why did one

child hit the other? Was the hitting a response to provocation, to frustration, to envy, or was it a response to something going on at home? Only when we understand the child’s action more fully, can we engage in meaningful positive instruction. The major drawback with instructive discipline is that it takes time. Yet sometimes we need to invest time in order to save time. If we understand why a child engages in a particular form of behavior, we have a good chance of preventing it and of having to deal with it in the future.

If, on the other hand, we think of discipline as punitive, our focus will be limited to finding the kinds of punishment most effective in getting rid of the undesirable behavior. From this standpoint, the challenge is to find the punishment which *best fits the crime*. A punitive discipline approach assumes that you can permanently stamp out *misbehavior without* exploring the causes of these actions. Likewise, inasmuch as causes are not included in the punishment equation, there is no need to think about age differences. Both children and adolescents can be punished by depriving them of some privilege, activity, or prized possession.

The use of punishment does indeed ensure that some form of learning takes

David Elkind is a professor of child development at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. He has written extensively and is perhaps best known for his popular books — *The Hurried Child*, *All Grown Up and No Place to Go*, and *Miseducation*. Professor Elkind is a past president of NAEYC. He currently is the co-host of the Lifetime television series *Kids These Days*.



place. Yet it is not always clear what children learn when they are punished. They may well learn that something bad will happen to them if they don't behave in a certain way. But if the causes of their misbehavior are not addressed, they may well create their own subroutines to by-pass the limits they tested or the rules they broke. A child who is deprived of her snack for hitting another child will only be made angrier at the punishment. In all likelihood she will find ways to hit the other child when no one is looking or in ways that cannot be readily detected. For many children, punishment in and of itself becomes a creative challenge, a sort of dare to find ways of indulging in the punishable behavior without being caught.

An example may help to make the difference between the two approaches concrete. Suppose a child is acting up and disturbing the other children. If we take the punishment perspective we might use the *time out* technique and put the child in

another room or in an area away from the other children. Presumably this removal will teach the child to be less disruptive in the future. If, on the other hand, we take an instructive position, we might have a *time in* (Weininger, 1998). That is, we might sit with the child and try to find out why she is upset. It might be the case that the child had a right to be angry, that he was excluded from a playgroup, was called a name, or was pushed. Once we have an idea of why the child was troubled, we have a much better chance of helping him to calm down and to rejoin the group. In the *time out*, a child learns that her feelings are ignored, and therefore of no value. A child given a *time in*, on the other hand, learns that his feelings are important and will be attended to. Which child is more likely to act out again?

Please understand, I am not saying that punishment is never to be used. I am saying that it has to be used thoughtfully and in such a way that it doesn't backfire.

The most effective punishment is that which immediately follows the deed and is intrinsic to it. A child who touches a hot stove will get burned, and that punishment will teach him to be careful around the stove in the future.

Unfortunately, social situations are not that straightforward, and a child can hurt another child physically or psychologically without experiencing any immediate guilt or anxiety himself. And, the child may not understand the causes of his or her misbehavior. That is where instructive, non-punitive discipline comes in. Such discipline helps children appreciate both the causes and the consequences of their actions. Instructive discipline is the most effective, and positive, way to teach children healthy social interactions.

Reference

Weininger, O. (1998). *T.I.P.S. Time In Parenting Strategies*. Binghamton, NY: esf Publishers.