

Guiding children's behaviour

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POLITICS

Disciplinary theories and their practices are political and therefore problematical, with inherent values, assumptions and contradictions.

- Their practices are value-laden.
- The practices reflect imbalances of power – in this case, between adults and children.
- These power imbalances are frequently legitimised – in the case of the discipline of children, on the grounds of their developmental incompetence.
- Some groups are served by the maintenance of this power imbalance. In schools, children are marginalised and disadvantaged by them.

CONTRASTING IDEAS ABOUT DISCIPLINE

Controlling discipline

Negative beliefs about children's nature

Views children as incompetent

Focuses on the future

Disruptions (mistakes) should not happen so should be punished

Disruptions are due to faulty reward and punishment regimes

Aims for compliance and obedience

External locus of causality

Adult is the boss, with coercive power

Guidance

Trusts that children are rational, want to cooperate with us, want to surprise us and to have us proud for them.

Views children as competent

Focuses on meeting children's current needs

Mistakes are inevitable and call for teaching

Disruptions arise from violations of children's needs, especially autonomy (see p. 2)

Aims for considerate behaviour

Internal locus of causality

Adult is a leader, with expertise and protective power

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT DEVELOPMENTAL VERSUS BEHAVIOURAL ERRORS

Behavioural errors

Children are trying to get things wrong; their errors are deliberate.

Children should not explore limits: they should obey them.

Children should not make behavioural mistakes.

Children who have difficulties achieving behavioural expectations should be punished.

Developmental errors

Children are trying to get things right: their errors are accidental.

Children need to explore to foster learning.

Mastery requires lesson and practice and will inevitably entail mistakes.

Children who have difficulties achieving developmental expectations need additional support.

CAUSES OF DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOUR

Internal stressors

- Transient conditions e.g. fatigue, hunger, illness
- Disabilities, especially in language and sensory integration domains
- Disorganised nervous systems e.g. due to food intolerances

Developmental inexperience

- Normal childhood exuberance
- Normal exploration
- Lack of information
- Loss of self-control

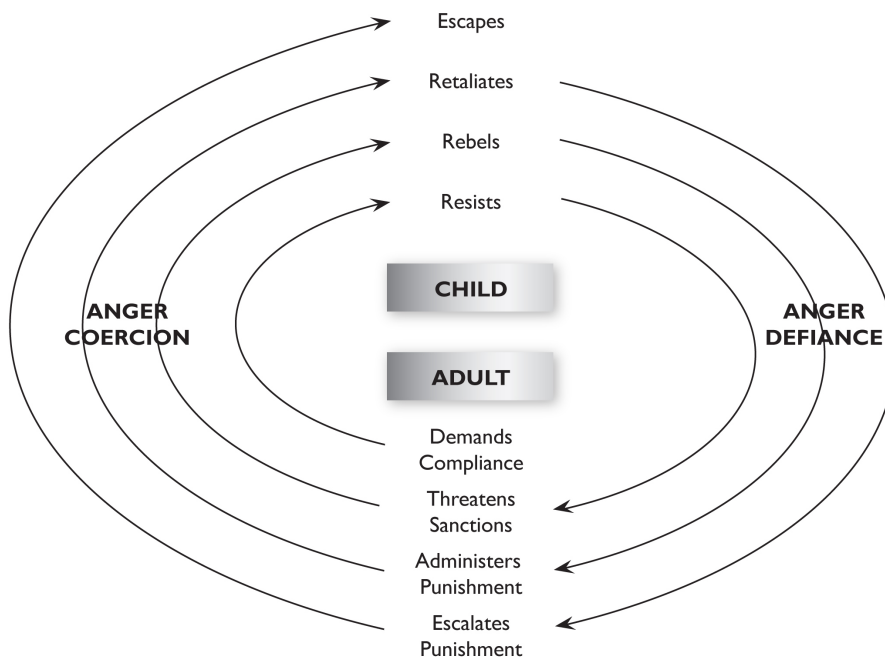
External stressors

- Developmentally inappropriate expectations
- Family adversity: poverty, untreated parental mental illness, parental drug abuse, child abuse, spousal conflict

