

# What is punishment, and does it really work essay sample



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Punishments targets behaviour change in eliminating the probability of an unwanted behaviour recurring. Research into punishment has aimed to produce results in a number of areas such as the most effective form of punishment, which ways punishment should be administered and also whether or not punishment is even effective. Punishment can be administered in many different contexts such as at home, at school and in society as a whole. The evidence backing up these different contexts demonstrates how each context determines the type of punishment and in turn the result. Despite this evidence, there is also substantial evidence that punishment is not an effective way of changing unwanted behaviour.

## Introduction

Punishment is an event which when presented after a response decreases the probability of that response occurring again (Gross, McIlveen, Coolican, Champ & Russell, 2000). Behaviourists argue that the way people act is in accordance to whether or not they are punished or reinforced for their actions (Passer & Smith, 2008). Studies have shown the numerous effects that punishment has on people. This essay will explore the two different types of punishment; aversive and response cost (Passer & Smith) and their uses in different contexts such as punishment in schools, in society and in the home. It will also analysis the effectiveness of punishment as researched in studies. In doing this, the question must be explored of whether or not reinforcement is the best way for increasing a response, or if punishment has the same effect on behaviour (Vogel-Sprott, 1969).

What is punishment?

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Punishment can be generally defined as an environmental change stimulus on behaviour that produces a decrease in responding over time (Michael, 1993, as cited in Lerman & Vondram, 2002). Although there are many different variations on the definition of punishment there is a general rule that it affects the likelihood of a response occurring again. This consensus of the effect of punishment has been derived from Thorndike's law of effect (Thorndike, 1898) which states " that in a given situation, a response followed by a satisfying consequence will become more likely to occur and a response followed by an annoying consequence will become less likely to occur" (Passer & Smith, 2008).

Punishment can be distinguished from reinforcement in the most basic form by saying that while reinforcement increases the likelihood of a response, punishment decreases it (Provenza, Villalba, Cheney & Werner, 1998).

Punishment can be distinguished into two different types; aversive (positive) punishment and response cost (negative) punishment (Passer & Smith, 2008). Positive refers to when the consequence is a stimulus being presented whereas negative refers to if the response results in the removal of a stimulus (Lieberman, 2000).

#### Aversive (positive) punishment

Passer and Smith (2008) define aversive punishment as a type of punishment which involves presenting an unwanted stimulus after the response has occurred. There are two subsections of aversive punishment, primary and secondary punishers (Tavris & Wade, 2001). Primary punishers are extreme physical stimuli which are applied such as pain and electric

shocks. Secondary punishers however are stimuli which have been acquired as having punishing qualities through association with other reinforcers (Tavris & Wade, 2001). They include things such as criticism and fines. Aversive punishment is most often used when it is necessary to stop a dangerous behaviour such as self-inflicted pain and animal cruelty as it produces rapid results (Passer & Smith, 2008; Tavris & Wade, 2001).

### Response cost (negative) punishment

Response cost is a type of punishment where something is taken away that the individual finds satisfying (Passer & Smith, 2008). This form of punishment is more commonly used in familial situations and everyday life, for example, groundings, loss of privileges and monetary fines (Passer & Smith, 2008). This time out technique is a form of punishment most commonly used with psychologists (Baumrind et. al, 2002, as cited in Passer & Smith, 2008)

### Situations in which punishment is administered

Punishment can be administered by a wide range of people, however usually the individual administering the punishment is one of authority. In accordance with this, the context in which punishment is administered varies from small scale, such as the home, to wider scale, such as a society as a whole. In looking at these situations, there are three main contexts in which punishment is given; these are at home by parents, at school by teachers, and in society by law enforcement bodies.

### Punishment in the home

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Punishment in the home is administered by parents and given to children to teach them how to behave for the rest of their lives. This is important for children's development as it can influence how they behave at school (Lieberman, 2000). An experiment conducted by Eron, Walder, Toigo and Lefkowitz (1963) asked parents to answer a series of questions on how they would react if their child acted in a particular way, which then determined how harsh their punishment was at home. The results of the study found that the children whose parent's administered harsher punishment were more likely to display aggressive behaviour at school. This study concluded that punishing aggression, in fact increased the likelihood of that behaviour occurring, rather than reducing it (Lieberman, 2000).

### Punishment in schools

One of the most common forms of punishment is administered in schools by teachers in order to make children behave in a way which is appropriate for a school setting. The most common form of punishment in schools is time-out (Passer & Smith, 2008). A time-out is a behaviour reduction technique which involves the removal of the opportunity to obtain reinforcement (Witherup, 2003). Webster (2006) conducted a study where a 13 year old boy was given time-out periods to stop aversive behaviour, after three to four weeks it was evident that the boy started becoming more interested in school work. This study then concluded that time-out is a sufficiently aversive event to alter some types of deviant behaviour without having to give positive reinforcement (Webster, 2006). However, it is not the only form of punishment given in schools.

Verbal reprimand is also used when children aren't performing tasks. Martin (1977) studied children's attitudes towards a range of tasks dependent on the feedback they were given for each task. The students were rewarded, reprimanded or ignored when working on each task. It appeared that the children worked the hardest on those tasks which they were punished for, however when given a choice the children would never choose the task which they received verbal reprimand for (Lieberman, 2000). From this, it can be concluded that children have a reduced interest and lack of motivation for those subjects which they are punished for (Lieberman, 2000).

