

### Strategy Brief, January 2015

Ana Cathcart, Reece L. Peterson, & Shir Palmon, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

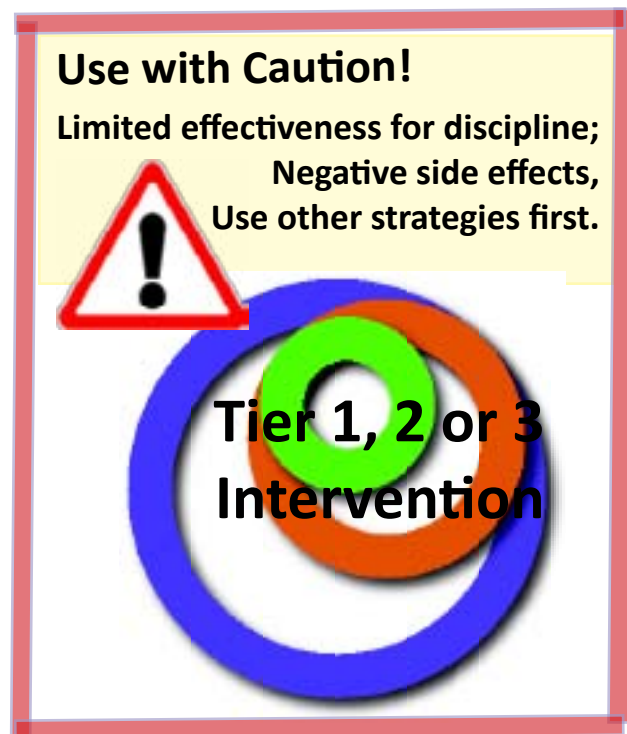
Depending on one's profession and frame of reference, people might define and view punishment differently. There are many theories of why crime and other violations of community values occur, and many theories about how the punishments imposed for those violations address compliance to those laws and values (Schram & Tibbetts, 2014). It is beyond our scope to examine those theories, but instead we will define the uses of punishment in schools, particularly as related to school discipline, and focus briefly on three different philosophies about and conceptions of types of punishments that might be used in schools.

#### What is Punishment?

There are many definitions of punishment. The Black's Law Dictionary employs a legal perspective and defines punishment as, "In criminal law, any pain, penalty, suffering, or confinement inflicted upon a person by the authority of the law and the judgment and sentence of a court, for some crime or offense committed by him, or for his omission of a duty enjoined by law" (What is PUNISHMENT?, n.d.). The legal definition does not indicate any relationship to behavior change and is retributive- a consequence imposed by the authority of law. On the other hand, the psychological science of applied behavior analysis defines punishment as any consequence that occurs following a behavior that reduces the likelihood of the behavior occurring again. A different view of punishment views punishment as an instrument to make good or compensate for loss, damage or injury- a return or restoration of a previous state. Each of these viewpoints may be applicable to how "punishment" might be used in schools depending on the context, and the person administering punishment.

#### Punishment in School Settings

Punishment in schools may focus on three different philosophies: punishment that is intended to change the student behavior; punishment that is retributive – a predefined consequence imposed by adult authority; and recently, a type of punishment that is an effort to be "restorative," which is focused on changing behavior, but also restoring the environment and relationships damaged by the behavior.



**Punishment as retribution.** “Retributive justice refers to the achievement of justice through a one-sided approach of imposing punishment” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2014, p. 277). Among most lay people, punishment is any unpleasant action against someone in retribution for a violation of the laws or norms of the community. In the context of families, these punishments range from the things parents might use such as reprimands, confinement to the child’s room, and “grounding” to guide and shape their child’s behavior and social development. Parents may expect these consequences to change their child’s behavior, but these are often used whether or not that is likely. In the context of schools, retribution may also apply to consequences teachers may impose for violating classroom rules, such as reprimands, having students stay after school, revocation of privileges, completing classroom chores, etc. They also apply to the disciplinary consequences imposed for violations of school codes of conduct such as office referrals, detention, suspension, expulsion, required transfer to another school, etc. Often, these are framed as if they are intended to change the behavior of the student, but these punishments persist even when behavior change is not really anticipated or demonstrated. They are conducted based on adult authority.

In that way, they are similar to punishments administered by the criminal justice system to individuals who break the law or violate social norms in accord with the legal definition of punishment. These consequences might include time in jail, other forms of loss of freedom (probation, monitoring devices, etc.), and are often administered as retribution for criminal acts. Many of these types of punishments in the juvenile and criminal justice systems are imposed without any clear expectation that these consequences will necessarily result in changed behavior by the perpetrator, but they demonstrate that there are consequences administered for these behaviors intended to uphold community laws and values. They may also be intended to deter others from engaging in those behaviors.

