

EVIDENCE ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE GUIDANCE APPROACH TO DISCIPLINE

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Any approach to discipline is judged to be a failure not only on the obvious criterion that it fails to establish and affect appropriate standards of behavior, but also if, in establishing such standards, it does so primarily by teaching children to obey rules rather than to make reasoned judgments about what actions are desirable, and about how actually to decide to act in those desirable ways.¹

Many people assert that everyone ‘knows’ that punishments (and rewards) *work*, whereas they are sceptical about whether guidance can maintain order, let alone teach appropriate behaviour in the first place. This raises two issues:

- how we measure or judge effectiveness;
- evidence about the effects of guidance approaches versus control.

When measuring effectiveness, ultimately, any truly optimal style of discipline should lead to its own demise.² That is, children should outgrow the need for adult supervision. As discussed in chapter 2 of *Children are people too*,³ for methods to be considered effective in this broader sense, they must not only end a disruption but also preserve children’s sense of safety, teach them skills to use in future, ensure that they continue to want to relate to adults, and promote healthy attitudes to authority. Specifically, our disciplinary methods must achieve the following.

- Disruptions in general need to be prevented from occurring.
- The particular disruption should be less likely in future to recur.
- Young people should learn something positive during the process of correction, such as how to solve interpersonal disputes or regulate their emotions – not how to avoid detection, to tell lies to get out of trouble, to deny responsibility, or to blame someone else.
- There must be no unintended emotional side-effects on the children whom we discipline, such as feeling intimidated or fearful, or being seen by peers as troublesome and therefore as someone to avoid or victimise.
- Surrounding children must continue to feel safe about how *they* would be treated if in future they were to make a mistake.
- Parents have to feel that we are abiding by our principles and doing a good job as parents.
- Our disciplinary methods must preserve our warm relationship with our children. Children should be equally willing to interact with us after a corrective intervention as they were before, not least because we can have no influence on them if they avoid us.
- The methods that we use must in themselves convey our values, such as respect (for both children and adults) and fairness of treatment.⁴
- Children need to develop a healthy attitude to authority.

In this paper, I report the evidence about the extent to which the two main parenting styles (control and guidance) achieve these many aims. In doing so, we must keep in mind that, under guidance, our attitudes towards and treatment of children reflect an ethical stance about the equal moral worth of all human beings and a political awareness that when we have power over others, we must be scrupulous in employing that power in the service of their needs, not for our personal fulfilment.

RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Children's disposition to cooperate with their parents is the natural order of human beings, because it ensures their survival.⁵ Therefore, the question becomes not how do we get children to comply with their parents' requests, but how do we ensure that we do not estrange children from their parents and from the desire to cooperate with them.⁶ The answer is provided by a plentiful accumulation of over 50 years of robust research that has compared child outcomes of parents' disciplinary styles. Of these, *every single study* has shown a guidance approach to produce superior results to controlling discipline, across all domains of children's development. These studies are especially credible because many are longitudinal – that is, they follow children and their parents over many years (in some cases, their lifetime), collecting observations and data about a whole array of life events and parenting behaviours. This research has been able to demonstrate that, of all influences on children's outcomes, parenting quality is the most powerful.⁷

Behavioural outcomes

Parents who employ a controlling, restrictive, hostile and rejecting style of discipline that lacks warmth fail to teach their children self-regulatory skills and prosocial means of solving problems; this results in increased aggression, defiance and uncooperativeness over time,⁸ particularly for children with early high rates of behavioural problems.⁹ Repeated experience with having to surrender their own interests in the service of arbitrary compliance increases children's oppositional tendencies and hostility towards and conflicts with parents.¹⁰ At its extreme, this pattern is labelled as oppositional-defiance disorder (ODD). However, there are no neurological impairments or learning problems underlying this diagnosis.¹¹ Instead, fathers' (and, to a lesser extent mothers') antisocial behaviour or emotional difficulties increase the chances that their children will develop defiant behaviour; in the absence of this type of parental pathology, negative or coercive discipline is the primary cause of children's defiance.¹² Even children in disadvantaged families (who on average have elevated levels of aggression compared with middle-class children) display persistent problems only in the face of insensitive, unresponsive and harsh parenting.¹³

