

Tutorial: Discipline

(See also Tutorials on [Behavior Management](#); [Positive Behavior Supports](#); [Parenting Styles](#))

WHAT IS DISCIPLINE?

In the context of child development and school policy, the term “discipline” refers generally to the practices that adults use to teach children rules of conduct and to enforce those rules. Disciplinary practices include creation and discussion of rules and expectations, reminders of rules, positive consequences for adhering to rules, and negative consequences for breaking rules. In discussions with students, rules can be referred to as expectations – “If we want to get along and get our work done, we expect that all of us will follow these simple rules. This is what we all expect from one another.”

Experts describe at least four different approaches to discipline.

Inductive Discipline Orientation: The term “inductive discipline” is commonly used by psychologists to refer to the most effective type of parental or adult discipline of children. Inductive or positive discipline is designed to avoid power battles, arbitrary use of parental authority, and other forms of negative interaction around discipline. This approach to discipline is often associated with “authoritative parenting”, which is the positive middle ground between extreme permissiveness, on one side, and extreme arbitrariness or “authoritarian parenting” on the other.

“Authoritative” parents maintain their proper role as their child’s authority figure, but also discuss and negotiate with their children and turn over decision making to children when it is proper to do so. When children behave in ways that are considered positive, they receive positive reinforcement and the reason for the reinforcement is clearly explained. For example, “John, You’ve done a great job of keeping your room neat and your things in order. That means that I don’t have to nag or spend time cleaning up after you. That saves me time, so we can go to the ball game this weekend.” Or in the case of negative behavior: “John, your room is a mess after you told me you would clean it up. Now we’re both going to have to spend extra time getting your room ready for guests... so we won’t be able to go to the ball game. That’s what happens when you don’t do the little things that you promise to do.”

Parents who use inductive or positive discipline also listen to their children and invite them to explain why they did what they did. Discussion is frequent. Parents are understanding, but also consistent in their enforcement of the important rules of the house.

Because of the clear explanations, children come to understand that there are clear rules for them to follow, good reasons for the rules, and natural and logical consequences that follow behavior that is consistent with the rules and or that is in violation of the rules. When homes are organized around inductive or positive discipline – with more positive reinforcement than punishment – children recognize the orderly organization of life around them and develop better self-regulation than children who live in any of the following three types of homes. Children who are raised in these homes tend to have better self-regulation later in childhood and adolescence than children whose parents rely on less positive styles of parenting. In effect, children “internalize” reasonable rules of conduct and their rationale – and come to use these principles as their own decision-making system. Children develop positive self-regulation in part because they have lived in a world that is organized and predictable, including well understood rules of conduct.

Deductive Discipline Orientation: In homes and schools characterized by “deductive discipline”, rules are created and then enforced by parents and teachers with punishments and rewards. The child is expected to “deduce” or figure out the rules by seeing how his behavior is rewarded or punished. There are few clear explanations given for rewards or punishments. Although enforcement might be consistent, punishment may come to be seen by the child as arbitrary, rather than a natural and logical consequence of violating a clearly understood rule. Power battles may be common.

Arbitrary Punishment Orientation: In homes that use arbitrary punishment, parents punish their children in ways that are not clearly related to any rules or standards. Often punishment is physical. Punishment can be imposed for whatever reason the parent decides on the spot is a good reason for punishment. There is no consistency or obvious standard. Rules and standards are not discussed with the children. There is little negotiation or respect for child decision making. Children may be confused about what they are supposed to do and come to fear their parents. Power battles or other forms of parent-child conflict are common.

This type of punishment is usually associated with poor child outcomes and, in particular, poorly self-regulated children. If physical punishment is used, the lesson learned by children is to use physical power over others if you are bigger than they are. Peer relations are often poor among children who come from homes in which physical punishment is used.

Permissive Orientation: In contrast to homes in which arbitrary punishment is used frequently, permissive homes are characterized by very few rules and few disciplinary practices. Children's choices, including impulsive behaviors, are largely respected and accepted. Few boundaries are placed around the child's behavior. Although on the surface, this may appear to be a "child-centered" home, the children may not experience the regularity and organization they need to learn how to think for themselves and make good decisions. Because there are no boundaries, the children may feel insecure and confused. Children develop positive self-regulation in part because they have lived in a world that is organized and predictable, including well understood rules of conduct.

WHY IS DISCIPLINE IMPORTANT FOR MANY STUDENTS AFTER TBI?

Behavioral difficulties are a common consequence of brain injury. One of the most common concerns focuses on issues of impulsiveness and risk taking as the student ages with a TBI. Students with damage to the bottom parts of their frontal lobes typically think and act impulsively – much like children who experienced their TBI at a young age they often present with increasing challenges in this domain as they age. Their impulsive behavior naturally leads parents and teachers to worry about effective disciplinary practices.

Students with brain injury may also behave in unacceptable ways due to other cognitive difficulties secondary to their injuries. For example, they might be rigid and /or react negatively to unexpected changes or deviations in their routines. [See Tutorial on Flexibility.] They may not be able to "read" others' communication accurately and therefore act strangely because of misinterpretation. [See Tutorial on Social Perception.] They may have difficulty initiating behavior and therefore fail to do what they know they should do. [See Tutorial in Initiation.]

