

GUIDING CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

Louise Porter, PhD, MA(Hons), MGiftedEd, DipEd

Child psychologist

When children act disruptively, we often call their behaviour *noncompliance*, *inappropriate*, *naughty* or *unacceptable*. All these labels imply that children *should* do as we tell them. However, training children to be obedient exposes them to abuse, because they might not learn that they are allowed to resist adults' inappropriate touch, and makes them vulnerable to bullying when a dominant group member directs some wannabes to victimise a weaker peer. Also, whole societies become unsafe when people obey orders to harm fellow human beings.

Instead of teaching compliance, then, a guidance approach to raising children believes that we must teach them how to be considerate of others – to think about the effects of their actions on others. This comprises (Porter, 2006):

- developing in children a *sense of right and wrong* so that, even without supervision, they act considerately – not because they might be punished for doing otherwise, but because it is the right thing to do;
- teaching children to *manage their emotions* so that their outbursts do not disturb those around them but, more importantly, so that they themselves learn to cope with setbacks in life;
- teaching children to *cooperate* so that all can have their needs met;
- giving children a sense of *potency* – that is, a sense that they can make a difference to themselves and their world and can act on their values.

Children do not act disruptively to earn rewards or avoid punishments, but to meet their needs. They *need* to be exuberant and to explore their social as well as their physical world. On occasion, they will behave

thoughtlessly because they lack skills, such as how to negotiate to solve problems. However, past the age of three years, most will know how they should be behaving (as we have explained this to them in the past), but have lost control of themselves and cannot act on that information.

These are the causes of everyday disruptions. But ongoing, repeated, or chronic behaviour problems (such as repeated aggression past the age of 3 1/2) come about because children are reacting to adults' attempts to control their behaviour. Mostly, these attempts involve delivering punishment such as reprimands or time out. Forty years ago Tom Gordon listed children's reactions to punishment as the three R's of resistance, rebellion and retaliation, and also escape. These reactions are most likely in spirited children.

Spirited children are distinct from children with high belonging needs. Children who want you to like them will behave well most of the time, aside from the occasional error. When they do act thoughtlessly, they will be remorseful when we explain the effect of their behavior on others. In contrast, those who are spirited gain most of their self-esteem not from belonging with and being accepted by others, but from being in command of their own lives. When we adults try to control them to make them act as we would like, they resist, rebel and retaliate. Their behaviour problem escalates. Punishments are unnecessary for children with high belonging needs; and are counter-productive for spirited children, as they only make their behaviour worse.

Therefore, rather than controlling children by delivering rewards or punishments, a guidance approach believes that adults must *teach* children, not punish them for not knowing how to act considerately. Considerable research has shown that this style of discipline produces children who are more cooperative, self-controlled, self-confident, independent and social.

ELIMINATING REWARDS

The most common reward is praise, with others being giving children treats, stickers or stars, allowing them to do a favourite activity, giving pocket money (not in recognition that they need hope that they can buy something their heart desires, but as a reward for acting in ways that we approve) and, in schools, awarding prizes, merit certificates, 'student of the week' status and grades. These all sound benign, especially compared with the menu of punishments which comprise reprimands, time out, love withdrawal, inducing guilt, denying children a favourite activity, or physical punishment (whose use continues even when it is illegal). Although comparatively pleasant, rewards actually involve punishment: if a child does not achieve expectations, we do not deliver the reward – and loss of a hoped-for reward feels like a punishment. If you were expecting an end-of-year bonus and your supervisor advised that you would not be receiving it because he or she did not think you had earned it, you would feel punished. So it is when we withhold rewards that children hoped to attain.

Furthermore, both rewards and punishments are attempts to make children do things our way, to control them. In that case, spirited children in particular will resist, rebel and retaliate, even against rewards such as praise. And rewards such as praise run the risk of discouraging children, who come to doubt that they can live up to our expectations. Their self-esteem becomes threatened. To explain this, it will help to think of self-esteem as a comparison between how we are, and how we would like to be (see figure 1).

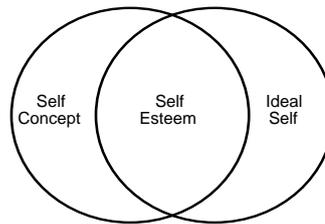


Figure 1: Self-esteem as the overlap between the self-concept and ideal self (Porter 2006)

This diagram tells us that there are three ways that individuals can develop low self-esteem: first, they will doubt their abilities when are not competent at something and they know it. We can resolve this by teaching children the skill they want to learn, or they may decide that it does not matter to them after all. Far more enduring across childhood and adulthood are the two remaining causes of low self-esteem. These are: either we are unaware of and therefore do not fully appreciate our skills and qualities (that is, our self-concept is impoverished), or we expect so much of ourselves that no one could achieve all that (our ideals are too demanding).

In children with apparently low self-esteem, we do not have to know which of these two causes is operating, because we can prevent or repair both with a single intervention – namely, by stopping praise (and the other rewards). We need to replace praise with giving children *information* about what they have achieved, rather than *judging* them or their efforts. Giving information is called *acknowledgement*, whereas delivering judgments is known as *praise*. The differences are that:

1. Acknowledgment teaches children to *evaluate their own efforts*; whereas praise gives *your* evaluation of these. You can ask children's self-evaluations by: 'What do you think of *that*? ... Was that fun? ... Are you pleased with yourself? ... You seem pleased that you did that so well.' This contrasts with praise which generally comprises the likes of, 'Good girl...Well done!...That's terrific' and so on.