In contrast, parents who are sensitive and responsive to their children and who provide support, structure and emotional warmth (that is, parents who use guidance) tend to produce children who are increasingly cooperative, self-controlled and autonomous and decreasingly antisocial.¹⁴

Mothers' responsiveness can cause angry infants to cooperate¹⁵ and render ordinarily non-conformist children as cooperative as their more typically well-behaved counterparts.¹⁶ Toddlers with sensitive, responsive and supportive parents develop more constructive responses to frustration.¹⁷ Their improved skills at self-regulation lead to fewer aggressive and destructive behaviours, improved co-operation with others and more appropriate self-assertion – that is, assertiveness which does not escalate into defiance or

oppositional behaviour¹⁸ Even children with reactive temperaments (that is, who react hotly to events) show declining behavioural difficulties when parents use guidance to teach them to regulate their feelings.¹⁹

No increase in punishment or in reward can guarantee that children will make the choices adults wish them to make...children are more likely to want to do what an adult wishes if the adult generally does as the child desires.²⁰

The persistence of behavioural difficulties is not due to children's temperaments as such,²¹ but whether they learn to regulate their feelings.²² In turn, this skill is learned from guidance but not from controlling discipline. Even easily distressed or irritable infants can be soothed by responsive parenting and thus learn to regulate their emotions, such that they become more sociable and positive than infants who were initially more settled.²³ The only relevant temperamental quality is that children who are irritable, emotional or reactive benefit *most* from warm and responsive parenting.²⁴

Moral reasoning

Advocates of a guidance approach believe that *why* children behave as they do is as important as *what* they do. There is a continuum from externally to internally governed motivations for considerate or moral behaviour:²⁵

- *External regulation*, where children obey behavioural regulations simply to earn rewards or to avoid punishment. Children who are externally regulated feel compelled to behave in particular ways, but they do not accept the imposed values as their own. As a result, they are both less compliant and more negative under supervision and behave morally only when they anticipate receiving rewards or punishment for their actions.²⁶ In short, children who comply with prohibitions simply out of fear of reprisals do not develop self-regulatory skills and therefore continue to require adults to oversee their conduct.²⁷ They do not learn to think morally and form ethical judgments for themselves.
- *Introjected regulation*, whereby children obey in order to earn social approval or avoid guilt. They have absorbed others' expectations of them, but their behaviour is still driven by the rigid application of rules, rather than by value-driven reasoning²⁸ and their self-esteem is dependent on meeting others' expectations.²⁹
- *Identified regulation*, where individuals consciously endorse a given value or choose a particular behaviour because it has acquired personal significance for them.
- *Integrated regulation*, where individuals incorporate and integrate a consistent set of values into their everyday behaviour. The result is that they will behave morally whether they are being supervised or not.
- *Intrinsic motivation*, where individuals freely choose to perform a given behaviour because it is valuable in itself. This internalisation of values ensures enduring moral behaviour.

Controlling discipline teaches children to focus on their own pleasures and pain, rather than on the effects of their behaviours on other people³⁰ and thus achieves only external or introjected levels of moral regulation.³¹ It does not foster compassion, altruism or empathy. Accordingly, although it can (unreliably) secure immediate compliance, it will not teach moral behaviour in the long term and may even inhibit it³² because controlling discipline does not give children information or practice at moral reasoning. Instead, children comply because they are being forced to ('I'm only doing this because s/he made me').

In contrast, guidance fosters integrated or intrinsic motivations to behave morally. Children and young people become willing to abide voluntarily by their parents' guidelines because their parents reason and negotiate with them, rather than deliver lectures about their behaviour.³³ They develop more sophisticated moral thinking and independently endorse their parents' values when these are not imposed externally.³⁴ Their experience of negotiating their parents' standards, rather than merely obeying them, fosters independence and a willingness to stand up for their values.³⁵ This is known as committed compliance, which is the first step towards self-regulation and integration of parents' values.³⁶

