Using Punishment with Exceptional Children: A Dilemma for Educators

The call for "good discipline" in schools is all too often synonymous for "punishment," a behavior management tool that is both used and abused with handicapped pupils. Recently, professional organizations, child advocates, and the mass media have been effective in raising public consciousness about this significant issue.

Few productive social and academic gains occur without mechanisms for setting limits and reducing problem behaviors. Experienced teachers of handicapped students agree that pupil management is the cornerstone of effective educational programs and that skill in management is a prerequisite to effective teaching. However, there are significant differences of opinion regarding the choice of management alternatives, particularly regarding the use of punishment. Some suggest that all punishment-based management programs be eliminated while others argue in favor of a variety of behavior-control procedures, including punishers. We believe that punishment procedures, used correctly, are effective and necessary behavior management tools.

Defining "Punishment"

An initial step in responding to the issue of using punishment as a behavior-control procedure is to adopt an agreed-upon definition of the term. We recommend the use of the commonly accepted behavioral definition of the term punishment to include any consequence that reduces the number of occurrences of a particular behavior in the future. Adherence to this common definition facilitates open discussion of the advantages, disadvantages, and role of punishment in special education. The definition has two major elements: (1) a consequence is a punisher only if it reduces the incidence of a given behavior, and (2) punishment technically cannot be used for behaviors that do not occur.

Other terms common to discussions of punishment must also be clearly defined. The terms "inhuman," "intrusive," "dehumanizing," and "depersonalizing" are ambiguous in meaning and must be interpreted in a relative manner. To illustrate, a punishment procedure such as physical restraint might be judged intrusive when employed with a mildly handicapped child who starts fights. However, the identical procedure used with a dangerously self-abusive child might not be considered intrusive. Hence, the advantages and disadvantages of particular procedures must not be perceived as absolute; rather, they must be considered relative to significant situational factors, including the severity of the child's disability and the nature of the target behavior.

Types of Punishers

Punishers currently used by teachers include response cost, time out, overcorrection, contingent exercise, and aversive conditioning. A brief description of each follows.

Response cost involves taking away a positive consequence following an unacceptable behavior. Points, free time, token economy chips, privileges, and other reinforcers may be withdrawn contingent upon a specific behavior.

Time out refers to the removal of a student from opportunities for reinforcement following unacceptable behaviors. Examples include placing a student in a chair in a specified classroom area, requiring a student to quietly put his or her head on the desk for a short time, or removing a student to an isolation area either within the classroom or in another room.

Overcorrection has two objectives: to restore the environment disrupted by unacceptable behavior and to require the child to practice an appropriate alternative behavior. The first phase, restitution, requires the student to correct the consequences of the behavior. Thus, a student who dumped over a wastebasket, spilling the contents, would be made to clean up the area. The second phase, positive practice, might involve having the student rehearse acceptable behaviors for expressing anger. Restitution is used only in cases of environmental damage, while positive practice is used in all overcorrection programs.

Contingent exercise involves having pupils perform various physical exercises (e.g., pushups) following unacceptable behaviors. This is similar to positive practice except that the exercise does not directly teach an acceptable alternative behavior.

Aversive conditioning requires the use of painful or noxious stimuli to decelerate unacceptable behaviors. Usually reserved for dangerous and potentially injurious behaviors, it may involve use of agents such as electric shock or lemon juice squirited into a student's mouth.

Role of Punishers

Although the effects of punishment sometimes fail to generalize across settings and time, there is little doubt that punishment methods suppress unacceptable behavior and are appropriate for use with some students under some conditions. The issue is how best to use punishers as part of an overall behavior-management plan that assures correct application and
monitoring. Incorrect use of reinforcement, as well as punishment techniques, can be harmful to children. We believe that attempts to prohibit use of punishers, rather than limiting their use, will simply reduce the opportunities and standards for teacher training and monitoring that are necessary to prevent harm to students.

The efficacy of punishment as a management option has been well established. However, the decision to use these interventions must be made on the basis of empirical, interpersonal, legal, ethical, and community variables.

Policies and Procedures

For the most part, there has been little legislation regulating the use of negative consequences in the classroom. Except with regard to corporal punishment, many, if not most, teachers have been left to set their own policies, regulated only by their personal standards. While we believe in the right of teachers to include punishers among their behavior management interventions, we also advocate clear policies governing their use and urge the adoption of these policies at the school board level.

A model suggested by Wood and Braaten (1983) includes policy and procedure components. A policy statement includes a description of the role of punishment procedures in a therapeutic educational setting; definitions and descriptions of permitted and prohibited procedures; and reference to relevant laws, regulations, and court decisions. Standards adopted by professional organizations may also be included.

Seven elements are suggested for procedural guidelines: (1) information on the use and abuse of punishment procedures; (2) staff training requirements; (3) approved punishment procedures; (4) record maintenance and retention procedures; (5) complaint and appeal procedures; (6) punishment issues and cautions; and (7) procedures for periodic review. A list of related resources also might be included.

