DISCIPLINE OF PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

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This report, being devoted to an independent study project, is primarily based upon observations and practice of discipline over a six month period at the Indiana-Purdue University Day Care Center and Pre-School in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The period began on August 28, 1976 and ended on February 17, 1977.

Previous to these observations I could not truly claim having supervisory experience with children. I babysat in high school, but I never was instructed on discipline. Throughout my university career I was introduced to many theories of discipline. Basically they fell under two categories of discipline: physical punishment and deprivational/ reasoning punishment. One author, a sociologist Alan C. Derckhoff, refers to the two distinct types as power assertion and love-oriented forms of disciplinary techniques. According to Kerckhoff

Power assertion suggests a clear authority relationship between parent and child. . . . It is most clearly expressed in such techniques as physical punishment, shouting at the child, forceful commands, and verbal threats. A love-oriented parent-child relationship . . . is characterized by egalitarianism as well as concern for the child's psychological develop-
ment. It is most clearly expressed in such positive techniques as praise and reasoning, as well as such negative techniques as isolation of the child and the withdrawal of parental expressions of affection. *

His terminology of love-oriented discipline is quite strong in that it suggests that the other method is not motivated by a strong sense of love. Also, the characterization of equalitarianism seems to be placing a considerable amount of responsibility upon very small shoulders. Children need guidance, especially in the first five years of their life when they are extremely dependent upon their parents.

The twentieth century has seen a revolution in the philosophy of discipline. At the beginning of this century, if a parent gave a child a good slap in the face for the punishment of a sharp tongue, it was accepted and believed that the parent was performing his/her duty. Today, on the other hand, most people (especially referring to the middle class) would react with shock and dismay if a parent used such a method. Instead a parent is expected to correct the child with a statement of "You shouldn't do that," or "If you say that again you'll be sent to your room to think about why that was wrong.

I was raised primarily with the slap in the face. Today, I am told that is wrong. But I learned that way and I turned out just fine, so it is hard for me to understand why it is so harshly condemned. I was not psychologically or bodily scarred by slaps and spanking. Indeed, I am in quite a dilemma. How will I discipline my children? Or, to begin with, what is discipline?

According to Webster's dictionary discipline is "training that strengthens; correction, punishment; control of order maintainence; a system of rules for conduct. According to this definition, the goal is strengthening and control. Generally, it can be strength of character, strength of intellect, or bodily strength which is sought after. In raising and training children what is the central focus? Alan Kerckhoff contends that the middle and lower class people have different focal points. The lower class strives for external conformity--obeyance of authority. Internalizing such characteristics and feelings is not stressed. The middle class parents, on the other hand, emphasize internal qualities of consideration, delayed gratification, and self-reliance.

Operating on the definition of discipline as a method of guidance, I must decide what I want
to direct my children towards considering their behavior as well as their internal qualities. I desire to instill self-control, respect for others (especially their elders), initiative, and the concepts of right from wrong. In order to do all of this I must give my children freedom to express their emotions and discover their world. Children, as do adults, learn best by doing. As their parent it is my duty to guide their explorations and to correct them when they make mistakes, being sure they understand what they did wrong.

The next step towards discovering what discipline is for me is to determine the methodology I believe in. Presently so many people, professionals included, do not believe in any physical punishment. Dr. Suzanne Fraizer, director of the Indiana-Purdue University Child Care Center and Pre-School, stated her philosophy in the following words: "Any physical punishment is only harmful. It can scar the children's emotional development. In addition to this, children do not understand why they are being hit, slapped or spanked. They also will not retain any connection they do make between the act and such a punishment. With deprivation and reasoning, they will learn."
They will remember. It may take longer, but the solid connection will be made.

I needed to investigate this belief on the level of actual practice. Reading about this method was only just that—reading, words. At the child care center I worked in the infant room, ages 6 months to 18 months, and in the older room, ages 3 to 5. Because of the infants lack of much skill in communication, the method of reasoning is eliminated as a possibility.

Most of the children only really understand "No!" One common activity in the infant room is grabbing and pulling each others hair. When I gave a firm "No!" there was little or no response. The one child doing the grabbing would turn and look, but he/she would not release the grip. I was unable to break the grip without applying a painful amount of pressure upon the grabbing hand. My last resort was to slap the hand of the child doing the grabbing. Quickly the hand retracted. Some cried, but only for a moment. I never hit the hand very hard. The slap was more like a tap, but it communicated the message of "that's wrong."

