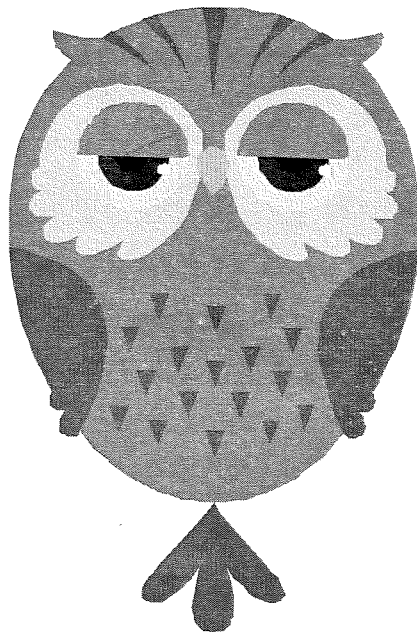
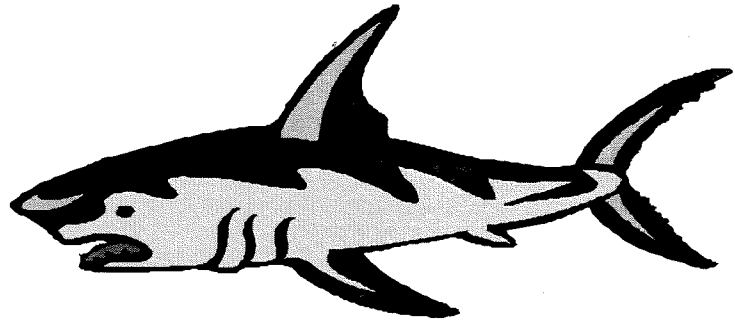
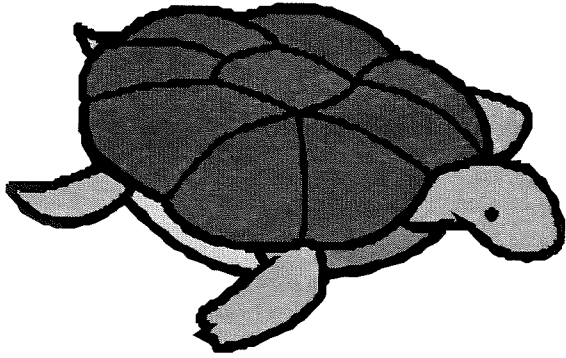




Turning Conflicts Into Learning — Problem Solving I



Personal Conflict Styles



Owl Strategies: Turning Problems Into Learning Opportunities

- ◆ Use gentle body language.
- ◆ Be specific.
- ◆ Focus on the present and the future.
- ◆ Focus on the problem.
- ◆ Focus on children's needs and interests.
- ◆ Listen carefully to both sides of an issue.

Which Kind of Consequence?

Place a **P**, **L**, or **N** by each situation to indicate whether the outcome is a **punitive**, **logical**, or **natural** consequence.

1. ____ Peter finds a mud puddle in the backyard and walks through it several times. "My feet are really cold!" he says.
2. ____ Jonah spills his milk at lunch. The provider tells him to go get a paper towel to wipe it up.
3. ____ Joe comes to large-group time and sits down. As soon as the caregiver begins to read, he begins to move around, sitting in different spots. The caregiver asks him to go to the time-out area.
4. ____ Reda hits Sang during rest time. Mr. McHale asks her to stop hitting and stay on her mat. Reda hits Sang again a few minutes later. "Reda, can you stop hitting Sang, or do I need to stop you?" Mr. McHale asks. She doesn't answer. He moves her to a spot farther away from Sang; then, after rest time, he asks Reda to talk about what had been happening.
5. ____ The provider reminds Latisha that she needs to put on a smock before she paints in order to keep her clothes clean. She says no. Soon she finds that she has paint on the front of her dress and begins to cry.
6. ____ Two children are looking at a book together. They try to turn a page at the same time and it tears. They are asked to leave the book corner and not return for the rest of the day.
7. ____ Several children move dishes, dress-up clothes, and dolls to a house they have built in another room. It takes them 20 minutes to put everything back at cleanup time.
8. ____ Evan finds a mud puddle in the backyard and walks through it several times. Before he goes inside, the caregiver asks him to take off his muddy shoes and put on extra ones.

Punishment: What Does It Teach?

- ◆ *At lunchtime, Bre'anna asks for more "pasgetti." Should the provider say, "You should know better!" and send Bre'anna to the time-out area?*
- ◆ *Kazu, preparing to go outside, puts his boots on the wrong feet. Should the caregiver tell him that, because of his mistake, he must stay inside to "think about it"?*
- ◆ *Celia holds a marker in a fist-like grasp instead of correctly positioning it between her thumb and index finger. Should the provider take the markers and put them away until Celia "learns to do it right"?*

Most family child care providers would agree that children certainly should not be punished for making mistakes like these or for lacking particular skills.