To implement policies, a sequence of training activities should be followed, including orientation for new staff and at least annual reviews. Training should include a review of policies, laws, regulations, and liability issues associated with the use of negative consequences; descriptions of environments in which punishment procedures may be used; responsibilities of different staff members relative to the use of punishment; steps to be taken prior to using punishers; other management alternatives; demonstration and simulated practice; review of relevant documentation forms, and procedures for filing punishment-related complaints and concerns. These training activities should be coordinated with central office administrators and parents and both of these groups should be allowed to participate.

Guidelines

Punishers inhibit or reduce the future occurrence of a behavior. No use of punishers is appropriate in the absence of a comprehensive plan for teaching and reinforcing desired behaviors. Three major principles govern appropriate use of punishers: (1) establishment of the priority levels of target behaviors; (2) demonstrated ineffectiveness of graduated reinforcement interventions; and (3) hierarchical application from less intrusive to more intrusive punishment procedures.

Priority Levels

Braaten (1982) proposed a model for dividing disturbing behaviors into five priority levels. This priority scale views a problem behavior as the primary variable in deciding whether or not punishers are appropriate and how intense an intervention should be.

Low priority behaviors include those that are annoying, but not harmful to others, and those that may impede goal achievement. Examples include teasing, disrupting, and various other off-task behaviors that do not substantially interfere with class routine.

Mild priority behaviors frequently interfere with or prohibit achievement of adaptive goals, involve minor property damage, and result in minor injury to self or others. Examples include defiance or off-task behaviors, defacing desktops, pushing, poking, or other provocative behaviors. These behaviors require teacher intervention.

Moderate priority behaviors interfere repeatedly and significantly with achievement of adaptive goals or with other members of the class and may require the involvement of support staff, administrators, and parents. Examples include fighting, avoidance of school or schoolwork, throwing objects or engaging in other behaviors likely to result in injury, exaggerated temper outbursts, and abuse of staff.

High priority behaviors are characterized by a generalized alienation or agitation that is excessively disruptive to self and others. These are behaviors that have persisted despite interventions by teachers, support staff, administrators, and parents, and they may require use of nontraditional interventions. Examples vary from physical assault to the ritualistic behaviors of autism.

The final level is reserved for urgent priority behaviors, which involve extreme risk and may require immediate expert intervention. Examples include life-threatening and potentially injurious behaviors.

Graduated Reinforcement

The principle of graduated reinforcement involves two major considerations. First, before any negative consequences are used, documented efforts should be made to achieve the desired behavior using reinforcement procedures. Second, levels of intervention should be gradually increased until desired behaviors are sustained. Examples of levels of reinforcement that parallel the priority levels just discussed, include the following:

Low—clearly expressed expectations, praise, good-news notes.

Mild—modeling, contingent attention, privileges, grades.

Moderate—stars, charts, goal-setting, contracting.

High—counseling, token systems.

Urgent—combinations of the above with heavier schedules of reinforcement.

In addition to reinforcement, efforts should be made to structure the environment in ways that will decrease opportunities for problem behavior.

Hierarchical Application

The principle of hierarchical application calls for use of more intrusive
interventions only after a less intrusive one has failed. Again there are two major considerations. First, negative consequences should be arranged in a hierarchy similar to the levels noted earlier. The first three levels are associated with traditional punishers, while the last two levels rely on nontraditional interventions. Low-level punishers include planned ignoring, proximity control, gestures of disapproval, and a review of rules. Mild-level interventions include warnings and reprimands, contingent privileges, in-place time out, situational "conferencing," and detention. Moderate-level interventions include time out in the classroom, parent conferences, suspension, loss of privileges, physical guidance, response cost, and restitution. High-level interventions include time-out exclusion, positive practice, and contingent exercise. Urgent-level interventions include time-out seclusion, physical restraint, mechanical restraint, medication, and aversive conditioning.

All negative consequences should be used with caution, and nontraditional interventions should be used only after full due process steps have been taken and a written comprehensive plan has been developed.

Need for a Policy

Some special educators may be averse to having yet another regulation since adherence to current policies and procedures is extremely time-consuming. The temptation is great to simply rely on "best professional judgment" as a guide for using punishment. Yet, while professional judgment without other safeguards may be the path of least resistance, it is not the most prudent method of regulating the use of negative consequences. The "best professional judgment" rationale is based on the assumption that all professionals possess the same clear perspective on the use and appropriateness of interventions—a dangerous assumption when dealing with the rights of disabled individuals. A clearly written policy establishes parameters within which best professional judgment can operate while protecting students from abuse and misuse of behavior management procedures.

Specific content aside, policies regarding the use of punishment present practical issues for classroom teachers. Few welcome additional restrictions on their autonomy to make judgments about how to best manage classroom behavior, particularly if it requires more meetings and paperwork. Moreover, if policies prohibit use of punishers or mandate cumbersome implementation procedures, teachers may come to believe that they have an impossible task, being responsible for appropriate classroom decorum without the authority to maintain it. On the other hand, the absence of clear guidelines leaves teachers vulnerable when their management methods are challenged.

Conclusion

We believe that teachers and other professionals should be granted the authority to choose from a variety of behavior management options, including punishers. However, the freedom to use appropriate negative consequences requires adherence to clear policies, procedures, and safeguards. We urge full policy development and believe our profession would be wise to take action in this area, rather than deferring decisions to outside policymakers.

References


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