Some children repeated the act, but looked at me first. I slapped their hand lightly, they stopped and shed a few tears. A few contemplated
a third adventure of hair pulling, but when they saw me and my look of disapproval, they stopped. They never tried it again. Even on the days without any instance of punishment, they decided against the act. This not only was true for the time I was in the room. If I stepped out for a moment or if I was absent, the help did not have problems with hair pulling. The pulling of the hair was a September incident only. If a new child arrived and he/she attempted to pull hair, he was quickly stopped and he/she quickly learned the rule.

Another primary problem the infants had was the inability to share toys. This is very common for this age group and, as such, an infant really cannot be expected to share toys. They do not understand this concept. All they know is if they want something, their hands can grasp onto it. Often they grab a toy from another infant. The other infant will scream, cry and sometimes try to retrieve the toy. My first strategy for battling this problem was to simply take the toy from the second infant and return it to the first one. But, the toy was usually re-stolen. Next I said "No!" firmly. This also did not work. I even tried to distract the second child with another toy, but
without much success. Sometimes I left the children alone, allowing them to solve their own conflict. This usually turned out to be disastrous, resulting with two screaming, crying infants. Again, as in the first cited situation, I finally resorted to the slight slap on the hand. The child who was punished usually cried a little, but after a few such incidents I no longer had a problem with the children involved in stealing another child's toy. An interesting possible side effect of the punishment was the children's increase in assertiveness as he/she protected his/her toys from any new arrivals.

One such incident, occurring in January, is as follows:

Christina was playing with a doll. The new arrival, Jennifer, decided she too wanted the doll. So she grabbed. Christina tugged back. Jennifer grabbed again. Christina fought back and grunted. The third time Christina pushed Jennifer's grabbing hand away. Jennifer stared at her for a moment before she decided to crawl elsewhere. Jennifer occupied herself with a Fisher-Price train. Christina retained the doll. Christina was very assertive and the incident was relatively peaceful.

A physical type of punishment was not always required nor was it applied as a blanket policy. Most of the children did understand "No!" and
in the majority of instances they would stop their action at the sound of a firm "No!" Situations demanding the physical method of punishment involved strong conflict between at least two infants or personal injury being inflicted upon one infant by another. So it appeared that the more serious an offense was the harsher punishment was required.

The slapping never was very hard, as evidenced by the very low noise level of the slap and the absence of any red marks. Just a simple, light tap was sufficient.

The occasions which required a "No!" command generally were infractions of an infant involving the misuse of a physical object. The infant room possessed a record player. If they attempted to play with the cord, a "No!" resounded throughout the room. If they stood on any chair, a softer "No!" command was spoken. The younger infants occasionally had to be shown what to do. If they stood, I gently set them down in the chair. After a while, they understood and tried to refrain from standing in the chair.

The number amount of times requiring discipline for the infants actually was quite sparse. Many days passed without any incidents of misbehavior or punishment. I believed my job was to make the
room less tempting for the children to do wrong actions. If the record player was not in use, I wrapped the cord up and made it unaccessable to the infants. The table itself was too high for them so they could not reach the phonograph. In order to insure this, I kept chairs away from the table unless I was sitting in the chair. Also, to prevent them from playing with the front door which was kept open I propped the heavy chair in front of it. At first they still tried to push the door... they tried to move the chair... but they failed at all attempts. After many tries, they gave up. It became a forgotten task.

In the child's life the first step in discipline is to provide a safe environment as free of temptations as possible. This functions under the principle of guidance. High shelves and cabinets which are unaccessable by chairs, et cetera, could be utilized for storage of things off limits to their hands and mouths. Locked cabinets are another alternative. In the home a special room for play could be set aside. This room could be free of expensive and breakable items, such as lamps, and expensive upholstery. If a family room is not available, the children's bedroom is a likely
candidate for such a room.