Children raised under a guidance approach also develop more empathy for and compassion towards others. The first mechanism for this is that they experience receiving empathy from responsive parents. Second, children whose parents discuss moral dilemmas, invite the children's participation and provide support to focus on the effects of their behaviour on others develop empathy, rather than attending to the costs to themselves of violating rules.³⁷ Parents' explanations to children about distress they may have caused another directly teach them how to consider others, to be empathic and to act prosocially towards others in distress.³⁸ When parents interpret children's failure to perform a behaviour as evidence that they do not fully comprehend its value, their teaching explains its significance and increases the chances that the children will perform it in future.³⁹

Learning

In terms of their learning styles, adults' controlling discipline generates in children less initiative and persistence,⁴⁰ declining intrinsic motivation,⁴¹ less engagement in learning,⁴² and greater negativity towards and less enjoyment of school work.⁴³ In turn, these negative learning styles lead to declining academic and social performances⁴⁴ and perhaps reduced creativity.⁴⁵ Because parents using controlling discipline have fewer language-rich interactions with their children, both overall and during disciplinary encounters, their children develop significantly lower language comprehension skills compared with those whose parents use reasoning and negotiation to discipline.⁴⁶

From infancy to adolescence, parents who support their children's need for autonomy and are responsive to their needs encourage an achievement orientation, persistence and competence.⁴⁷ This trend continues throughout the school years, when young people reared under a guidance approach score highest on all indicators of academic competence.⁴⁸ Those whose autonomy needs are met at home and school show increased intrinsic motivation and interest in schoolwork and preference for challenge.⁴⁹ This persists into adulthood when university students whose parents use guidance display more confidence, persistence and a mastery orientation to learning, whereby they strive to do well for the benefits of becoming skilled, rather than to earn rewards.⁵⁰

Emotional development

Emotionally, compared with children whose parents use a guidance approach, children of controlling parents are more negative, withdrawn, anxious, unhappy, and hostile when frustrated.⁵¹ Both genders but girls in particular have lower self-esteem as a result of their limited input, circumscribed power and reduced sense of personal significance to their parents.⁵² In one study, 84 per cent of those with low self-esteem had two

controlling parents (whereas 89 per cent of the high self-esteem group had parents who used guidance).⁵³ Children of controlling parents are lonelier and more depressed⁵⁴ and are more emotionally reactive to family adversity.⁵⁵

Adolescents of controlling parents have an external locus of causality and a less well-formulated sense of identity.⁵⁶ Frustration of their need for autonomy incites increased defiance in children as they strive to regain self-determination.⁵⁷ These negative emotional effects are particularly evident when parents use psychological control such as guilt to manipulate children.⁵⁸ Parents' distress or punitive reactions to children's negative feelings teaches children to suppress emotions but, when emotionally aroused, they are more likely to vent their feelings intensely, which leads to antisocial behaviour.⁵⁹

In contrast, children and adolescents whose parents use guidance tend to be self-confident and socially outgoing,⁶⁰ have high self-efficacy and are better able to regulate their emotions and, in turn, control their own behaviour.⁶¹ They have a healthier emotional adjustment overall, higher self-esteem⁶² and are more resilient in adversity.⁶³

Social outcomes

Sensitive parenting is the most significant predictor of children's social functioning across all settings and throughout the early childhood and school years.⁶⁴ Controlling interactions with parents can cause children to develop negative expectations of peers and, in turn, to engage with them in antisocial or less competent ways,⁶⁵ including both physical and relational aggression.⁶⁶ Children of controlling parents use fewer constructive strategies and resolution techniques in conflicts with peers, probably because they have not learned these in their interactions with their parents and have not had practice at taking others' perspective.⁶⁷ Thus, controlling discipline produces children who are more disruptive in the playground and less prosocial in their peer interactions,⁶⁸ with the result that they are less well liked by peers.⁶⁹ An alternative pattern is that psychologically controlling parenting can produce passive social behaviours such as withdrawal,⁷⁰ leaving children vulnerable to being bullied.⁷¹

In contrast, children's warm connectedness to or engagement with their guiding parents extends into more positive peer relationships.⁷² Moreover, guidance gives children experience of and teaches them the skills for social competence, such as managing their emotions, power sharing, influencing and being influenced by others, making suggestions, negotiation, compromise, collaboration, intimacy and positive emotion. Children whose parents consider their needs during parent-child conflicts later use reasoning and compromise to resolve conflicts with their peers.⁷³

Parent-child relationships

Children and young people become estranged from controlling parents. Although they may do as they are told, they resent the restrictive control that their parents impose and become hostile towards them, rejecting both them and their standards.⁷⁴ Their parents' willingness to cause them pain will decrease their desire to relate to their parents or care how they feel.⁷⁵ In turn, a lack of concern for parental approval leaves parents with little influence over their behaviour. Controlling relationships with parents can also cause young people

to become excessively and prematurely oriented towards their peers.⁷⁶ When the peer group is deviant or the youth are desperate for peer acceptance, they may engage in delinquent behaviour in order to be popular with their friends.