Yet when children make *social* mistakes — when they quarrel, hit and kick, or “lose it” because they can’t solve a problem — it’s common for adults to respond with punishment. When a child’s social behavior is unacceptable, they may send the child to the time-out chair, exclude the child from going outside, or take a toy away.

Consider this example: During play outside, Luke and Lawrence are both pulling on a new stroller, hitting each other, and shouting. Should the adult punish Luke and Lawrence?

In a high-quality family child care home, the answer to this question is no. Punishing children for their social mistakes is inconsistent with a commitment to active learning. Providers know that children learn best when they are intrinsically motivated and are actively involved in learning new skills. If Luke and Lawrence are removed from the situation and punished, they will not develop the skills they need to approach the problem more constructively the next time it occurs. During this moment of conflict, however, the children’s keen interest in the stroller means they are highly motivated to find a more constructive solution to their problem. Punishing Luke and Lawrence might solve the provider’s immediate problem of restoring order, but such an

approach will not support the children's need, at a critical moment, to begin to acquire new social skills.

Later in this article we will consider alternative responses to Luke and Lawrence's dilemma, but first it is important to consider *why* adults punish and the implications of punishment for children.

Why Adults Punish

When it is clear that conflicts like these result from children's immaturity, why do many providers use punishment for the Lukes and Lawrences in their homes?

There are many reasons why providers punish children, and the reasons vary with each adult-child situation. The most common is that most adults simply have no other approach for dealing with children's unacceptable behaviors. Research informs us that children who are punished often become caregivers who punish. Having had no role models for constructively communicating strong emotions such as anger and frustration, adults do what they have seen modeled — they respond to the “out-of-control” child by taking over control. Instead of helping the child learn to be more “in control,” these adults respond by venting their own strong feelings.

Another reason why providers punish children is that they feel a strong sense of responsibility for children's behavior. They fear that if they do not respond to the offending behavior firmly enough, with a sufficiently memorable consequence, the child may be tempted to repeat the behavior. They may express the fear that if an “impression” is not made, the child may grow up to be “bad,” possibly even becoming a criminal.

Unfortunately, however, punishment often doesn't help the preschooler remember how to behave more acceptably. Since young children have difficulty holding more than one thought in mind at a time, children who are punished may remember only the fright or resentment created by a provider's anger or may only retain the message that they are “bad” or “naughty.”

Punishment and Behavior Change

Even if the child does realize that a particular behavior is not acceptable, the punishment may still not have a *lasting* effect. Punishment usually results only in short-term changes in behavior because the child's *desire* to repeat the offending behavior has not changed, even though the child has outwardly complied with the adult's wishes. As a result, maintaining the new behavior requires a *punitive system*, in which punishment, or at least the threat of it, is repeated over and over. Popular child-management techniques such as "time-out" and "1-2-3 magic" are examples of punitive systems that rely on such cycles of punishment.

Such systems are popular, because punishment (and its partner, reward) do appear to work, at least in the short run. Children are easily manipulated by promises, stickers, sweets, the loss of "goodies" or privileges, or threats of possible isolation in a time-out area. Yet such punishment-reward systems do little to help children learn how to express needs and feelings or to resolve problem situations more appropriately.

To help children begin to develop these important social skills, we need to adopt an active learning approach, in which **child choice** and **initiative** are essential elements of the learning process. New social behaviors are likely to be acquired permanently only when children can choose to engage in them independently, without adult coercion. Punishment and reward alike result in *mindless obedience*. Because the child who has been punished or rewarded has not chosen the new behavior freely, but has simply adopted it to avoid punishment or to gain a reward, he or she will only repeat the desired behavior if the provider continues to use external motivators such as bribes, threats, or punishments. As a result, the child becomes dependent on the provider for the motivation to behave constructively. The child never internalizes the desired behavior, because he or she has never made a *conscious choice* to engage in the behavior.

It is important, too, to evaluate punishment from the perspective of our basic educational goals. What do we want for children? When providers who are learning the HighScope active learning approach are asked this question, they most often respond that they want to encourage children's independence, creativity, problem solving, social adaptability, and risk-taking. In the active

learning approach, problem situations as well are seen as valuable opportunities to develop these same capabilities. From this perspective, children's mistakes and problems are critical experiences that concretely demonstrate to children their need for a new skill. Children miss out on the opportunity to explore and learn from their mistakes if they are placed in the time-out area as soon as a problem arises.

