

# ACTIONS THAT ENCOURAGE OBEDIENCE

When children do not do what they have been asked to do, privileges can be withdrawn until they cooperate. Because they are in control of the length of the consequence, desired results usually happen quickly. When children do things they have been told not to do, privileges can be taken away for a specific period of time. Such punishments do not guarantee that children will act appropriately. They only ensure that parents have done their part to help young people follow rules.<sup>1</sup> However, children will learn from their mistakes when punishments are designed to:

- Teach good conduct rather than cause distress or prevent mistakes from ever happening.
- Be severe enough to produce tension, but not so severe as to cause undo frustration.
- Start as soon as possible after misbehavior.
- Provide opportunities for children to stop consequences by performing the desired action—A child can go to bed a half hour early until she gets up on time two mornings in a row.
- Directly relate the consequence to the behavior—A child who leaves the door open may have to close it behind him twice before he goes about his business.

## TYPES OF PUNISHMENTS

The greater the variety of punishments parents use, the more effective they will be. The following are reminders on the do's and don'ts of common punishments:

- ✓ Hands-on action allows parents to take advantage of their size and strength. When you use your voice, you are on the same level as your children. They can scream as loudly as you can. When children do not respond to one verbal request, take prompt action. In many cases, you can interrupt disobedience and then provide an immediate chance to perform the desired behavior:
  - Put your hand on a child's shoulder to help him or her move along when it is time to go.
  - When the stereo is too loud, the plug can be pulled for five minutes.
  - Toys that are used destructively can be taken away briefly.
  - When a young child won't give up a fragile object after three counts, simply take it away.
- ✓ Time-out is a consequence that interrupts undesirable behavior, focuses attention, and creates the earliest possible opportunity for correct conduct. One minute per every year of age is a standard guideline for the length of time-out. A baby who eats dirt can be put in the crib for one minute. A preschooler who leaves the house or yard unattended can be placed in a corner for four minutes. The following increase the effectiveness of a time-out:
  - Place children where they can be observed. They often enjoy "time-out" in their rooms or act destructively.
  - Walk children to time-out and hold them until they are capable of complying.
  - Ignore fretting or fussing as long as children stay in the time-out spot or position. Distress shows that the punishment is having impact.
  - Increase concentration by having children watch a timer or hold a glitter wand.
  - Give one warning and then act—"If you touch that again, you need to take a time-out."
  - Be consistent when children repeatedly break the same rule. It is better to give a 6-year-old four time-outs for pushing the baby than one 24-minute-long time-out.
  - In public places, immediately take children to the car, a bathroom stall, or an outside back wall for time-out. This is amazingly effective!
  - Briefly pull to the side of the road if children are disruptive while you are driving.

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<sup>1</sup> More ideas on firm parenting can be found in *Back in Control* by Gregory Bodenhamer (Simon & Schuster, 1984).

- Use a “moving time-out” with hyperactive children who make up for time they sit still by being overly active later. For example, they can walk back and forth on a line 10 times.
  - Children can shorten time-out by stating the behaviors they need to change.
- ✓ Essays are an excellent way to logically relate a consequence to a “crime.” They require children to concentrate, think about their behavior, empathize with others, and comply with parents. Very young children can make “pictorial essays” or copy a simple sentence. Depending on the child’s age, an essay, sentence, or picture can cover the following points:
- a. Why do my parents think this rule is important, and how do they feel when it is broken?
  - b. What was on my mind when I broke the rule?
  - c. What disagreements do I have with the rule, if any?
  - d. What do I plan to do to keep myself from breaking this rule in the future?

Even resistant children will write an essay when they are told they will have no privileges until it is correctly completed. Children may need to interview their parents or even do research to complete (a). If children are given only one sentence to write, it is much better for them to cover (a) than to make promises they may not keep. Do not correct children’s reasoning on (b) and (c), even if you disagree. Children can write the essay more than once, depending on the seriousness of the rule broken. For example, a 13-year-old who has been sneaking out at night might be required to rewrite the essay every night for a week.

- ✓ Restrictions are a form of time-out for older children. Privileges such as using the phone, visiting friends, using the car, or having time alone can be taken away. Be specific about the length of restrictions, but do not make decisions in the heat of anger. Lengthy restrictions often punish parents and do not give children the opportunity to demonstrate that they can change their behavior. Restrict or supervise contact with friends with whom your child tends to break rules, but never criticize a child’s choice of friends. Explain restrictions in terms of misbehavior, not character. When possible, allow children to reduce the length of restrictions by writing an essay or correcting misbehavior. For example, allow your children to go out with friends if they succeed in coming home on time five days in a row.
- X Spankings are not recommended in this action-oriented approach for the following reasons: (1) Often, parents are not comfortable giving spankings. They may threaten children many times before taking action. (2) When spankings are used, the parent is active and the child is passive. Time-out, essays, and restrictions, on the other hand, require the child to comply with the parent. (3) Spankings can encourage young children to hit. If you don’t spank, you can tell the children “We don’t hit in this house.” (4) Spanking older children can create anger and resentment that lead to further defiance.