

PUNISHMENT AND SCHOOL LEARNING

Introduction

The goal of this topic is to introduce learners to the concept of punishment and school learning. It includes the meaning of punishment and corporal punishment, arguments for and against the use of punishment, principles for effective, alternative to corporal punishment and students' rights.

Audience

The intended audiences of this topic are learners and instructors in the field of educational psychology, particularly in higher education.

Length of the topic

This resource has been designed to be covered in two days (approximately one hour per day²)

Topic outcomes

While engaging with this topic, learners will:

- Conceptualise the term punishment and corporal punishment and principles for effective punishment.
- Point out the effects of punishing students

Technology Requirements

- A computer or tablet with internet access
- Assistive technologies for audience with disabilities.

Concept of Punishment

Punishment is an unpleasant action given to someone for a mistake or wrongdoing committed. It is a means of controlling undesirable behaviours. Generally, punishment is a reaction to rule violations but to correct student behaviour without causing undue anxiety in the learning process, punishment does not have to be done wisely and pedagogically.

Types of Punishment

There are two types of punishments which are positive and negative punishment.

Positive punishment involves adding an undesirable stimulus to decrease undesirable behaviour. An example of positive punishment is scolding a student to get the student to stop texting in class. In this case, a stimulus (the reprimand) is added to decrease the behaviour which is (texting in class).

Negative punishment involves the removal of a pleasant stimulus to decrease undesirable behaviour. For example, when a child misbehaves, a parent can take away a favourite toy. In this case, a stimulus (the toy) is removed to decrease the behaviour.

Corporal Punishment in Schools

Corporal punishment is the use of physical force to cause a person to experience pain for correction or control of the misbehaviour. School corporal punishment is the deliberate infliction of physical pain as a response to undesired behaviour by students. In schools, it may involve striking the student on the buttocks or the palms of their hands with an implement such

as a rattan cane, wooden paddle, slipper, leather strap, belt, or wooden yardstick.

The use of corporal punishment has been declining in many schools internationally. Waning public acceptance, increased litigation against school boards and educators regarding its use and legislative bans have led to the decline. Many countries worldwide have banned its use. Discipline is important and schools have a strong role in teaching children to be self-disciplined. Effective discipline is primarily a matter of instruction rather than punishment.

Punishment contingencies in general tend to have negative side effects. Evidence indicates that corporal punishment negatively affects the social, psychological and educational development of students and contributes to the cycle of child abuse and pro-violence attitudes of youth. Many organizations worldwide have opposed the use of corporal punishment in schools and have actively supported the removal of legal sanctions for its use. Such an organization resolves to educate the public about the effects of corporal punishment and alternatives to its use.

Various scholars have different views on punishment. Some of them argue for it due to the purposes it serves in educational settings, while others oppose it due to its negative impacts on teaching and learning processes.

Arguments for the Use of Punishment

While excessive or harsh punishment can be counterproductive and constructive consequences for misbehaviour, can play a role in fostering

discipline and responsibility. Below are arguments in favour of punishment in educational settings:

- i. Punishments have an immediate influence on students' behaviours. When a student does something wrong and gets a punishment, the student will immediately stop that behaviour.
- ii. Punishment promotes discipline and prosocial behaviours. Prosocial behaviours refer to a range of actions that are typically advantageous to others but come at a personal cost to the actor, such as assisting, volunteering, donating and cooperating. Structured and fair punishment helps instill habits like punctuality, respect, and adherence to rules, which are critical for success in academics and life in general.
- iii. Punishment discourages misconduct. Punishments deter students from engaging in disruptive or harmful behaviour. For example, enforcing consequences for bullying or cheating discourages others from engaging in similar actions, fostering a more positive and productive learning environment.
- iv. Encourages reflection and growth. Constructive punishments can encourage students to reflect on their actions and make better choices in the future. For instance, punishment helps the student understand the impact of their actions and how to improve.
- v. Equity and fairness. When applied fairly, punishments establish that all students are subject to the same rules and expectations. This sense of fairness can reduce feelings of favouritism or inconsistency and promote mutual respect among students and teachers.