Older children are not much different. They, too, can be kept relatively free from a tempting environment. Too many No's and Don'ts may inhibit a child or confuse the older pre-school age child. While their objective is play! play! play! they need freedom to express themselves and explore. Too many rules can restrict their motivation. How can anyone have fun when most things are off limit and they must constantly be aware of avoiding the lamp, not putting their feet on the couch, not knocking over the planter, not smudging the full length mirror?

The punishment aspect of discipline for the pre-school age child can be very different from the methods used for infants. This is primarily due to their increased communicative ability and partly as a result of their greater ability to understand right from wrong. At this age priviledge deprivation begins to be effective. Also, being made to sit for five or ten minutes, thinking about their action, is feasible. In this case the incident can be explained to the child-- why it was wrong, how to prevent its occurance again, asking why he/she did it in the first place. After five months of working with pre-school age children
at least three days a week, one and one-half hours a day, I found this contemplation method to be very successful. The first time I found it necessary to implement this method was when I began taking pre-school children to the "ballroom" an auditorium, where they had free play. Two restrictions were placed on them while they occupied the room:

1. No running
2. No yelling, screaming or loud growling

Because of the immense size of the room it was difficult for them to put these rules to practice. When children broke either rule I spoke to them, reminded them of the rule and issued a warning. A second infraction on the same day was given a five minute contemplation period. I told them specifically that they had to sit for five minutes. I kept a close watch on the clock and adhered to that time period rigidly. Before allowing them to join in play again I asked them (1) what did you do wrong/ why did I make you sit? and (2) Why was that wrong. Then I reminded them of the rule they broke. If they broke the same rule a third time on the same day I made them sit for a period of ten minutes, using the same procedure I used for the second infraction. If a fourth time occurred, as this happened on two occasions, I had them remain sitting until their mother or father
arrived. The adjustment period to the ballroom was two and one-half weeks. After that time everyone knew the rules well. Sean (5) functioned as the police agent: "Remember, no running or yelling!"

The only incidence of any physical punishment I heard of involved a four year old who frequently bit other children. The teacher, Linda, exhausted all methods of reasoning and deprivation. One month passed before she reached the breaking point. Finally, Linda bit the boy. He hurt, he cried, he knew how his peers felt. Suddenly the biting incidents were arrested. Upon talking with other mothers who had children with a biting problem, I found that they, too, only solved the problem by biting the child. One parent consulted a psychiatrist only to discover that he firmly believed that the only remedy for biting was to bite the child. The mother tried it... and it worked.

Some types of expected behavior can be more readily taught via example. Picking up after oneself can fall under this category. At the child care center the teacher and children who attended the previous semester were good guides for the new children. During the adjustment period, which usually lasted two weeks, coaching by the teacher was extremely helpful.
"Here, Joey. Put the crayons back in the container."

The teacher and Joey did this task together.

"Then put them back where you got them."

If the child did not remember where the objects original position was, then the teacher reminded him. The teacher was careful not to assume all or the majority of the task in order to prevent the child from becoming too dependent on others. After a few times of helping, the teacher was able to relax and begin telling the children to put the materials away him/herself. If the teacher added "I'm sure you can remember where it goes," the child was reinforced to depend upon him/herself and some self-confidence was instilled when he/she sensed that the teacher had confidence in him/her. This is the self-fulfilling prophecy in the positive direction.

Many people advocate an actual deprivation of affection, the showing of love, for a child who mis-behaves. I never practiced this and never will due to my belief that it de-emphasizes the depth of love and affection. Love is not an object which can be taken off of the shelf at will. It is not a game to be played. Delivering and retracting
love gives love these qualities. It also detracts from its all-enduring quality. Love is a magical-like bond which exists deep within the heart. It never really disappears. It can be ignored. Love is so vital to a child's sense of security that I would never tamper with it. Love needs to be kept constant in order to radiate security.

Privilege deprivation is also a method to beware of. It is a good method, but a problem can ensue if a promise is broken. To children a promise is what it is meant to be; it is words which are not to be taken back, broken, or taken lightly. A promise is binding. Children can be emotionally crushed if an adult breaks a promise. An adult is a symbol of security and dependability for the children. If the adult falls short of this expectation, a burden is placed upon the young children's shoulders. This can be frightening for them. At the child care center an incident of a broken promise occurred purely by an accidental cause. The teacher promised a little girl (5) that she could paint before she went home. According to the schedule, the child went home at 3:30 p.m. At 2:30 p.m. the mother arrived. The child had not painted yet so she knew it was not really time to go yet, since she trusted the teacher.
"You're early, mommy. I still have to paint."

