

Using Punishment with Exceptional Children:

A Dilemma for Educators

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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 "inhumane," "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 squirted 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