In contrast, guidance improves young people's connectedness to or engagement with their parents.⁷⁷ Adolescents who feel that their parents give them enough freedom feel close to their parents and respect their wishes.⁷⁸ When their parents impose few controls on them, they are more willing to cooperate, enjoy interacting with their parents, and are less negative.⁷⁹

DISADVANTAGES OF REWARDS

In addition to the general disadvantages of controlling discipline, there is specific evidence about the detrimental outcomes of the particular rewards and punishments. Chapter 2 of both the DVD, *Guiding children's behaviour*⁸⁰ and of *Children are people too* present arguments against their use so the full list will not be repeated here, although it is useful to consider the evidence about these claims. With respect to rewards, a fundamental criticism is that these convey to children that they are valued not for who they are, but for what they do.⁸¹ This conditional love from parents will have devastating emotional outcomes for children, including lowered self-esteem, resentment of parents and reduced motivation.⁸²

Second, rewards focus children's attention on what *they* will earn from their actions, rather than how these affect others. Therefore, rewards do not inspire compassion and altruism.⁸³

Third, rewards work counter to our intentions, in that delivering a reward for a given behaviour *decreases* the attractiveness of the behaviour and *increases* the attractiveness of the reward.⁸⁴ For example, when we reward children for eating vegetables by allowing them to have ice-cream, we make vegetables *less* attractive and ice-cream *more* desirable.

Fourth, a compelling body of research focuses on the effects of rewards on children's motivation and learning. It has been found that individuals who seek rewards as evidence that they have out-performed others or to prove their worth become very competitive and, if they cannot win, grow despondent or disengaged.⁸⁵ They avoid tasks that carry a risk of failure, are less persistent when faced with challenge, react helplessly to errors, develop more negative views of themselves when they experience failure, and may become disruptive in an effort to avoid or escape task demands.⁸⁶

The result is that when children receive praise or other rewards for their achievements, they strive only to earn more rewards, rather than to gain in competence. In other words, their intrinsic motivation for the task declines, particularly for those tasks where they believe that they cannot outdo their peers or earn desired rewards.⁸⁷ This approach to learning causes deteriorating performances when they experience setbacks.

In contrast are those who seek to become competent simply for the satisfaction of growing and improving. This is known as a mastery orientation to learning, or growth seeking.⁸⁸ Learners with this view see failure not as an indictment of themselves, but as useful information that they need to try another approach.⁸⁹ When not subjected to external pressure to excel, they report enjoying tasks more and experiencing less tension while completing them.⁹⁰ They sustain their effort and are more positive about their own capacities, as a result of which their performances improve over time.⁹¹

DISADVANTAGES OF PUNISHMENT

Chapter 2 of *Children are people too* lists some disadvantages of punishments, the most common forms of which are verbal reprimands, loss of access to material goods or favourite activities, forfeited pocket money, time out and, despite strong evidence of its uniformly negative side-effects, spanking or smacking. The disadvantages of these methods centre on their limited ability to ensure even immediate compliance, their negative effects on children's emotional wellbeing, and the damage they cause to the parent-child relationship.

The colloquial use of the term *punishment* disguises the fact that surprisingly little is known about its effective use in everyday settings.⁹² Therefore, it is informative to supplement the discussion in *Children are people too* with some scientific evidence. Most research has focused in laboratories on rats, pigeons and monkeys being exposed to electric shocks, sprays of water, blasts of air, squirts of lemon juice, ammonia odour and physical restraint, none of which are applicable with children.