Hall et. al (1971) also did a study on academic performance and punishment. Boys who were getting bad grades were punished by having to go to extra classes during their free time. The results show that those who had attended the classes had increased academic performance and their marks in the subjects increased dramatically (Hastings & Schwieso, 1987).

### Punishment in society

Punishment on a societal level can occur in two ways. It can be a process of socialization as secondary punishers administered by peers such as criticism can affect the likelihood of an action occurring again (Tavris & Wade, 2001). Passer & Smith (2008) have expressed the example that if someone is criticised for their choice of clothes or hairstyle, they are unlikely to do that again.

The second way that punishment occurs on a societal level is through law enforcement in their affect to stop anti-social behaviour (Burney, 2005). In recent years there has been a stronger reliance on punishment as the way to

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combat crime in Australia and all over the world (Sanson, Montgomery, Gault, Grindley & Thomson, 1996). Punishment for crimes is designed to have at least one of three different effects; to be a deterrent for other people, to prevent the offender committing more crimes and to be a retribution for their actions (Sanson et. al, 1996). Brennan and Mednick (1994) examined data on Danish men, focusing on repeat arrests. After an arrest, punishment was administered and it was found to reduce rates of subsequent arrests for both minor and serious crimes (Tavris & Wade, 2001). However, the study also showed that it was the consistency of the punishment that was the most effective in deterring the youths from committing crimes in the future (Tavris & Wade, 2001).

Does punishment work?

The effectiveness of punishment can be discussed in two different ways. As punishment is continually used there is popular belief of its strength is changing behaviour (Sanson et. al, 1996). However punishment is not always the best way of deterring unwanted behaviours as there is also evidence that “ in the long run punishment doesn’t reduce the probability that an act will occur” (Skinner, 1948, as cited in Lieberman, 2000). Campbell and Church (1969, as cited in Gross et. al, 2000) state that punishment is a stronger influence on behaviour than reinforcement.

Weaknesses of punishment

Punishment can be said to only lessen a particular behaviour rather than teach new behaviours (Gross et. al, 2000). In 1970, Estes studied the effect of punishment in rats and their likelihood to continue pressing a lever if they  
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were shocked for doing so. The study concluded that the punishment merely suppressed their behaviour in the short term, but in the long term did not weaken it, therefore concluding that punishment does not assist the organism in unlearning a particular behaviour (Gross et. al, 2000).

Punishment can fail for a number of reasons. The first problem with punishment is that it must be unpleasant to the organism, and therefore can in turn be very difficult to administer ethically (Gross et. al, 2000). The result of punishment can often lead to an aversive response from the organism such as anxiety and fear which can lead to more violent behaviour (Barrish, 1996; Gross et. al, 2000). Punishment can often act as a reinforcer to people as it provides attention therefore not having the intended effect.

#### Strengths of punishment

It has been discovered that by punishing destructive and dangerous behaviours those specific behaviours have been eliminated (Lovaas, 1977, as cited in Gross et. al, 2000). It also has been discovered that it is not a matter of the harshness of the punishment as to how effective it is, but rather the consistency (Sanson et. al, 1996).

#### Ways to improve punishment

In order for punishment to be effective it needs to be administered immediately after the behaviour so that the organism can make a connection between the aversive behaviour and the punishment (Gross et. al, 2000). It also needs to be consistent for it to make a difference in the organism producing the unwanted response (Sanson et. al, 1996). Punishment should



not involve physical abuse as the result may occur with the punished organism becoming more violent.

Punishment does not give much information about what should be done in replace of the unwanted response (Gross et. al, 2000). In order to make punishment more effective, information about the response that is wanted should be given, and when this response is displayed it should be reinforced. A study by Sears, Maccoby and Levin (1957) demonstrated that mothers who gave clear reasoning of the punishment and the unwanted behaviour were much more effective than mothers who used punishment alone (Lieberman, 2000).

## Conclusion

Punishment has a wide range of applications in everyday life, all with the same purpose to reduce the likelihood of an unwanted behaviour (Passer & Smith, 2008). Punishment is the presentation of an aversive stimulus or the removal of a satisfying stimulus after a response to influence the probability of that response occurring again (Lieberman, 2000). The administration of punishment is dependent on context as there are specific punishers which cannot be used in certain circumstances, for example corporal punishment is unacceptable in a school setting (Gross et. al, 2000).

Punishment can be used in the home and administered by parents, can be used by teachers in the classroom and can be used by law enforcement and peers in a social setting. The deterrence purpose of punishment appears to be effective in some specific circumstances, however this is not always so.

There are many criticism of punishment and its administration in terms of <https://assignbuster.com/what-is-punishment-and-does-it-really-work-essay-sample/>

ethical dilemmas, the time that it lasts and whether or not it is even considered punishment by the organism (Gross et. al, 2000). It appears that although there are some strengths of punishment, there needs to be certain steps which are followed for it to consistent and effective way of changing unwanted behaviour.