Alternatives to Punishment

What, then, are the alternatives to punishment? How can we help children find and *consciously choose* more positive ways to express needs and solve problems? Our answer is a problem-solving process in which children's feelings are sensitively acknowledged, their ideas are respected, and solutions are chosen by the children with the support of the provider.

Here's how this process was used to assist Luke and Lawrence, the two children fighting over the stroller who were described at the opening of this article:

While playing outside Luke and Lawrence decide simultaneously that they want to use the stroller. Shouting loudly, they alternately pull at it and hit each other.

*Hearing the commotion, Rachael, the provider, approaches them, kneels down so she can be at their level, and gently puts her hands on each of them, stopping the hitting. She says, "Luke, you look angry, and Lawrence, you look angry, too. It's not okay to hit when you are angry, but we **can** talk about what is making you feel upset." The children quiet down and look at Rachael. Continuing in a calm manner, Rachael asks, "What seems to be the problem here?"*

Luke says, "I had it and I want it!"

Lawrence says, "I want it!"

Rachael continues to acknowledge their feelings. “So, Luke, you want the stroller, and Lawrence, you want the stroller, too. The problem is that you both really want this stroller. Hmmm, I wonder what you could do to solve this problem?”

Both children are silent, and Rachael waits. (Though it is difficult to wait for the children’s suggestions, Rachael has learned through experience that her patience at times like these is very important.) Suddenly Luke’s face lights up and he says, “We could buy a new one!”

Rachael, remembering that she is supporting the exploration of ideas, replies, “I wonder how that could happen?”

Luke thinks for a moment, and then curls up his nose, and says, “Nah.” Other ideas are explored — making a stroller, using the stroller together — but Luke and Lawrence do not agree on either of these.

Finally a child playing nearby offers a suggestion: “They could take turns.” Luke responds excitedly, “Yeah, I could push the stroller all the way down to the wall and back and then give it to Lawrence. He can do it, then give it back to me!”

Rachael restates this, making sure both children agree to this idea. They do agree, and they take turns for the rest of their time outside.

During the next week, Luke and Lawrence have another conflict over a favorite toy. Rachael reminds them that they have solved a problem like this before. Luke replies, “Oh, yeah, we can take turns like with the stroller.”

This example demonstrates how effective a problem-solving approach can be. Sometimes, however, a problem-solving discussion is not a good option because time is limited or because the emotions of the provider or child are so strong that problem solving will not be productive.

At these times it may be best to postpone problem-solving. In this case the provider can make a simple “I” statement that states his or her feelings, gives reasons, and gives limited choices. For example (to Luke and Lawrence), “I feel worried because pulling on the new stroller may break it. Because it’s time for cleanup, we don’t have time to solve this problem together. We will talk about how to take turns with this after lunch. Your choices now are for the three of us to put the stroller away together or for me to put it away.”

Whether problem solving occurs right away or at some later time, it offers an effective alternative to using punishment or external rewards to manage children. As children solve problems together and engage, *by choice*, in new ways of interacting, they find that successful problem solving has its own rewards.

Source: Evans, Betsy. (January/February 1996). *High/Scope Extensions*. Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press.

Negative Implications of Punishment

Punishment . . .

- Makes children dependent on adults, while increasing adult control and authority
- Has negative effects on self-esteem:
 - Makes children “other-directed” rather than “inner-directed”
 - Focuses on “badness” of child rather than the problem or action
- Addresses adult’s short-term needs, rather than child’s long-term needs
- Promotes compliance and conformity
- Promotes fear, aggression, and resentment
- Develops mindless obedience rather than a *desire* to act constructively
- Teaches a desire to avoid being caught
- Inhibits children’s ability to express strong emotions appropriately
- Creates an adversarial relationship between adults and children

Physical punishment . . .

- Teaches that violence is an acceptable way of expressing anger
- Teaches that if you are bigger, you are allowed to hurt

Source: Kohn, Alfie. (1993). *Punished by Rewards*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Alternatives to Punishment

- ◆ Engage children in active learning experiences.
- ◆ Follow consistent daily routines.
- ◆ Intrinsically motivate children through play that
 - Is enjoyable.
 - Is personally interesting.
 - Gives children choices.
 - Has a high probability of success.
 - Promotes a sense of competence.
- ◆ Support developmentally appropriate play by using interaction strategies based on sharing control with children.
- ◆ Engage children in a problem-solving approach to conflict that focuses on
 - Problems, not people.
 - The process of expressing and listening to needs and feelings.
- ◆ Use “I” statements
 - To express strong emotions.
 - To give reasons for feelings.
 - To give limited choices and logical consequences.