**Punishment to change behavior.** Psychologists, therapists, and teachers using a “behaviorist” framework define the word punishment as a behavioral principle, and a technical term that describes a relationship between a behavior and the consequences that follows. A behaviorist only considers punishment to be an action or consequence that actually results in the decrease in future frequency of a specific behavior. This is a core principle of applied behavior analysis. It is the inverse of reinforcement, and is commonly used and understood as a part of efforts to change behavior using these principles.

**Punishment as a restorative or indemnifying procedure.** Restorative justice refers to the repair of harm produced by one person’s behavior by “reaffirming a shared consensus of values in that community, involving a joint or multisided approach which emphasizes the victim, the community and the offender” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2014, p. 277). It oriented



to paying the costs of restoring possible damage, loss, or injury. It is both a philosophy and a plan which entails all persons affected by the misdeed coming together to make a restorative plan, and provide supports for future behavior for the offender. It is a balanced approach which attempts to restore victims, provide meaningful consequences for offensive behavior, rehabilitate and reintegrate the offender, and enhance community safety (Schram & Tibbetts, 2014). In restorative practices, the “punishment” is a combination of outcomes that address each of these goals and are built into a monitored plan of action. Restorative practitioners might not label that “plan” as “punishment”. Restorative practices are becoming more commonly used in schools and classrooms as an alternative to other traditional or retributive types of “punishment.”



### **Confusion and Controversy Regarding Punishment in Schools**

These differences in the use of the word punishment can cause confusion. While most of the time in schools educators may employ the “behaviorist” definition, when it comes to school discipline, many educators may resort to a criminal justice interpretation of punishment as retribution required by the school procedures. When asked, most educators will say that the school discipline system is intended to change student inappropriate behavior. However, most also recognize that the traditional school disciplinary consequences, which may include detention, in-school suspension, out of school suspension, and expulsion, probably do not have a positive impact on changing student behavior for most students who receive those punishments. Following a reprimand, a loss of

privileges or a detention, a behaviorist would not consider these as punishment unless the future likelihood of the target behavior decreased. Nevertheless, a parent or an assistant principal might still consider these as punishments regardless of whether they actually change future behavior if taking a retributive approach.

**Corporal punishment.** Corporal punishment (using physical force to inflict pain) has been outlawed for use in school discipline in 29 states, but is still employed in some schools in the remaining states. It remains controversial. Some argue that its use is more effective and efficient than other alternatives. However, others oppose its use on moral and ethical grounds. Nevertheless, there are millions of uses of corporal punishment each year in schools primarily in the southeast and southwest parts of the United States where it is permitted, (Dupper & Montgomery-Dingus, 2008). Where it is used, this is of course a retributive form of punishment.

**Suspension and expulsion in schools.** In recent years, there has been criticism of exclusionary discipline consequences for students in school. These practices, primarily suspension and expulsion, have been used as retributive punishments for misbehavior. Skiba and Peterson (1999) found that although fighting is the largest single reason for suspensions, the majority of suspensions occur because of minor offenses that do not threaten school safety such as disrespect and tardiness. Suspensions and expulsions may be reinforcing bad behavior as they allow the student who may not want to be in school anyway to escape from school for a period of time. These consequences are correlated with numerous negative outcomes for students including dropping out of school, low academic achievement, and ongoing behavior problems.

Additionally, a disproportionately large number of those who receive suspensions or expulsions are minorities, low-income students, and students with disabilities (Skiba et al., 2014). These disproportionalities in who receives suspension or expulsion have become

a focus of national concern with The U.S. Office of Civil Rights and the U.S. Department of Education issuing guidance on the use of these procedures. They have provided resource materials in order for schools to address and reduce these problems by installing programs to prevent misbehavior, and to employ more useful alternatives to these exclusionary practices (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education have also been concerned about the use of suspension and expulsion in early childhood settings for young children (December, 2014).

Moreover, suspension and expulsion have also been associated with later involvement in the juvenile or criminal justice system. This connection has been termed the “school to prison pipeline” (Kim, Losen & Hewitt, 2010), and has been a motivation to examine how punishment for school discipline should be revised to diminish the use of suspension and expulsion in order to interrupt this pattern of those being the first step toward involvement in crime and the justice system.

**Effectiveness of punishment in changing behavior.** There is a substantial body of literature which indicates that the behaviorist approach to identifying punishing consequences as a part of a larger behavior change plan can be effective in changing student behavior. Unfortunately, there is much less data available to determine whether the retributive or restorative approaches to punishment result in changed student behavior. There simply is little data available about retributive punishment in schools, and few studies have examined the impact of these forms of punishment on changing student behavior.

