

## Teaching Right and Wrong

Parents want their children to develop a morality that is in accord with the parents' understanding of right and wrong. Of course, moral issues arise lifelong. A major discussion of children's moral judgment appears in Chapter 8; drug addiction and sexual activity are covered in Chapters 10 and 11; marriage and divorce are discussed in Chapter 13; choices in dying are explained in the Epilogue. Here we highlight what young children naturally do.

### Inborn Impulses

Children have a sense of right and wrong, an outgrowth of bonding, attachment, and cognitive maturation. Children help and defend their parents even when the parents are abusive, and they punish other children who violate moral rules. Even infants may have a moral sense: An experiment found 6-month-olds preferring a puppet who helped another puppet, not an unhelpful one (Hamlin, 2014).

According to evolutionary theory, the survival of our species depended on protection, cooperation, and even sacrifice for one another. Humans needed group defense against harsh conditions and large predators. A moral sense evolved from that essential need to rely on other people (Dunning, 2011). That is why the body produces hormones, specifically oxytocin, to push people toward trust, love, and morality (Zak, 2012).

With the cognitive advances of early childhood, and increased interaction with peers, these innate moral emotions are strengthened. Children develop **empathy**, an understanding of other people's feelings and concerns, and **antipathy**, a feeling of dislike or even hatred.

Empathy leads to compassion and **prosocial behavior**—helpfulness and kindness without any obvious personal benefit. Expressing concern, offering to share, and including a shy child in a game are examples of children's prosocial behavior. The opposite is **antisocial behavior**, hurting other people.

Prosocial behavior seems to result more from emotion than from intellect, more from empathy than from theory (Eggum et al., 2011). The origins of prosocial behavior can be traced to parents who help children understand their own emotions, not from parents who tell children what emotions others might have (Brownell et al., 2013).

The link between empathy and prosocial behavior was traced longitudinally in children from 18 months to 6 years of age. Empathetic preschoolers were more likely to share, help, and play with other children in the first grade (Z. Taylor et al., 2013).

Prosocial reactions may be inborn, but they are not automatic. Some children limit empathy by "avoiding contact with the person in need [which illustrates] . . . the importance of emotion development and regulation in the development of prosocial behavior" and the influence of cultural norms (Trommsdorff & Cole, 2011, p. 136). Feeling distress may be a part of nature, but whether and how a child expresses it is nurture.

Antipathy leads to antisocial actions, which include verbal insults, social exclusion, and physical assaults (Calkins & Keane, 2009). An antisocial 4-year-old might look at another child, scowl, and then kick him or her hard without provocation. This can occur, but generally, children become more prosocial and less antisocial as they mature (Ramani et al., 2010).

Antisocial behavior may be innate as well (Séguin & Tremblay, 2013). Two-year-olds find it hard to share, even to let another child use a crayon that they have already used. Preschool children have a sense of ownership: A teacher's crayon should be shared, but if a child owns it, the other children believe that he or she is allowed to



**Video: Interview with Lawrence Walker** discusses what parents can do to encourage their children's moral development.

#### **empathy**

The ability to understand the emotions and concerns of another person, especially when they differ from one's own.

#### **antipathy**

Feelings of dislike or even hatred for another person.

#### **prosocial behavior**

Actions that are helpful and kind but that are of no obvious benefit to the person doing them.

#### **antisocial behavior**

Actions that are deliberately hurtful or destructive to another person.



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**Pinch, Poke, or Pat** Antisocial and prosocial responses are actually a sign of maturation: Babies do not recognize the impact of their actions. These children have much more to learn, but they already are quite social.

be selfish (Neary & Friedman, 2014). The rules of ownership are understood by children as young as 3, who apply them quite strictly.

At every age, antisocial behavior indicates less empathy. That may originate in the brain. An allele or gene may have gone awry (Portnoy et al., 2013). But it more directly results from parents who do not discuss or respond to emotions (Z. Taylor et al., 2013; Richards et al., 2014).

### Aggression

Not surprisingly, given their moral sensibilities, young children judge whether another child's aggression is justified or not. The focus is on effects, not motives: A child who accidentally spilled water on another's painting may be the target of that child's justified anger.

As with adults, impulsive self-defense is more readily forgiven than is a deliberate, unprovoked attack. As young children gain in social understanding, particularly theory of mind, they gradually become better at understanding someone else's intentions, and that makes them less likely to judge an accidental action as a hostile one (Choe et al., 2013a).

The distinction between impulse and intention is critical in deciding when and how a child's aggression needs to be stopped. Researchers recognize four general types of aggression, each of which is evident in early childhood (see Table 6.2).

- **Instrumental aggression** is common among 2-year-olds, who often want something and try to get it. This is called *instrumental* because it is a tool, or instrument, to get something that is desired. The harm in grabbing a toy, and hitting if someone resists, is not understood.

Because instrumental aggression occurs, **reactive aggression** also is common among young children. Almost every child reacts when hurt, whether or not the hurt was deliberate. The reaction may not be controlled—a child might punch in response to an unwelcome remark—but as the prefrontal cortex matures, the impulse to strike back becomes modified. Both instrumental aggression and reactive aggression are less often physical when children develop emotional regulation and theory of mind (Olson et al., 2011).

**Relational aggression** (usually verbal) destroys self-esteem and disrupts social networks, becoming more hurtful as children mature. A young child might tell

#### instrumental aggression

Hurtful behavior that is intended to get something that another person has.

#### reactive aggression

An impulsive retaliation for another person's intentional or accidental hurtful action.

#### relational aggression

Nonphysical acts, such as insults or social rejection, aimed at harming the social connection between the victim and other people.