2. Unlike praise, acknowledgment *does not judge* children, their behaviour or achievements. You might offer an opinion, such as: 'I admire how much work you put into that', or 'I appreciate that you helped pack away: it meant we could all go to the park a little earlier'. We can also imply a positive opinion with 'Congratulations!' or 'Wow! You did it!'.
3. Acknowledgment is a *private* or personal communication that, unlike praise, does not show children up in public or try to manipulate others into copying someone who is behaving to expectations.

Our feedback can be most honest when we focus on the *processes* that children use, rather than the outcomes that they produce, such as a 'beautiful' painting. It is more authentic to comment on the skills they exercise – such as planning ahead, being persistent, being creative, solving problems, displaying patience, showing curiosity, exercising self-control, working independently, or cooperating with others. In this way, two children of differing ages or abilities can receive equal feedback, as both can persist or concentrate (to their capabilities). Importantly, it means that we can be honest and our feedback credible (now and in the future), as we do not praise some product that is ordinary.

Giving children information rather than a judgment keeps their self-esteem intact by enhancing their self-concept without inflating their ideals. It also teaches them to focus on how their behaviour affects others, rather than on what it earns for them. Noticing their effects on others is the basis of behaving considerately.

ELIMINATING PUNISHMENT

A guidance approach believes that children want to grow and to surprise us and that they act rationally – that is, in ways designed to meet their needs. For everyday disruptions, then, we can ask what they want, listen to their

objections (even when their protests are not expressed ideally) and negotiate how to meet our needs at the same time as meeting theirs.

However, communication skills cannot solve the problem when children have become overwhelmed by emotion or 'lost the plot'. They display this in the form of tantrums – the *protesting* type in the supermarket in disappointment, say, at being denied an ice-cream; *whingeing* and whining which is also driven by disappointment but is a quieter version of protest; *social aggression* in response to anger at a real or imagined injustice; and *uncooperative* behaviour which occurs when children don't 'feel like' doing as we ask, and think that this feeling justifies not doing it.

On the bases that you cannot reason with people while they are being unreasonable and neither can you give a drowning person swimming lessons, when children have become emotionally overwhelmed in these ways, our task is not to explain (yet again) how they should be behaving. They already know this, because we have explained it to them in the past. If we had told them a similar number of times where we had hidden some lollies, they would remember *that* piece of information; therefore, they can equally remember how they should be acting when they have been told previously.

Instead, they need to learn how to calm down. Human beings have only two ways of calming down when we are upset. The first method is familiar to us because we use it with hysterical babies: we bring them in close, soothe them, tell them it's okay, that we understand that they are upset, reassure them that they will feel better soon, and comfort them that we will be here for them until they feel better. This close support can be equally necessary for older children, up to at least four years of age.

Within group settings, when a child has hurt someone else, you would bring them in close to you while you sympathise with and nurse the victim.

Once the victim is pacified, you would turn to the perpetrator and instruct, 'I wouldn't let her do that to you, and I can't let you do that to her...Now I need you to stay with me until I can see that you feel better and the other children will be safe'. Then you carry on with your regular tasks as the child helps or merely observes, not mentioning the behaviour itself but chatting about anything that comes to mind, keeping the child company until he or she is clearly calm enough to be unlikely to hurt others for the time being. (If children do subsequently hurt or disrupt others' play, this simply means that you did not give them long enough to calm down, so need to resume keeping them company. It can take 45 minutes for young children to calm down, particularly when they are not yet practiced at it.)

The second method of calming down from strong emotion is also familiar to us all, because we use it for ourselves after we've had a bad day. When we get home, if there is no one to get emotional support from, we will listen to loud music (so that we cannot hear ourselves complaining about the day's injustices), put on the TV to let the visual valium calm us down, or do something physical such as getting some exercise or, its opposite, some rest. Whether we choose to soothe ourselves auditorally, visually or physically, the one method we don't choose is to sit ourselves on a chair in the laundry facing the wall!

This illustrates the difference between time out and time away. The message behind time out is that it is naughty to get overwhelmed by emotion so children are to go to their room until they are prepared to behave themselves and to apologise. The contrasting assumption behind time away is that people do get overwhelmed sometimes. Sure, those around us cannot be expected to tolerate the disturbance, so when we are upset, we should withdraw to a private sanctuary where they can do something soothing until we feel better.

On any given occasion, you can choose which method to use, depending on the circumstances. Compared with bringing children in close to soothe them, time away (or sanctuary time) is suitable when you are not available to help children to calm down, when they are old enough (four years or older) to be able to achieve it on their own, when they are not so upset that they cannot manage without support, or when you are angry and therefore cannot safely bring children in close.

Those who believe that raising children is about rewarding and punishing them think that cuddling children to calm them, or letting them soothe themselves with a pleasant activity is just a reward for bad behaviour. However, a guidance approach accepts that children *are* more emotional than adults and that the core task of childhood is learning how to manage their feelings and impulses. If we punish children for not knowing how to do this, we are punishing them for *being* children.

Punishment offers retribution for past misdeeds, whereas guidance aims to teach children skills in order to prevent future ones. It recognises that developmental errors (such as falling over when toddling, or falling off a bicycle when learning to ride without trainer wheels) call for teaching children new skills; so too do behavioural errors. The key, however, when children act thoughtlessly is not to teach them the facts of how they should be acting, but to teach them how to manage their emotions. When they can achieve that, they will become calm enough to manage their own behaviour and act as they already know they should.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Porter, L. (2006). *Children are people too: A parent's guide to young children's behaviour*. (4th ed.) Adelaide: East Street Publications.

Porter, L. (2008). *Guiding children's behaviour*. Adelaide: Small Poppies SA.
(DVD)

www.louiseporter.com.au