How to discipline your children without rewards or punishment

March 25, 2015 3.18pm EDT

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Many parents are moving towards "gentle parenting", where they choose not to use rewards (sticker charts, lollies, chocolates, TV time as "bribes") and punishments (taking away "privileges", time-out, smacking) to encourage good behaviour, but encourage good behaviour for the sake of doing the right thing.

Gentle parents argue that to offer rewards and punishments overrides a child's natural inclination towards appropriate behaviour by teaching them to behave in certain ways purely to receive a reward, or to avoid punishment.

What is discipline?

For most people it would seem impossible to discipline without rewards and punishments. However, it depends on your understanding of "discipline". Discipline always has a silent
“self” in front of it because it’s about controlling yourself.

So, in the case of parenting, it’s about helping children learn to manage themselves, their feelings, their behaviour and their impulses. We want our children to develop a sound moral compass, to sort behaviours, impulses and feelings into “appropriate” and “inappropriate” and be able to justify judgements about their choices.

When the term discipline is used, it is often in a sense that implies punishment. This meaning is implied because discipline is associated with a behaviourist view of how humans learn. Behaviourism is associated with conditioning, a process whereby learning is an association between behaviour and good or bad outcome, just like in Pavlov’s dog experiment.

However, behaviourism is used less and less because human behaviour is seen as more complex than a simple rewards/punishments model suggests. Behaviourism is also problematic because it implies people behave in desirable ways only to secure rewards or minimise punishments.

We don’t want our children to behave in a way that’s desirable just because they might get something or get into trouble if caught. We want our children to do the right thing because they know it’s right, and because they want to do right.

**Motivating children intrinsically not extrinsically**

Behaviourism teaches children to look for external motivations to behave in a desirable way. It has been said that rewards and punishments override a child’s natural inclination to do the right thing because they rely on extrinsic (external things that are used to motivate us) rather than intrinsic (a motivator that is internal and usually a feeling of well-being that comes over us when we choose to do something) motivators.

There is a great deal of research into workplaces showing that people do not perform better when they’re offered what are known as extrinsic motivators. Surprisingly, that includes money, a better office, a better title or certificates.

Workplace research suggests that people will behave in desirable ways in their workplace when they feel happy. People feel happy at work when they feel valued and they feel valued when they have control over their life.

Control over life is called agency. Most of the research reveals that people who have agency are happier and more productive.

Similarly, in children, agency is the ability to have some control over what they do. If we think about it, children have very little control over their lives. Their parents or caregivers determine most of their day – when they eat, what they wear, when they can go out, when they stay in, when they nap, just about everything.

While there are serious safety concerns with children, we can soften our approach and give them more agency over their lives. The effect is likely to be happier children who feel more in control and are more likely to work with us to ensure everyone is happy.

**But, we can’t give children free rein, it’d be mayhem!**
You are probably reading this and thinking, in horror, that we can’t trust children to have control over their lives. After all, they’d play with knives, set fire to themselves/the dog/the house, play with the gas hobs or run onto the road.

Children need limits. They need to know what’s safe (playing in the safety of their yard) and what’s unsafe (knives, stoves, roads, immolating the dog). Telling a child they can’t do something unsafe is not the same as punishing them. Instead, you can follow these steps:

Stop the behaviour. If the child is about to run onto the road, scoop them up and hold them. If the child is about to hurt the dog, hold their hand and remove the weapon, if there is one. If the child is about to touch the hotplate move them away. If they’re being rude, you need to stop them too.

Say something along the lines of “[action] is unsafe, I won’t let you do [action]”. To use the running on the road example, you would say, “Running onto the road is dangerous; I won’t let you run onto the road.” Or, if they’re rude, you can say, “What you just said was hurtful, I won’t let you be hurtful to me/your sibling/someone else.”

They might cry, prepare for that. And that’s okay. I cry when I get a speeding ticket, but it doesn’t stop the offence being recorded.

If they are crying, try to listen to them and reassure them we’ve heard they’re upset. After all, they’ve just had their agency compromised by our concern for their safety. You could say something along the lines of, “I hear you have some big feelings about my stopping you from [whatever it was].” If it was the hotplate example, you could say, “I hear that you really wanted to see what the hotplate felt like, but I can’t let you touch it as it will burn you.” If they were being rude, you could say, “I know you don’t mean to be hurtful, but saying things like that can make people sad.”

We need to help our children develop discipline, but we can do this without compromising their sense of self and their agency. It is about following the golden rule of life, “How would I want to be treated if I was in my child’s position?”

Further reading on discipline:

- How teachers are taught to discipline a classroom might not be the best way
  - Rewards
  - Punishment
  - Gentle parenting
  - Discipline
  - Tweet168
  - Share3.7k
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