Many students with brain injury have particular weakness in the part of the brain that enables people to benefit from feedback or learn from the consequences of their behavior. This neurological problem makes discipline a difficult issue. Most adults believe that consequences are the primary instrument of discipline. That is, if a student misbehaves, he should receive some sort of punishing consequence so that he will learn not to engage in that behavior again. However, this form of discipline assumes relatively intact capacity to learn from prior consequences – precisely what many students with brain injury are incapable of doing. The student might learn on an "intellectual" level that behaving in a certain way leads to negative consequences, but knowing this intellectually and guiding ones behavior with that knowledge are two very different matters. [See Tutorials on Positive Behavior Supports; Behavior Management: Prevention Strategies.]

WHAT ARE THE MAIN THEMES IN INSTRUCTION AND SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WHO MAY BE DIFFICULT TO DISCIPLINE (See Behavior Management)

1. Understanding, not excusing: When a student engages in negative behavior as a result of neurologically-based impulsiveness, lack of initiation, inability to recall the appropriate response, or reduced “reading” of social cues and situations, parents and teachers must first understand the source of the difficulty. However, understanding is not the same as excusing. Inexcusable behavior is inexcusable even if it is in part a product of the student’s neurological difficulties. Rather than excusing behavior, parents and teachers should redouble their efforts to help the student avoid the negative behavior in the future. [See Tutorials on Positive Behavior Supports; Behavior Management: Prevention Strategies]

2. Clear and explicit rules with reasons: At home and at school, the rules and expectations should be very clear. They may need to be posted and reminders may need to be frequent. Written reminders in a student’s organizer and reminders to review these notes are often necessary. There may need to be frequent review and discussion of the reasons for the rules. These discussions should take place when the student and adults are calm – not during a time of behavioral crisis. This includes both general rules, like “Raise your hand if you have a question”, and specific instructions, like “Please complete all of the problems on this page. You’ll know you’re done when it looks like this.” Encouraging the student to have written record of such instructions will ultimately empower the student to become his own advocate.

3. Rules stated positively: What To Do versus What Not To Do: In a classroom or home, rules should be formulated positively, in terms of what adults want the students to do versus what they want them to avoid. For example, a rule might be, “Speak nicely to your sister,” not “Don’t yell at your sister!”; or “Pack you backpack the night before and be ready for your bus”, not “Don’t dawdle in the morning”; or “Say goodbye and leave quietly, please,” not “Don’t bang the door when you leave!”

4. “A pound of prevention for every ounce of reaction”: Particularly with impulsive children, it is critical to focus primary effort on preventing negative behavior rather than reacting to that negative behavior. This is common sense when dealing with toddlers who are famous for being impulsive. Parents try hard to “child proof” the environment so that they do not have to spend their days reacting to the difficulties that an impulsive child will inevitably get into. Many children with brain injury, ADHD, and other diagnoses are like young children with respect to impulsiveness. Thus prevention is the key. [See Tutorials in Behavior Management: Prevention Strategies; Positive Behavior Supports]

Video Illustration of Positive Behavior Momentum

5. A pound of positive for every ounce of negative: When students behave in ways that are difficult to live with, it is easy to fall into the trap of attending only to the negative behavior. But even students with severe behavior problems act in acceptable ways most of the time. It is critical to pay attention to positive behavior, call attention to it, and reward it with praise or some other reward. Otherwise the student will learn that he only comes to the attention of adults when misbehaving, and may also develop a sense of personal identity associated with negative behavior. This can easily create a cycle of negative behavior followed by negative consequences, breeding more negative behavior, and so on. Parents and teachers should work to create opportunities for positive behavior, which can then be highlighted and rewarded.

6. Consistent implementation: Complete consistency in implementing behavior or discipline programs from person to person, from and time to time, and across teachers and parents is a desirable goal, but fraught with limitations and sure to lead to frustration. However, it is important for all teachers and parents to “be on the same page” with respect to rules, their implementation, and consequences for violations. Substantial inconsistencies will likely lead to increased behavior problems.

7. Discussion of rules and disciplinary practices: Students should have a clear understanding of why specific rules exist and why specific consequences are associated with violations. For example, presentations like the following may need to be frequent: “It’s important for students to raise their hands and wait to be called on; if everybody talks out of turn, we won’t understand anybody and won’t get

anything done." "John, when you talk out of turn, you'll have to do your work alone. We have to make sure that when students work in a group, they work together." These discussions should occur during periods of calm, not during a behavioral crisis, and should be available in written format for the student to use as a cue in future task assignments.

8. Natural and logical consequences: Many students with brain injury do not learn efficiently from the consequences of their behavior. Therefore, their behavior management plans are primarily focused on antecedent (advance) supports to prevent negative behavior. Nevertheless, when they do behave in negative ways, there should be consequences so that the student learns that certain behaviors are followed by specific consequences. These consequences may not modify the behavior, but at least the student learns about how the world works. Ideally these consequences are naturally and logically related to the behavior so that they make sense to the student. For example, if a student trashes his room, a natural and logical consequence is having to clean it up. It is not a natural and logical consequence, for example, to be forced to sit in a punishment chair for an hour.

9. No punishments during times of extreme anger: When the student or the adult or both are extremely upset, it is not the time to administer punishments. Under these emotionally charged circumstances, the net effect of punishment is to increase anger, not to learn anything. The goal when students are in crisis or emotionally upset is simply to end the crisis and reduce the emotionality of the situation without anybody getting hurt. Thus, the most immediate action is to remove the student from the environment or stop the environmental stimulation. The time to discuss the consequences of negative behavior is later when the student is calm. Again, prevention is the key to minimizing aggressive or angry outbursts.

10. No power battles: When it is necessary to discipline a child, this should be done calmly and quickly with the child removed from other children. There should be no conflict over who is in control; the focus is on rule violation only. Adults must choose their battles wisely so that they know that they will successfully administer discipline if it is required.

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