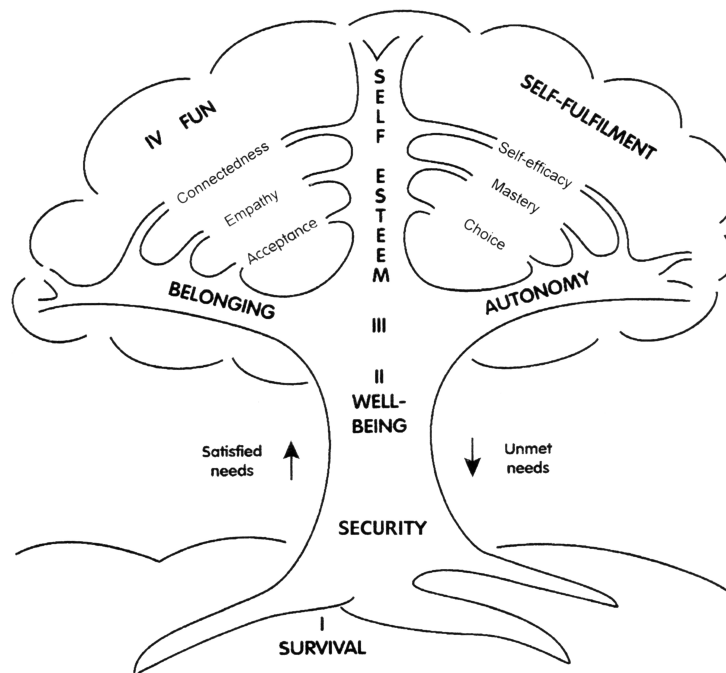
Reactive behaviours

These are children's negative responses to an adult's correction and usually involve an escalation of the original behaviour. Gordon (1970) called these 'the three Rs' of resistance, rebellion and retaliation and later added a fourth response: escape.

THE 'DANCE' OF ESCALATING ADULT COERCION AND CHILD RESISTANCE



A MODEL OF HUMAN NEEDS



DISADVANTAGES OF REWARDS AND PUNISHMENTS

When adults administer consequences, we are in control of children. Naturally, given that they are inherently aversive, punishments have some particular disadvantages:

- They can become addictive and escalate into abuse.
- They can teach children to ignore adults who threaten but do not deliver punishment.
- Children can be shunned by their peers as a result of adults' discipline of them.
- Punishment can intimidate onlookers.

Shared features

- Both rewards and punishments entail punishment. Individuals will feel punished if they judge that they 'deserve' some recognition but do not receive it. This shows that rewards and punishments are two sides of the same coin (Kohn, 1999).
- Both are attempts to manipulate children into doing things our way.
- Given that the need to be self-determining is fundamental to all human beings, external control will often excite secondary behavioural problems, such as resistance, rebellion and retaliation (Gordon, 1970). This is particularly likely for spirited children.
- Consequences focus children's minds on what *they* will earn by their behaviour, rather than on the effects of their actions on others.

Limited effectiveness

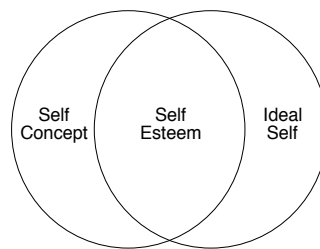
- To have any effect on children's behaviour, rewards and punishments have to be delivered immediately, frequently and intensely (consistently). This is seldom possible.
- Conformist children will learn to comply but, in so doing, become submissive. In terms of their learning, they might avoid taking intellectual risks and being creative in case adults might disapprove of the outcome.
- When children are accustomed to adults judging their actions, they do not learn to monitor their own behaviour: they notice neither their accomplishments nor their thoughtless acts.
- Consequences work mainly for those who are cooperative anyway and therefore do not need manipulation; for the remainder, they seldom alter their disruptiveness and instead resist outside attempts to control them.
- Coercion damages relationships.

Effects on recipients

- Children's intrinsic motivation for learning declines.
- Children can become competitive with each other as they try to earn for themselves the limited rewards that are on offer.
- The imposition of external controls can teach children to exercise control over peers (and adults) through verbal and physical aggression and bullying.
- Rewards and punishments can discourage children as they realise that they cannot achieve inflated expectations.

SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem compares our skills and qualities (termed the *self-concept*) with our beliefs about how we would like to be (our *ideal self*). This is illustrated below.



Self-esteem as the overlap between the self-concept and ideal self (Porter 2006)

PRINCIPLES FOR DELIVERING FEEDBACK

- 1a When you want children to develop a healthy self-esteem, do not praise them.
- 1b When you want children to develop a healthy self-esteem, acknowledge and celebrate (but do not praise) their efforts and successes.

ROUTES TO LOW SELF-ESTEEM

- 1 Individuals feel disappointed in their skill levels because *they are incompetent*.
- 2 Individuals have the skills and qualities that they value, but do not realise it: *their self-concept is impoverished*.
- 3 Individuals expect so much of themselves that no one could achieve all that: *their ideals are inflated*.