In laboratory settings, studies have found that punishment works best to deter particular actions when it is fairly intense and is delivered both immediately (within seconds) and every time the inappropriate behaviour occurs; at the same time, any competing reinforcement (e.g. adult attention) must be eliminated.⁹³ These conditions are seldom manageable in natural settings, not least because adults will not always witness children's actions, with the result that many are not detected and therefore cannot be punished. Moreover, the very conditions that make punishment effective – particularly its intensity – are too severe to be justified for normal childhood behavioural mistakes and, moreover, are likely to provoke aggression, resistance and escape in punished children.⁹⁴

Another shortcoming is that changes brought about by punishment seldom transfer to other settings (generalise) or are maintained,⁹⁵ probably because punishment on its own cannot teach a desirable behaviour, but only suppress an undesired one.⁹⁶ This means that, once instituted, punishment would need to be in place virtually permanently, when instead children should outgrow the need for external discipline.

If punishment is so effective, how come I have to keep doing it?⁹⁷

The conclusion even from advocates of behavioural controls is that punishment is effective for the 95 per cent of children for whom lesser methods would work equally well; for the remaining 5 per cent of children with severe behavioural difficulties – that is, the very children whose behaviour most needs to improve – punishment seldom works.⁹⁸ Its disadvantages far outweigh its advantages and, other than signalling who is in charge, it fails to produce any lasting behavioural improvements.⁹⁹

Time out

Although some will contend that, of the various forms of punishment, time out is reasonably mild, what is really being withdrawn from children during time out is not their parents' attention, but their love.¹⁰⁰ Withdrawal of love can make children comply, but largely because the threat of emotional abandonment is so devastating. Children perceive it as a lack of care¹⁰¹ and a communication that they are unworthy.¹⁰² At the time, it can lead to expressions of distress and protest that attract more punishment¹⁰³ and, in the longer term, it leads to fear, anxiety, low and unstable self-esteem, avoidance of failure by evading challenge, lack of moral development, delinquency, poor emotional wellbeing, and difficulty forming relationships.¹⁰⁴

Physical punishment

It is sobering to contemplate that in democracies, there are restrictions on how prison guards can treat inmates (who, it could be argued, have *demonstrated* antisocial proclivities) and yet few countries limit the physical assault of innocents (children) by their parents, unless injury results.¹⁰⁵ Where it is not illegal, smacking or spanking is still practised by the majority of parents: in the U.S., over one-third of children under one year of age are hit by their parents, including being shaken¹⁰⁶ (which, at that young an age can be fatal). Smacking reaches a peak of 94 per cent for three- to five-year olds, who are hit up to three times a week – that is, *150 times a year!*¹⁰⁷ While prevalence decreases with age, 30 per cent of parents of adolescents are still hitting them, on an average of six times a year, with these figures likely to be a significant under-estimation.¹⁰⁸ Spanking is most prevalent in less educated, young, impoverished, rural and Protestant parents but nevertheless is extremely common across all sectors of the community.¹⁰⁹ Some parents will ask your thoughts about it, in which event the evidence presented here will equip you to give a reasoned response.

When studies focus on young children with clinical levels of disruptive behaviour, infrequent mild physical punishment accompanied by reasoning achieves improved short-term compliance and reduced aggression; but more typical children experience no positive benefits and only harmful effects, particularly when aged over six years, when subjected to frequent use (one to three times a week) at any age¹¹⁰ and when children are inhibited or fearful by nature.¹¹¹ Detrimental outcomes are most pronounced for frequent and severe physical punishment.¹¹²

In the long term, this form of punishment has negative effects across all domains of children's functioning.

- Physical punishment increases the severity of children's behavioural problems across time. These include increased aggression and escalating defiance or oppositional behaviour and antisocial acts during childhood and adolescence¹¹³ and into adulthood.¹¹⁴
- Morally, physically punished children comply simply to avoid consequences and thus fail to develop an internal locus of causality. This results in impaired conscience development, or the failure to internalise parents' values.¹¹⁵
- Children subjected to physical punishment show impairments in social skills such as social problem solving, with lowered peer acceptance and increased peer dislike. These effects probably come about because their experience of a hostile relationship with their parents causes children to develop similarly negative expectations of peers.¹¹⁶
- Physically punished children show diminished connectedness to and trust in punitive adults.¹¹⁷ In other words, even when individuals show resilience, punishment damages relationships.
- At the time, like all forms of punishment, smacking will produce emotional distress such as perceptions of rejection, fear of loss of adult approval, anger, humiliation, guilt and sadness.¹¹⁸ These emotions are likely, in turn, to block any cognitive appreciation by the child of the message behind the discipline.¹¹⁹ In the longer term, many physically punished children experience low self-esteem, anxiety and depression and, in adulthood, alcohol dependency.¹²⁰ Even when physical discipline is culturally normative, it still reduces children's emotional adjustment and increases their levels of social aggression.¹²¹
- The developmental impairments, such as reduced IQ¹²² and language comprehension,¹²³ associated with physical punishment probably arise because parents employing corporal punishment use less reasoning when disciplining.