While supporters of physical punishment may believe that it is effective in accomplishing the stipulated goals and creating obedient and respectful individuals, studies have found that corporal punishment is generally not

effective. Studies indicated more negative impacts of punishing on students' academic performance and their general well-being.

Arguments Against the Use of Punishment

School teachers and policymakers often rely on personal anecdotes to argue that school corporal punishment improves students' behaviour and achievements. Several psychological societies have issued statements opposing all forms of corporal punishment in schools due to its effects on students. Some of the arguments against the use of punishment include the following:

- i. Punishment does suppress wrongdoing without providing an alternative/acceptable way of behaving.
- ii. Punishment may lead at learners hiding offences because they are accustomed to frightening punishments.
- iii. Punishment is likely to trigger feelings of revenge especially if it is administered in a state of anger or inconsistency.
- iv. Punishment may cause the offender to lose their sense of guilt because they have "paid" for their mistake with the punishment.
- v. Punishment may lead to aggression among students. It may include repeatedly telling punished students that they are worthless, useless, unloved, or unwanted. This can lead to poor self-esteem and low self-confidence, which, in combination with the accumulated stress of constantly fearing corporal punishment, can cause many mental illnesses.

- vi. Corporal punishment may lead to physical injuries to students. Physically punished students are likely to get seriously injured, to the point of needing medical attention.
- vii. Promotion of violence. corporal punishment in schools is likely to foster the impression among students that violence is an appropriate means for managing others' behaviour.

Educators need to consider a more holistic approach to managing misbehaviour. This could include building positive relationships with learners, encouraging reflection on wrong actions, and providing consequences that aim to teach responsibility and personal growth. As such approaches can be more effective in shaping desired behaviours and minimizing the possible negative impact of excessive or inappropriate punishment.

Principles for Effective Punishment

Teachers should consider the developmental characteristics of students when punishing learners, and keep in mind their responsibilities for educating people. For punishment to be effective, teachers must abide by the following principles.

- i. Punishment should focus on behaviour. To prevent being used as a representation of power, punishment should focus on student's misbehaviours rather than students themselves. For example, if some children do not submit their homework on time, the teacher should punish them for their delay rather than criticize them with the insulting words 'useless, stupid or lazy'.

- ii. Before punishing, the student must be made aware of what was wrong and why they should be punished. Teachers should let students know that punishment is the inevitable result of their behaviour
- iii. Punishment must be proportionate to the mistakes made by the students. Punishment should align with the severity of the mistake. A minor infraction, such as forgetting homework, does not warrant severe consequences, while more serious issues, like repeated bullying, might require stricter interventions.
- iv. Punishment must be effective. Make sure punishment is worthwhile for students and teachers. It is an inhumane act to implement it knowing it has no effect. When implementing discipline, the individual differences of students, such as family environment and personality, should be fully considered first. To limit it to what they can afford now and can benefit from in the future.
- v. Punishment should be given in time. Effective punishment should be provided immediately after the behaviour and not after a period of delay. If students receive a punishment immediately after misbehaviours, they can naturally connect the results with their behaviours, which is beneficial for them to realise their behaviours are inappropriate.

Alternative to Corporal Punishment

Effective discipline includes programs and strategies for changing student behaviour, and classroom environments, and educating and supporting teachers and parents. Effective discipline includes prevention and intervention programs and strategies. It is empirically based rather than relying on custom or habit. The following are alternatives which can be initiated by school psychologists and teachers to provide an atmosphere where learning can take place and where students learn to be self-disciplined:

- Help students achieve academic success through the identification of academic and behavioural deficiencies and strengths and help them get appropriate instruction; identify their problems and deal with them appropriately.
- Use behavioural contracting - educate students on what it means to behave appropriately.
- Use individual and group guidance and counselling to assist those with psychological challenges.
- Encourage disciplinary consequences which are meaningful to students, and have an instructional and/or reflection component.
- Provide social and life skills training.

