

# How positive reinforcement and punishment affects children: an experiment

[Psychology](#), [Child Development](#)



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## **Positive Reinforcement vs. Punishment**

It is common practice that when a child does something bad, they must be punished. Alan Kazdin, director of the Yale Parenting Center, is suggesting that parents learn to use positive reinforcement instead of punishment. He claims that this will yield better results and have a more positive impact on your child over time. He is applying an operant conditioning technique to change their children's behavior. This approach is backed up by a well-developed theory called The Law of Effect.

What characterizes operant conditioning is that the participant receives reinforcement only when they fulfill a desired voluntary response. Operant conditioning is a form of learning “ in which the participant receives a reinforcer only after performing the desired response, and thereby learns a relationship between the response and the reinforcer.”(Psychology, Gleitman, 278). The participant will then associate the response with the reinforcement, and will likely repeat the desired behavior. Note that reinforcement is used neutrally here, and is not synonymous with reward. For example, Kazdin encourages the parents to praise their child immediately after they listen and behave, so that when they are seeking approval and praise from their parents they will repeat the behavior that their parents responded positively to the first time. Punishing a child when they disobey is still a reinforcement, but negative reinforcements give weaker responses.

Thorndike's Law of Effect states that if the response is followed by a reward, the response will be strengthened. If, however, the response is followed by no reward or a punishment, the connection will be weakened. This is the theory that Kazdin is applying to parenting. A child is more likely to learn and practice desirable behaviors if they associate the behavior with something positive.

The subtleness of shaping makes it ideal when working with children. According to the Psychology 121 textbook, shaping is when you achieve the desired response by rewarding the subject's behaviors that are increasingly similar to the response. Children want a reaction from their parents, be it good or bad. They may sense that you feel stressed or angry, which can make them more tense and disagreeable. They may also see this misbehavior as an opportunity to illicit a response from you. Children quickly learn what gets a response out of their parents. If the child can see you getting more upset by their behavior, they might continue to do it because your theatrical response is entertaining, even if it means punishment for them. When you use the shaping technique that rewards good behavior, the child is now only seeking a positive response from you, so they will continue to do as they are instructed to receive praise.

Additionally, we have to take the discrimination between multiple stimuli into consideration. A discriminative stimuli is an external event that tells an animal which behaviors will be rewarded in a situation. For instance, if a parent yells at a child every time they see them pulling their sister's hair, the child will learn that there is only punishment if the parent is there to yell at

them. Instead of learning to favor a positive reaction, the child will continue with the behavior, only learning to do it behind the parent's back. This is not a long term solution, and it only creates more bad habits that will be difficult to break later. Whereas, if the child receives reinforcement only when they are not pulling on their sister's hair, they are more likely to learn that the hair pulling does not help them gain anything in any situation, and will gradually abandon it.

All of this can be traced back to B. F Skinner and his work with operant conditioning in the 1930s. He trained rats to pull a lever in a box by giving them a food pellet every time they pulled the lever. Eventually, they were able to seek out the lever in the box and knew to pull it. With this experiment, he learned that Thorndike's Law of Effect was correct. The rats learned quicker when there was positive reinforcement, rather than a negative one. Even after he stopped rewarding them, the connection had been made and the rats retained the skill. These same principles are being applied to parenting because they have been proven to work. No credible sources have conducted experiments and found that punishment is more effective. Humans respond better to love than fear.

Kazdin also uses a technique known as framing as a tool in his exercises. Framing is when a statement is presented in a way that makes a proposition seem more favorable by changing the point of reference. For example people are more likely to risk losing money in a hypothetical scenario if the situation is framed to emphasize the loss. When coaching a child to stop throwing aggressive and excessive tantrums, he presents the lesson as a

game. The child then feels comfortable to act without fear of punishment, and is more likely to play along. He then asks the child to pretend to have a tantrum without doing some of the behaviors that they are trying to get rid of, like hitting. The child now sees the exercise as a fun challenge and wants to do their best because Kazdin has framed the situation as a game. This way of teaching is positive and encourages the child to develop less destructive ways of expressing themselves. By framing the instruction as a game instead of a disciplinary exercise, the child is suddenly eager to try.

Kazdin mentions that punishment is never the most effective way, but is commonly used because parents feel like they are out of options. The key point of these exercises is to change the parent's habits and way of thinking. Parents assume that the problem is with the child. They can wrongly assume that because they are dedicated, they are right and using the most effective tools. They then decide that their child's behavior is due to the child being fussy or difficult in nature. Although this is sometimes the case, it is more likely that they are failing to notice the influence their attitude might have on the situation. This is why Kazdin encourages parents to consciously try to change the tone of the situation from a negative one to a positive one. Not only will the child be more likely to cooperate, the parent will feel less stressed and desperate. Additionally, a positive conversation and resolution will help strengthen the parent-child relationship.

A common argument is that a parent is forced to dole out stricter punishment only because their child is increasingly difficult. Research has shown that fear of punishment has a substantial effect on children with what

the textbook refers to as self-punishment. Children will experience anxiety when approaching a situation involving the actions they were punished for. In this way punishment is effective at stopping disobedience. However, it has also been found that children with “ power-asserting parents”(Gleisman, 576) are more likely to cheat and tend to have less of a moral code. It turns out that their fear of punishment is now greater than their understanding that something is wrong. So as long as they don't get caught, they will continue misbehaving. You may scare a child into submission, but they are more likely to learn ways around being punished instead of learning more productive behaviors.

Some would also argue that positive reinforcement would raise children who are solely motivated by rewards and never learn the consequences of their actions. This is a good and reasonable argument against parents who are inconsistent with their parenting or never punish their children when they do something wrong. The positive reinforcement parenting style is not suggesting that you do not punish your children when they have done something bad, but rather you teach your child from the beginning to appreciate and favor good behavior by offering them praise when they make the right decisions. This fundamental goal is explained in the Psychology 121 textbook when it says, “ The idea is not to bribe or coerce the child but to show her that her actions can change the way people react to her. Ideally, her changed behavior will result in a more positive social environment that will eventually make explicit rewards and punishments unnecessary.”(Gleitman et al. 689). This way of parenting does not insist

that you never reprimand your children, but that you teach your child to view confrontations and problems differently.

Humans respond better to love than fear. If your children learn that positive behavior equals positive feedback from the people around them, they are going to approach all situations with this mindset. They will see you in a more loving and supportive light instead of someone who yells at them or restricts their freedom. As your child gets older and starts to form their own opinions, it will be helpful if they already view you as someone that they feel comfortable sharing with, so that when you try to advise them and help them avoid bad decisions they will be more open to your opinion.

From the extensive experimentation done with positive reinforcement operant conditioning, it is clear why it is more effective with children. The issue is more with the parent, and them learning to deal with these problems in a way that they are not used to. Once they revise their way of approaching these situations, they can not only get their children to behave better, but work to also build a stronger relationship with their children.