Even where these detrimental effects cannot be demonstrated, no beneficial effects of physical punishment can be proven either.¹²⁴ The only positive result ever found has been increased compliance. However, this is a dubious achievement because, as already mentioned, it does not teach children moral reasoning or encourage independent thinking.¹²⁵ Furthermore, where smacking achieves compliance, this is evidence that the children are amenable and therefore lesser methods would be more effective. In other words, it is unnecessary.

RESISTANCE TO ABANDONING CONTROLS

The research reviewed here has been accumulating for at least fifty years and is impressive in its unanimity and rigour. Its conclusions are clear: compared with guidance, controlling discipline is less effective and more harmful in important ways. Despite this, for many reasons we find it difficult to abandon controlling children.

Distrust of children

Our reluctance to abandon controlling discipline is grounded in authoritarian religious beliefs in the basic immorality of human beings. This causes us to believe that justice demands that, even when very young children make mistakes, there must be retribution; otherwise, children will never overcome their evil tendencies. Even modern thinking distrusts children's childishness, causing us to push children to grow up and behave beyond their capabilities because we fear babying or 'spoiling' them.

Social inequalities

Parents can impose controls on children because we do not think of them as being human yet. Similarly, women who are dominated by their male partners tend, in turn, to impose controls on their children.¹²⁶ At a broader level still, societies which control the working and personal lives of adults tend to endorse parents' control of children. In these social settings, parents aim to prepare their children for the 'real world' of controls. However, this is like saying that children will be exposed to carcinogens in adult life and therefore we should get them used to them now.¹²⁷ Instead, what gives children the fortitude to deal with adversity later in life is their early experience of success and joy.¹²⁸

Lack of knowledge

Because of our experience of being denied self-control as children, in adulthood this style is all that is familiar to us. Once we become parents ourselves we reflexively use what we know.

This lack of experience with alternatives is reinforced by an unjustified faith in the effectiveness of rewards and punishments and by either-or thinking which says that *either* we impose our will on children *or* they will run amok. However, both styles of parenting communicate a lack of care for children: control signals that we do not care about their needs, feelings and perspective; permissiveness indicates that we cannot be bothered responding to them, even when they act thoughtlessly.¹²⁹

The dichotomy is false, but persists in the face of a lack of education for parents about the third alternative (guidance). It causes parents to fear being too permissive when, in fact, most are more likely to control their children too much than too little.

Many parents believe that they don't have the time to use guidance methods. However, bypassing children's perspective and imposing solutions on them means that children will learn little, solutions are less likely to be effective and problems are more likely to be repeated. Moreover, Kohn reports that, 'While it is theoretically possible to spend too much time hashing things out, most parents have a long way to go before they have to worry about erring in this direction'.¹³⁰

Low self-efficacy in parents

Parents with low self-efficacy fear feeling inadequate and are likely to overcompensate for their doubts by imposing rigid standards on children (which masquerades as consistency).

Sometimes, restrictions are justified on the grounds of ensuring children's safety. However, while safety concerns can be legitimate, it is nevertheless important that any restrictions we impose are to protect children, not merely for our convenience. Even less legitimate is our fear for the safety of objects ('things').¹³¹

We are also terrified of being judged by outsiders when, in reality, what other people think of us is none of our business.

CONCLUSION

The disadvantages of controlling discipline are common across cultures, socioeconomic groupings¹³² and various family structures.¹³³ Thus, while it is clear that children need parental instruction, the evidence presented here tells us that we can achieve better outcomes for children by guiding them rather than imposing controls.

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