## **Punishment to Change Behavior**

What do we know about using the behaviorist definition of punishment as a vehicle to change behavior? Like reinforcement, punishment is a behavioral principle and a natural phenomenon that occurs in everyday life. This view of punishment is any consequence for a specific behavior

that actually decreases the likelihood that the behavior will reoccur. According to applied behavior analysis, a punisher is only punishment if the behavior decreases as a result. If the punisher does not decrease the occurrence of that specific behavior, then by definition, it is not a punisher and punishment is not occurring (Webber & Plotts, 2008). For example if a teacher attempts to reduce the use of inappropriate language by requiring the student to stay after school five minutes for each time that this inappropriate language occurred in the classroom, the teacher would only know if it was in fact a punishing consequence if, after implementing this procedure several times, that the use of inappropriate language by this student actually diminished. If not, some other consequence might be tried in an effort to identify an effective punisher for that student and behavior. Even if this procedure was effective for the student, it might not be an effective punisher for another student for the same behavior. Punishment, when used according to these principles, can be very effective in changing behavior, and can change behavior even more quickly than other methods such as reinforcement of alternative behaviors.



**Forms of punishment.** “Positive punishment” decreases behavior by adding a negative consequence. Examples of these would be extra homework or reprimands. A “negative punishment” decreases behavior by removing a positive consequence, which would otherwise have occurred. Examples of this are taking away recess or taking away use of a toy as a consequence of behavior (Alberto & Troutman, 2013; Sadowski, 2012).

**Uses of punishment.** Punishment can be a quick and effective way to decrease problem behavior. For example, a person is unlikely to touch a hot stove twice (the pain from the first touch serves as a punishment). While punishment is often effective for students (Maag, 2001), punishment does not automatically teach a new behavior to replace the problem behavior being punished. On the other hand, reinforcement by its very nature teaches and refines new behaviors that can easily be used to replace problem behaviors. For this reason, reinforcement is generally a more effective long term means of behavioral change than punishment. The effectiveness of punishment is greatly influenced by its timing- delayed punishment will probably not be useful, especially for young or cognitively less mature persons (Wood, 1978).

**Use with self-harm & related behaviors.**

The behaviorist application of punishment is most often used with children in therapeutic settings for children who may have severe problematic behaviors that result in self-harm, harm



to others, or property damage (Maag, 2001). When people experience chronic, life-threatening problematic behavior, they might benefit most from punishment strategies because changing these behaviors quickly and effectively is important to the person's wellbeing. The use of a punishment procedure for self-abusive behavior could be the quickest and most effective way to change that behavior. Such quick behavior change is an example of the ethical right to effective treatment (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007) as without this treatment the

behavior might cause self-injury. For some students, a punishment-based intervention might be the only option for reducing future frequency of a problematic behavior. For instance, if a low-functioning child wandered into a street or on dangerous equipment, a teacher or therapist might apply a punishing consequence to change that behavior quickly and prevent future danger. Baer states that, "Punishment is a legitimate therapeutic technique that is justifiable and commendable when it relieves persons of the even greater punishments that result from their own habitual behavior" (Baer, 1971 p.111). All in all, it is important to try all other less-intrusive interventions first. If all other alternatives fail, then the use of punishment practices might be the only ethical option left (Iwata, 1988).

## **Negative Side Effects of Punishment**

Regardless of the definition employed or approach to punishment, the use of punishment can be problematic. Punishment often evokes negative side effects (Cooper et al., 2007; Kazdin, 2010; Wood, 1978). Several of these side effects are discussed below, and apply to punishment whether used as retributive or in accord with principles of applied behavior analysis. These negative side effects of all forms of punishment suggest that punishment should be used only as a last resort (when other interventions have failed or are not possible), and used only when absolutely necessary.

**Ethical concerns.** Many people find punishment to be unethical because it is associated with inflicting some type of harm, pain, or discomfort to people in the effort to change their behavior. Experiencing unnecessary pain and psychological harm from punishment practices might be more detrimental than alternative interventions that do not require punishment. People or agencies that apply punishment strategies to reduce problematic behavior must not degrade or disrespect the student. All interventions must be physically safe for the student and the implementers (Cooper et al., 2007). Additionally, people have a right to safe and humane treatment as well as a right to the least restric-

tive alternative, meaning that less intrusive interventions must be found ineffective before using a more restrictive intervention such as punishment (Cooper et al., 2007).

**Emotional and aggressive reactions to punishment.** In some cases, the use of punishment creates emotional arousal reactions in students that result from expectations of receiving punishment. These reactions can escalate negative and aggressive behavior or emotions to the point where some students lose self-control, or teachers get caught in a power struggle with students.