PRAISE

Approves of work that meets adults' standards

Judges children or their efforts

Prescribes what children must do to earn our respect

Is delivered in public as a way to manipulate others into copying a praised child

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Teaches children to evaluate their own efforts

Gives our opinion

Describes qualities that children display that we already respect

Is a personal event that does not show up children in public or compare them to each other

TIPS FOR ACKNOWLEDGING CHILDREN'S ACHIEVEMENTS

Ask children how they feel about what they have achieved:

Are you pleased?
What do you think of *that*?
Are you happy with that?

When children are saying or giving nonverbal messages that they are pleased, reflect that:

You look delighted!
You seem very proud of yourself.
You look very pleased.

When appropriate, add your opinion (but not a judgment):

Well, I agree with you!
I agree that you can be very pleased with yourself
I think it's special too.

Give information or feedback in the form of *I-verb*:

I admire...
I respect...
I value...
I'm impressed that...
I appreciate...

Intend to *congratulate*, not manipulate:

Congratulations!
Hey! You did it!
Wow! Look at that!

Express *appreciation*:

Thank you!
I'm grateful that...
I appreciate that because...

Focus on the *process*, not the product:

I admire that you tried something new.
I'm impressed that you had another go.
Looks like you really worked at that.

Verify children's own assessment that they have achieved something worthwhile, *highlight* their successes so that they notice these, and *expand* on what they have achieved:

I agree that it's quite an achievement! (verification)
Did you know you could do that? (Highlight)
And not only have you finished it, but you worked on it for ages (Expansion)

Use natural manners, without patronising children. For example, in response to a child's thanks:

You're welcome!
It's a pleasure
I hope you enjoy it.

BENEFITS OF ACKNOWLEDGMENT

- Acknowledgment gives children information about who they are and what they are capable of being: it expands their self-concept.
- It does not imply doubt about their worth or tie their worthiness to their ability to satisfy our expectations: their ideals remain realistic.
- Because it is authentic, it is credible, meaningful and, therefore, successful at low doses.
- It does not undermine children's intrinsic motivation.
- It encourages self-referenced perfectionism, rather than socially prescribed perfectionism.

GUIDANCE PRINCIPLES

- 1a You do not have to tolerate intolerable behaviour.
- 1b You do not have to tolerate *inconsiderate* behaviour.
- 2 You cannot reason with people *while* they are being unreasonable.
- 3 When a person is drowning, that is not the time to give swimming lessons.
- 4 Look for a solution, not a culprit.
- 5 Consistency is unnecessary – but repeated practice helps.

EVERYDAY GUIDANCE METHODS

Ask

- in what way did you hope (the behaviour) would help?
- what did you have in mind when you did that?
- what did you hope it would achieve for you?
- what do you need right now?
- what can I do to help?

Explain the effects of the behaviour

- Deliver information, not a judgment.

Empathic assertion

- Reflect the child's needs: *I understand that you...*
- Express your own, assertively: *However, I need...*
- Solve the problem jointly: *So what can we do about that?*

Offer choice

- whether to do something (as long as it is not compulsory)
- how to do something
- how to feel about it.

Collaborative problem solving

- *Define the problem.* Use I-messages to disclose your needs and listen to the child's expression of his or her needs.
- *Invite the child to contribute to generating solutions;* 'What's your ideas?' Brainstorm all possibilities and listen to all suggestions.
- *Evaluate the suggestions* and choose a solution that seems viable – that is, one that is realistic (which means that it is achievable by the child and in the circumstances) and mutually satisfactory. (Note that 'Trying harder' is seldom a viable option.) This stage recognises that the solution is not pre-determined.
- *Carry out the selected solution.*
- *Check back later* to see how it is working. If subsequently the solution fails, this simply signals the need to repeat the process to generate a different strategy until one is found that those involved can achieve and which works to meet both their needs.

Contracts

- *Describe the behaviour you need from the child.*

- Commit to providing the support that the child needs, 'on the grounds that, if the behaviour were easy, the child would already be performing it. That he or she is not, this means that it must not be easy for the child to do and therefore the child needs more help.

TEACHING EMOTIONAL SELF-CONTROL

Types of meltdowns

A meltdown is any sign that children are out of control of their feelings. Four patterns are:

- *Protesting tantrum*: thrashing about, screaming, crying, spitting.
- *Whingeing*: the passive version of the protesting tantrum, involving sulking, nagging and complaining.
- *Social tantrum (aggression)*: bossing others, refusing to share or take turns, name-calling, aggression, bullying, exclusion.
- *Uncooperativeness*: not being able to overcome their distaste for a reasonable directive.

Supporting children to regain control

- Bring children in close
- Use time away

FURTHER READING

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Websites

Louise Porter: www.louiseporter.com.au

Alfie Kohn: www.alfiekohn.org

Ross Greene's site: www.livesinthebalance.org

Nonviolent communication: www.cnvc.org