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## I'll Teach You A Thing Or Two! The Unwanted Teachings Of Punishment

*Part 1 of a 2 part series*

*Punishment is the process in which a behavior is followed by the presentation or withdrawal of some event and results in a decrease in the rate of the behavior.*

*Negative reinforcement is the process of ending or avoiding an aversive event by performing a behavior and results in an increase in or maintenance of that behavior.*

*"The King Is Dead!"* A couple hundred years ago there used to be a character in certain towns called the Town Crier. He stood in the streets and shouted out messages of importance to the citizens. It was how citizens got important news. Eighty years ago a paper boy stood on street corners and shouted out the headlines, "Extra, extra! Read all about it!" These guys called out the latest news and let the people know they could find out more if they bought a paper.

Positive reinforcement trainers in the animal world are modern day callers. Instead of a street corner, they shout out the message on Internet websites and discussion groups, "There is a better way!" You don't have to hit your kids or choke your dogs. Your cat CAN be trained.

But not with punishment, they say. Punishment doesn't work.

I wonder what life would be like if that were true. There are better ways to teach, but the truth is that punishment works. By definition, it has the effect of decreasing behavior. In fact, we may not have survived as a species if punishment didn't work. When we are burned because we put a hand in a fire, the punishing effects of the hot fire teach us not to do that again. If we didn't learn that lesson, we'd end up burned to a crisp rather than reproducing like bunnies and passing down our genes to future generations.

The problem with punishment as a teaching tool is not that it isn't effective. It's that it so often brings with it unwanted side effects.

Punishment is a natural phenomenon that occurs in the natural world. It is also something we use to control the behavior of other people. B.F. Skinner wrote "It is the commonest technique of control in everyday life" (Skinner, 1953). But even though it works and is commonly used, that doesn't mean we should routinely use it as a training tool for our animals, children, or employees. Why not? If it works so well, why not use it? Several reasons.

Think about what you do when you come into contact with a hot stove burner. You pull back your hand, right? So far that's an example of negative reinforcement which will be discussed more in the January 15, 2004 article. You're pulling back to turn off the burning sensation on your skin. But in the future you are far less likely to reach your hand out to touch the burner when it's hot. So reaching-out behavior is punished.

What happens when you punish behaviors in your learners by criticizing, spanking, or even using time out? You become the burner. You punish their behavior of reaching out for you in certain situations. When they're around you in these circumstances, you cause something bad to happen, so they keep their distance.

This year I inadvertently taught my pound dog, a Chinese Crested mix to run away from me when I called—and I should have known better. (This demonstrates how useful the word "should" is!) He was a pound puppy with few appropriate



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toileting skills, and I'd tried a variety of things to encourage going outside. We'd made little progress, so began to call him to me at frequent intervals to take him outside. Yep... he figured that out. Whenever I called his name, if he came to me he'd have to go outside no matter what the weather was like, and even though there was a perfectly good place to pee in the den. So when I called, he ran in the opposite direction. I had to go through a process of re-teaching the meaning of his name and only providing good things after calling him. I belatedly moved to a better use of leashes, crates and doggie doors to limit access to inappropriate potty places. (Things I "should" have done first!)

Another problem with punishment is that it can temporarily or permanently stop other behaviors besides the ones you're punishing. For a period of time after punishment, the learner stops performing the punished behavior. But the learner also stops doing much of anything else. He just turns off for a while. The world is kind of dangerous at the moment, so he keeps his behavior to a minimum to avoid coming into contact with unpleasantness. It's hard to train when your learner doesn't want to do anything.

Sometimes you punish some behavior besides the behavior you wanted to punish and the unwanted behavior remains intact. What if your dog is sitting still as you answer the door, but barking his head off at the same time? You whack him with a rolled up newspaper and whoops! He keeps barking his head off, but you can't get him to sit still when you answer the door any more.

Some learners—canine and human—become very solicitous to the person who provided the punishment after they've had some behavior corrected. It is very common for parents who use spanking as a disciplinary technique to defend its use because immediately afterwards the child turns unbelievably sweet and cooperative. This sweetness reinforces the parent's spanking behavior quite effectively. But at what cost? Personally I'd rather reinforce sweetness and cooperativeness because sweet-seeming cooperation that follows punishment doesn't always last. Sometimes it turns into something sinister in a few years.

Teenaged humans have a bad reputation. People say they're disagreeable, they're irrational, they don't do their chores, they say rude things to their parents, they stay holed up in their rooms for hours on end. The problem is that for the most part, we parents taught them to act this way. We don't mean to. We think we're doing the right thing when we punish misdemeanors when they are small. Most parents control their children's behavior through spanking, scolding, time out and other behavior breaking techniques. What we fail to do too often is to reinforce behaviors we want. For that we rely on that "should" word. "He should do his homework because it's his responsibility."

So what? Is he doing his homework? Should is a meaningless word in terms of behavior. Either he's doing it or he's not. It doesn't matter whether he should. If he's not doing his homework, doing homework will need to be reinforced if it's going to happen. Punishing other behaviors because he doesn't do his homework is just creating a child who wants to avoid you. He'll avoid you by keeping his distance holed up in his room or out of the house entirely, and by making himself so aversive to you that you try to avoid him. Loud music and a surly attitude are often distance keeping mechanisms.

Normally we don't even punish a specific behavior. We try to punish "not doing homework" by withdrawing privileges or by lecturing. But that technique is doomed to fail. Punishment means that something happens to decrease the rate of a behavior. Not doing homework is already the lowest rate of behavior there is. So we take away privileges and activities the kid likes, and reduce the opportunities for reinforcement in his world. But we don't do anything to reinforce appropriate behavior. In order to achieve reinforcement, he has to look to other people and places and things. Things we're unlikely to be involved in. We blame his behavior on hormones and believe it happens with all teenagers. Certainly adolescents are undergoing a lot of physical changes that are real challenges for them. But most of the behavior that is truly biological can be safely ignored.



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Providing aversives that are unrelated to a specific behavior isn't even punishment. And providing aversives again and again even they aren't causing a reduction in behavior isn't punishment, either, no matter what our intent is. Those are just abuse.

In defense of all of us punishing people, we all use punishment. Most often we aren't aware of how behavior works so we really believe we're doing the right thing. After all our own parents did it that way and look how we turned out! Much of the time we don't know any alternatives. Sometimes we're even justified in using it. But not very often.

In this month's featured book, *Coercion and Its Fallout*, Murray Sidman writes, "To use punishment occasionally out of desperation is not the same as advocating punishment as a principle of behavior management." Dr. Skinner wrote, "... In the long run, punishment, unlike reinforcement, works to the disadvantage of both the punished organism and the punishing agency."

There are better ways and that is what this E-Zine is here to present. There is a lot more to be said about aversive control techniques. For a powerful discourse on this, look for *Coercion and Its Fallout*. There are links throughout the E-Zine. I strongly recommend this book for anyone who cares about making the world a better place.

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