

## **The fallacy of reward and punishment:**

I have ever really believed that either reward or punishment is an effective way to parent and control children. While they are useful from time to time to motivate a child to attend to a task or responsibility, as a general parenting method they are bound to fail. Punishment or reward does not work in the end because the motive of the child to behave in a certain way does not arise out of a sense of responsibility, respect, or freedom.

Punishment as a tool is the central parenting tactic of the autocratic parent. This kind of parent is all-powerful. He or she may be a dominating authoritarian figure who enforces his or her rules. Children in the extreme case of autocratic parenting, are told what to do, how to do it, where to do it, and when to do it. There is very little room for them to question, challenge, or dissent. This style of parenting worked somewhat in previous generations when inequality was normal in social interactions, but it works poorly in today's atmosphere of equality and respect.

If a child is motivated by giving him or her rewards ("if you eat your dinner you will get a treat") then a reward for good behaviour comes to be expected almost as a right. If rewards are to be effective as incentives for continued good behaviour, the parent often must increase the value of the reward, until a kind of bankruptcy is reached.

Punishment is not effective as a persistent incentive because it then creates resentment in the child, and it may lead to him or her wanting to find ways of getting even with that feels unfair.

While they are okay from time to time, if they are the only means of controlling a child then the parent is reliant on his or her power or superiority to gain cooperation rather than on the child's respect for the parent, or the child's own inner sense of responsibility.

One has to consider what qualities we want to develop in our children. Compliance based on fear or benefit is not enough. Many experts in parenting would identify that one of the key qualities that the good parent and family nourishes and develops in the child or teenager is a sense of responsibility.

Responsibility is a key quality that children need to learn in their families in order to prepare them for living in our modern world. Modern democracy demands that all citizens make decisions and accept responsibility for the consequences of their decisions. Without individual responsibility our freedom gives way to governmental responsibility and the creation of either a 'nanny' state or a dictatorship. However with freedom and choice come the responsibility for the consequences of our decisions and choices. In our society our children will be called upon to make thousands of choices, and they will be held responsible for their choices by experiencing the consequences that follow. They will face choices about drinking, drugs, sex, crime, dropping out, studying, being obedient, etc at times when we as parents are not there to tell them what to do. However, if we have prepared them to make responsible decisions, then they will be more able for these challenges. Therefore, our task as parents is to explore methods to teach responsibility to our children.

A choice can be made only when there is the freedom to choose; otherwise the choice is not there at all. Some parents give their children almost no freedom to make choices. They believe that their children are inexperienced and the parent must make the choice for them. Other parents, at the other extreme, foster a kind of anarchy where the children run riot!

A simple but powerful parenting technique is to give children choices, within limits of course. If you give your children choices, within which the consequences of these choices are explained to them, then the child begins to experience his/her family as a real preparation for the outside world.

For example, a mother might say to her 5 year old, when do you want to brush your teeth, now or after you are dressed in your pajamas?

A father might say to a teenage son "When you go out tonight I know there will be drink there. You know how I feel about drinking at your age but I am not a policeman and cannot take responsibility for your choices. So, it's up to you what to do. You have a real choice to make here. You could drink and pretend to me that you didn't do so, and you might get away with it. Alternatively, you could think about what I have said. You know that if you do drink that I will be forced to curtail where you go in future but all of this is a choice you have to make. I had to make the same kinds of choices at your age. Think about it!"

Alternatively, a mother, instead of getting into a disagreement with her daughter about homework might say "I need you to decide when you want to do your homework - after you come home from school or immediately after dinner. You can decide and we will then work around it!"

These might seem trivial but there is an art to allowing a child feel a sense of responsibility and freedom and to turn a potential conflict into a choice.