Students Rights

Several international human rights organizations including the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the Inter-American Commission on Human

Rights have stated that physical punishment of any kind is a violation of children's human rights

International human-rights bodies supporting the prohibition of corporal punishment of children in all settings, including schools, include the European Committee of Social Rights and the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

Summary

Many nations reaffirm their opposition to the use of corporal punishment in schools because of its harmful physical, educational, psychological and social effects on students. Corporal punishment contributes to the cycle of child abuse and pro-violence attitudes of youth by teaching that it is an acceptable way of controlling the behaviour of others. Discipline is important and effective and alternatives are available to help students develop self-discipline. These are primarily instructional rather than punitive.

School psychologists should provide many direct services to improve the discipline of individual children as well as services which improve classroom and schoolwide discipline. Nations should continue to work actively with other organizations to educate the public and policymakers about the effects of corporal punishment and seek its complete prohibition in schools while promoting alternative and more effective means of promoting discipline among students.

Review Questions

Multiple Questions

1. What is the primary goal of punishment in behavioural correction?

- a) To inflict pain as a deterrent
- b) To establish authority
- c) To promote behaviour change and prevent the recurrence of misbehaviour
- d) To create fear of consequences

2. Which of the following is NOT a principle of effective punishment?

- a) Consistency in the application
- b) Proportionality to the offence
- c) Delayed implementation for better reflection
- d) Clarity of expectations and consequences

3. What is the main difference between punishment and discipline?

- a) Discipline focuses on teaching, while punishment focuses on correcting behaviour.
- b) Discipline is stricter than punishment.
- c) Punishment always involves physical force, but discipline does not.
- d) There is no significant difference between the two.

4. According to behavioural principles, punishment is most effective when it is:

- a) Immediate and consistent
- b) Harsh and intimidating
- c) Delayed but severe
- d) Administered in public

5. Which of the following best describes "proportionality" in the context of punishment?

- a) The punishment must match the severity of the misbehaviour.
- b) The punishment should escalate over time regardless of the offense.
- c) Punishments must be uniform for all students regardless of context.
- d) The punishment should prioritize physical over psychological consequences.

6. What role does communication play in effective punishment?

- a) It is unnecessary if the punishment is clear.
 - b) It ensures the individual understands why the punishment is being applied and how to avoid it in the future.
 - c) It is only required if the punishment involves severe consequences.
 - d) It should be limited to maintain authority.
7. Which of the following is a characteristic of ineffective punishment?
- a) It is arbitrary or inconsistent.
 - b) It includes teaching alternative behaviours.
 - c) It is proportionate to the offence.
 - d) It reinforces accountability for actions.
8. What is a key reason why excessively harsh punishment may fail to be effective?
- a) It reinforces the severity of the rules.
 - b) It builds fear-based compliance, which leads to long-term behavioural change.
 - c) It can damage trust and lead to resentment or defiance.
 - d) It emphasizes the importance of discipline over understanding.
9. In operant conditioning, punishment is designed to:
- a) Strengthen a behaviour
 - b) Weaken or reduce a behaviour
 - c) Teach new behaviours
 - d) Eliminate all behavior
10. Which principle helps ensure punishment is perceived as fair and just?
- a) public shaming of the offender
 - b) Allowing flexibility based on teacher discretion
 - c) Aligning punishment with clear, pre-established rules
 - d) Ensuring punishment is severe enough to deter all behaviours

Short Answer Questions

1. Explain the difference between negative reinforcement and punishment.
2. What defines corporal punishment, and how does it differ from other forms of punishment?
3. How does corporal punishment impact the mental and emotional well-being of individuals subjected to it?
4. How does corporal punishment align with modern understandings of human rights and dignity?
5. What is the purpose of punishment in an educational setting?
6. How does punishment affect students' motivation to learn and engage in the classroom?
7. Does punishment foster a positive or negative relationship between students and teachers? Why?
8. How does corporal punishment impact a student's academic performance and overall school experience?

Essay Questions

1. Explain the relevance of corporal punishment in achieving behavioural change.
2. How does the use of corporal punishment align with or contradict modern educational theories about positive reinforcement and learning?
3. With examples, provide alternative methods to punishment that can achieve similar or better results in classroom management.
4. Should governments or international organizations regulate or ban corporal punishment? Provide reasons to justify your response.

References

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