"No, honey. I'm on time."

Now the child experienced a great dilemma. She trusted her mother, who said it was time to leave. She also trusted the teacher who said, who promised, she would have a turn to paint before it was time to go home. The child, very upset, began to cry. Ultimately she chose to trust her mother and lose trust in the teacher.

"You promised I could paint before I went home."

In dismay, the teacher checked the time. 2:36 p.m. Next, she checked the scheduled departure time. 3:30 p.m. The teacher explained the mistake to the parent. The little girl's mother tried to explain. But all she knew was that a promise had been broken.

The above example does not involve a disciplinary action, but it demonstrates the importance of promises to children. If an absolute statement is ever made, one should be NEVER BREAK A PROMISE TO A CHILD!

This survey over discipline, emphasizing the punishment aspect, results in my conclusion that one must speak the child's own language before effective communication of guidance and correction.
can occur. Infants lack a skillful verbal ability. They understand physical methods best since they themselves use physical methods in order to communicate. They will push away something bothersome to them. If they do not want something they will push, kick, turn. For example, if they do not want their diaper changed they use all the body power they have in an attempt to get away. They even cry. Another common situation is the bowl of cereal that less than graciously splatters all over the floor, wall and mother. To use the same tactics communicates dislike to the infant. Words may not communicate this at this stage of development, except that many infants do understand the firm command of "No!"

An important question involving physical punishment is how can one tell if the punishment is cruel. Child Abuse is apparently rising. It is often a result of lack of judgement and/or lack of control. When I use a physical method I aim for the hand, buttocks or even the face in special situations (such as sharp tongues). Also, for young children, especially six years and below, I make sure my muscles are relatively relaxed and uncontracted. This insures minimal muscle strength in my hand. Never would I use my foot. The shape of the foot and structure of the foot are conditional
for injury to a child even under minimal strength.

Duration of punishment is another important factor. An average of one spank, smack or slap is usually all that is necessary. That communicated displeasure and gives displeasure. Ten seconds of hitting would be my very maximum limit if the hitting is on the buttocks. Any more than that would probably create anger in the child, overriding the purpose of the punishment.

Older children really seem to rarely need physical punishment. They can be reasoned with to some extent. They may have difficulty expressing why they did what they did, but the adult can help the child express him/herself by asking questions. The adult can explain, in simple terms, why the action was wrong. But there are children who can only learn by being spanked. In such a case, by all means spank!

Older pre-school children may react with anger towards the person who punished them. But this is usually very temporary. Children this age are typically very resilient. My usual experience was that the child would be angry... then perhaps one-half hour later he/she would present me with a picture or an art project. Also, they tended to grow closer to me, seeking my approval and praise of many of their actions. This closeness did not
tend to be temporary either. The next day, the next week, the next month, their eyes would light up when I entered the room. They made special points of greeting me, sometimes with a kiss. Such relationships did not occur before the experience of punishment. Why such a reaction commonly occurred is basically a mystery. Perhaps they associated me with a parent, since their parents are usually the ones who punish them. Maybe they felt that I was paying attention to them and they felt secure with that feeling. The security led to warmth which led to affection. The punishment may have been interpreted as an act of caring. So out of my care for them they began to care for me. Or perhaps that momentary one-to-one relationship immensely increased their awareness of me. They remembered me and somehow associated me with a positive quality.

Back to my original questions:

1. What is discipline?
2. What is my goal for using discipline?
3. What method of punishment will I utilize?

In summary, I found discipline to be guidance. In the process of guidance, some form of correction or punishment becomes necessary. Then, as for the goals, I decided they were basically to instill self-control,
respect for others, initiative and the concepts of right from wrong. As for methodology, I cannot decide definitely until the children are born. Methodology is based on each individual case. I do believe that physical means will be more prevalent until they develop a basic verbal skill... until they begin to communicate without the physical means young infants use. I will not rule out physical punishment nor will I develop a blanket policy of it. Every child is different.