

January 2007

Topic:

Alternatives to Punishment

QUESTION:

I'd like your advice on a constantly recurring problem that I have with my 7-year-old son. Most of the time he's quite reasonable, takes care of his little sister, and is generally pleasant to be with.

However, he doesn't want to listen when I tell him to do, or not to do, certain things. E.g., I specifically told him not to eat candy just before dinner. He looked at me, and stuffed the candy right into his mouth. What should I do? Should I punish him for not listening to me?

Frustrated Mom

Dear Frustrated Mom,

Your question is a very common one – all parents will at some point struggle with this issue. There are two main aspects to this problem.

Number 1: When you say, "He doesn't listen to me," actually your child's actions are saying "I won't be told what to do." He can hear you all right, so he *is* listening. However, like most of us, he doesn't want to "be told" or to submit to the demands of others. Submission would make him feel inferior and powerless. Yuck, who likes that!

So when a behaviour is questionable, look at what the "needs of the situation" might dictate, rather than try to make the child do something because we dictate to him. When unsure how to handle an issue, rely on your and your child's creativity to problem-solve rather than on punishment, and together come up with an alternative you both can live with (more on this below).

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Number 2: I understand that you want to be a responsible parent and you're concerned with your child's nutritional needs. He's a growing young boy. But "punishing" him for not obeying is not an effective way to convey your concern, for the following reasons.

First, punishment is inappropriate in our democratic society, where both parents and children have equal rights to human dignity and respect. It puts the parent in a position of superiority and the child in a position of inferiority.

As well, punishment by definition has to hurt, and will likely bring on a power struggle. It can create resentment, retaliation, and rebellion, or drive the behaviour underground. For example, he might continue his behaviour in a sneaky way, with the hope of getting away with it.

Rebellious behaviours are often "paybacks" for injustices and grievances suffered in the past. When we use our power over our child, even if we win that round, he'll just bide his time until the first available opportunity to show us the "you can't make me" attitude. He is so focussed on teaching us a lesson he isn't taking responsibility for his own behaviour.

And while there are children who will submit to our demands, is this in their best interest? If they always submit to their parents, they may also be quick to submit to the demands of their peers and become pleasers in life instead of independent, self-motivated thinkers.

Remember too that although sometimes punishment may appear to work in the short run, the damage it does to the relationship is accumulating.

Alternatives to Punishment

So if our goal is not to resort to punishment, how can we handle these frustrating moments? Instead of getting angry (and using power) here are some suggestions:

- **Give the child information.** Share with him why you don't want him to have the candy right now. *I know, this one is kind of obvious, but the key is to say it once, not repeatedly!*
- **Ask for his ideas about how this situation could be handled.** When is candy a good idea? When do we have candy in our house?
- **Make a suggestion.** Would he like the candy for dessert, after he eats his "growing" food?

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- **Give him a choice.** *You know kids like a voice and a choice!* If he is hungry and “can’t wait,” how about a few slices of apple with cheese, or carrots and dip?
- **Give him a job.** Often redirecting his energy into something fun to do (*yes, jobs can be fun!*) can work. One of my kids’ favourite distractions was to grate cheese – even if it wasn’t on the menu. Other jobs: feed the cat, set the table, tear up lettuce for the salad.
- **Find solutions for the next time.** If the candy is already eaten, you may want to talk about what you and your child might agree on in the future. (*Do this when you’re calm – not steaming!*)
- **Discuss consequences.** If the child continues to show no regard for his candy consumption, you may decide on no candy in the house until he’s willing to be more respectful of the situation and your agreements. And, yes, that means everyone in the house goes without candy! After all, you’re a family through thick and thin – this helps the child see the impact he has on others.

An Improved Attitude

We don’t want to live in a war zone with our children; rather, we want to have closeness and “dual respect.” “Dual” means we *respect their right* to make judgements, and we never lose sight of *our right for self-respect*.

For example, your son is standing there stuffing the candy in his mouth right after you asked him not to. Most parents’ reflex would be to hit the roof. We feel hurt and move right into anger, yelling, and likely some punitive action. I’m asking you to do a very difficult thing – stop acting on your reflex! If you act out of anger, you’ll feel lousy afterward, and it’s not a self-respectful place to put yourself. And what are you modelling to your son? Disrespectful and ineffective approaches to conflict resolution.

Self-respect looks like this: When you feel the urge to get angry, don’t submit to it. It’s your choice! Take a deep breath, or walk out of the room for a moment. The key is to calm your self, look after yourself, and then deal with the situation in a respectful way. Remember that you’re training your son in how to deal with confrontation, so see it as another opportunity to teach him about having respectful relationships.

Stop the punishments and the inevitable retaliations will decrease. Wouldn’t this be a wonderful approach for the whole world to adopt!

Georgine Nash and Beverley Cathcart-Ross

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