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Doctor's Journal

Parenting - Discipline Versus Punishment

Why is it that we as parents have to get ugly with a child, day after day, using punishments that aren't working, before we strategize to try and turn around the situation? I find that parents often let hard discipline situations persist until they escalate into bigger problems that can really have a negative impact on family relationships. This is partly because we tend to believe that "discipline" must mean "punishment". We think that if we aren't using punishers as our main form of behavioral intervention, we are softies. This just isn't true. The word "discipline" is related to the word "disciple," which means "to teach". And, there are many ways to teach children. Good teachers rarely use punishers because they are able to create an environment of praise for desirable behaviors. They know how to present choices to get compliance, and they are excellent at redirecting negative behavior into positive expressions of energy and activity. So, next time you find yourself punishing a behavior repeatedly without seeing any change, stop and evaluate how you may be able to turn the situation around by redirecting, presenting choices, or by praising/rewarding behaviors you like instead of punishing those you don't like. Create an incentive system for your child (working on just ONE behavior), wherein they can earn a privilege for having a brief period of time without doing the negative behavior (such as earning 15 minutes with a favorite toy/activity for having "no screaming" from wake-up until leaving for school). The older child/adolescent can delay gratification for longer periods, such as earning the privilege to hang out with peers on Saturday for doing homework on Monday and Tuesday nights and the same for Sunday if they finish homework on Wednesday and Thursday nights. Be sure the behavior you pick is clear to the child (rather than "being nice", work on "not hitting" or "doing what I say the first time"). Enjoy your positive home environment!