

Incentives vs. Punishment

A common question that parents ask is, “I have tried everything and I can’t get my child to behave or listen to me.” Most parents with children, whether their children exhibit attentional or behavioral problems or not, have difficulties at one time or another in getting their child to obey. A parent’s first inclination when their child is misbehaving is to exert a punishment. This usually works for children that only occasionally will not listen or do as they are told, but for children that are frequently oppositional or “push the envelope”, punishment becomes very quickly ineffective.

Punishment when used in isolation by itself with a child receiving no rewards or incentives for good behavior is not particularly effective. All of us, even adults work on a reward system. For example, would adults go to work if there was not an incentive ie.. a paycheck. Most likely they would not. Punishment also is not very effective in changing a behavior in the long-term, no matter what the problem is. Basically, what punishment will do for a child over a period of time is cause built up anger and resentment towards you and even worse the behavior you are trying to change has not changed. In addition, a lot of children will also try to find ways to hurt you or “get back” at you and this just causes a rift in the family.

The most effective way to change a child’s unwanted behavior, ie.. cursing, smoking, not cleaning their room, I could go on and on, is to use a positive reward or incentive before you use a punishment. Always emphasize the positive before the negative. Most children that are acting out are already ostracized at school, with their friends, by other adults, the last thing they need is more criticism and punishment at home. Using a reward or an incentive really is the only way to change an unwanted behavior.

To change an unwanted behavior:

- 1.) Decide what behavior you want to change ie... interrupting you while you are speaking. This is a very common behavioral problem and one seen in most ADHD children
- 2.) Choose the positive behavior you want to replace the negative one with. In this case, your child will stop interrupting you.
- 3.) Watch for the positive behavior when it occurs and when it does, you praise and reward it. If you consistently praise and reward the positive behavior when it occurs then it will most likely occur.
- 4.) Reward the positive behavior consistently for at least a week before you then punish the unwanted behavior. Use a mild punishment such as a loss of a privilege. In order to change an unwanted behavior whether it is in a child or a teenager, you must first explain to them what you expect of their behavior for example, while you are sitting at the table

eating dinner you tell your child that you expect them not to interrupt when others are speaking.

When you as a parent are working on getting an unwanted behavior to no longer occur, you should concentrate on that one particular behavior for the week. Do not punish everything else your child is doing wrong, concentrate on your main objective, which in this case is to get your child to no longer interrupt others when they are talking. So which one works better, punishment or incentives? Incentives of course work better at extinguishing an unwanted behavioral problem.

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