**Escape and avoidance.** When punishment strategies are implemented, it is natural for someone to try to escape or avoid the situation in which punishment will occur. Students might cheat, steal, or lie in order to avoid the public disapproval of a teacher in front of their peers (Cooper et al., 2007). Escape and avoidance of an aversive stimulus is a natural reaction. For example, if a student continues to receive reprimands for sloppy work then the student might decide to avoid class altogether (Cooper et al., 2007). In this situation, avoiding class is more problematic than turning in sloppy work. Researchers also found that people do not always physically escape or avoid punishment; sometimes, people escape punishment by decreasing their mental capacities through the use of alcohol and drugs (Mayer, Sulzer, & Cody, 1968) or tuning out the adults.

**Hiding behavior to not get caught.** Sometimes students who are punished simply become more adept at not getting caught, and the inappropriate behavior continues (Reynolds, 1961). For example, if a teacher punishes the a student for bullying, the student may suppress the rate of bullying while in the presence of the teacher, and may continue bullying at an increased rate while unsupervised. Not only is it problematic that the student is engaging in increased bullying, but also, the teacher might think that the student has stopped the bullying because the teacher is no longer a witnesses to the bullying.

**Misuse and over use of punishment.** Many people rely too heavily on punishment and use it for unnecessary reasons (Alber & Heward, 2000; Cooper et al., 2007). If a person can decrease an unpleasant behavior quickly and efficiently with punishment, it is likely that they will use the same method more frequently to decrease the unpleasant behavior in the future. This use of punishment can be reinforcing to the adult employing punishment even when it does not decrease the behavior long-term (Cooper et al., 2007). For instance, teachers might reprimand students when they talk without raising their hand. The reprimand might not actually decrease student misbehavior long term; however, the immediate effect might be very reinforcing for the teacher. As a result, punishment can be overused, when not necessary or when other more positive methods to change behavior are available.

**Undesirable modeling.** Adults may inadvertently model aggression. When punishment strategies are implemented, students might model those behaviors. For instance, if parents utilize spanking as a form of punishment, their children are more likely to hit their peers (Cooper et al., 2007). There is a strong correlation between harsh and excessive punishment with antisocial behavior and conduct disorders (Sprague & Walker, 2000). Excessive harsh punishment of students in school can lead to negative personal interactions with peers and poor school climate. Students who are more exposed to harsh punishment techniques are more likely to display aggressive behaviors when interacting with others (Cooper et al., 2007). When schools implement punishment techniques, some students are likely to model the negative behaviors of their teachers, and may perceive that punishment is how those “in control” maintain their power.

## **Alternatives to Punishment**

Given the potential side effects of punishment, as well as the desire to avoid the need for retributive or other forms of punishment in school, a variety of prevention strategies have been commonly suggested to prevent or dimin-

ish the need for the application of punishment.

- Prevent the need for punishment by establishing a positive school climate, and a rich reinforcement of positive behavior in the environment.
  - Provide direct instruction with good student and adult models of appropriate behavior.
  - Use functional analysis strategies to understand the motives for behavior, and to develop more appropriate replacement behaviors which can be built into individualized behavior change plans.
  - Provide a warning signal so that the student might be able to respond to the warning and avoid the punishment.
  - Provide excellent academic instruction and academic supports when students struggle academically.
  - Employ cognitive behavioral instruction to develop problem solving skills in students
  - Provide social skill instruction to student to teach appropriate behavior in various settings.
  - Reinforce incompatible, desired behavior.
  - Allow student input in rules or school values, and provide instruction on how they are implemented.
  - Avoid public confrontations.
  - Provide instruction on and opportunities for students to use problem solving strategies and conflict reduction strategies.
- Provide opportunities to develop a community of common expectations and to address and solve problems with disruptive behavior when it occurs.

## Conclusion

Punishment in school settings has several possible meanings. It can be viewed as retribution for misbehavior, as a behavioral intervention strategy, or as a part of a restorative plan. Punishment can be used effectively, particularly for behaviors that are dangerous or need speedy remediation. However, punishment can have several negative side effects associated with its use including ethical issues, emotional responses by the student, escape and avoidance, misuse and over use by the adult, and undesirable modeling by the adult. There are better options for changing behaviors that are more effective and less harmful to the child. Using punishment in the framework of applied behavior analysis is effective, but should be used with extreme caution due to the potential side effects it may engender.



**Caution! Punishment has several possible meanings; Retribution, Behavioral intervention, or Restitution; It has limited effectiveness for “discipline”; While it can be used effectively as a part of an intervention plan for specific behaviors, it has serious negative side effects. No endorsement for its use should be implied in this Brief!**



## See Other Related Briefs:

See the briefs on *Corporal Punishment; Detention; Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports; Reinforcement; Restorative Practices; Restitution; Saturday School; and Suspension.*

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