TABLE 6.2 The Four Forms of Aggression

Type of Aggression	Definition	Comments
Instrumental aggression	Hurtful behavior that is aimed at gaining something (such as a toy, a place in line, or a turn on the swing) that someone else has	Apparent from age 2 to 6; involves objects more than people; quite normal; more egocentric than antisocial.
Reactive aggression	An impulsive retaliation for a hurt (intentional or accidental) that can be verbal or physical	Indicates a lack of emotional regulation, characteristic of 2-year-olds. A 5-year-old can usually stop and think before reacting.
Relational aggression	Nonphysical acts, such as insults or social rejection, aimed at harming the social connections between the victim and others	Involves a personal attack and thus is directly antisocial; can be very hurtful; more common as children become socially aware.
Bullying aggression	Unprovoked, repeated physical or verbal attack, especially on victims who are unlikely to defend themselves	In both bullies and victims, a sign of poor emotional regulation; adults should intervene before the school years. (Bullying is discussed in Chapter 8.)

another, “You can’t be my friend” or “You are fat,” hurting another’s feelings. Worse, a child might spread rumors, or tell others not to play with so-and-so. These are examples of relational aggression.

The fourth and most ominous type is **bullying aggression**, done to dominate. Bullying aggression occurs among young children but should be stopped before kindergarten, when it becomes more destructive. Not only does it destroy the self-esteem of victims, it impairs the later development of the bullies, who learn behavior habits that harm them lifelong. A 10-year-old bully may be feared and admired; a 50-year-old bully may be hated and lonely. (An in-depth discussion of bullying appears in Chapter 8.)

Aggression usually become less common from ages 2 to 6, as the brain matures and empathy increases. In addition, children learn to use aggression selectively, and that decreases both victimization and aggression (Ostrov et al., 2014). Parents, peers, and preschool teachers are pivotal mentors in this learning process.

It is a mistake to expect children to regulate their emotions on their own. If they are not guided, they may develop destructive patterns. It is also a mistake to punish aggressors too harshly because that may remove them from their zone of proximal development, where they can learn to regulate their anger.

In other words, although there is evidence that preschool children spontaneously judge others who harm people, there also is evidence that prosocial and antisocial behavior are learned (Smetana, 2013). Preschool teachers are often ideally situated to teach prosocial behavior, because aggression often arises in a social setting.

A longitudinal study found that close teacher–student relationships in preschool predicted less aggression and less victimization in elementary school. The probable reason—close relationships led children to want to please the teachers, who guided them toward prosocial, not antisocial, behavior (Runions & Shaw, 2013).

## Discipline

Children misbehave. They do not always do what parents want. Sometimes they do not know better, but sometimes they deliberately ignore a parent’s request, perhaps doing exactly what they have been told not to do. Since misbehavior is part of growing up, parents must respond, and their responses affect the child’s moral development.

**PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT** In the United States, young children are slapped, spanked, or beaten more often than are infants or older children, and more often than children

### bullying aggression

Unprovoked, repeated physical or verbal attack, especially on victims who are unlikely to defend themselves.

in Canada or western Europe. Within the United States, frequency varies (MacKenzie et al., 2011; S. Lee et al., 2015; Lee & Altschul, 2015). Spanking is more frequent:

- In the southern United States than in New England
- By mothers than by fathers
- Among conservative Christians than among non-religious families
- Among African Americans than among European Americans
- Among European Americans than among Asian Americans
- Among U.S.-born Hispanics than among immigrant Hispanics
- In low-SES families than in high-SES families

Those differences do not preclude variations from one family to another: Many a secular, European American, immigrant, high-SES father in Boston spansks his child, even though most men who have all those characteristics do not.

Adults usually believe that their upbringing helped them become the person they are. For that reason, most adults tend to think that their past childhood punishment was proper. Moreover, physical punishment (called **corporal punishment** because it hurts the body) usually succeeds momentarily because immediately afterward children are quiet.

However, longitudinal research finds that children who are physically punished are more likely to be disobedient and to become bullies, delinquents, and then abusive adults (Gershoff et al., 2012). They are also less likely to learn quickly in school or to enroll in college (Straus & Paschall, 2009).

In fact, longitudinal research finds that children who are *not* spanked are more likely to develop self-control. As spanking increases, so does misbehavior (Gershoff, 2013). The correlation between spanking and later aggression holds for children of all ethnic groups.

In 33 nations (mostly in Europe), corporal punishment is illegal; in many nations on other continents, it is the norm. In the United States, parents use it often. In schools, teachers may legally paddle children in 19 of the 50 states. Overall, in one recent year, 218,466 children were corporally punished at school, 16 percent of whom had been designated as having an intellectual disability. Further, a disproportionate number of the paddled children are African American boys. These data raise questions about fairness and justice (Morones, 2013; Gershoff et al., 2015).

Although some adults believe that physical punishment will “teach a lesson” of obedience, the lesson that children learn may be that “might makes right.” When they become bigger and stronger, children who have been physically disciplined tend to use corporal punishment on others—their classmates, their wives or husbands, their children.

### corporal punishment

Discipline techniques that hurt the body (corpus) of someone, from sparking to serious harm, including death.

**Smack** Will the doll learn never to disobey her mother again?



## OPPOSING PERSPECTIVES

### Is Spanking OK?

Opinions about spanking are influenced by past experience and cultural norms. That makes it hard for opposing perspectives to be understood by people on the other side (Ferguson, 2013). Try to suspend your own assumptions as you read this.

*What might be right with spanking?* Over the centuries many parents have done it, so it has stood the test of time. Indeed, in the United States, parents who never spank are unusual. Spanking seems less common in the twenty-first

century than in the twentieth (Taillieu et al., 2014), but 85 percent of U.S. adolescents who were children at the end of the twentieth century remember being slapped or spanked by their mothers (Bender et al., 2007).

Corporal punishment has decreased worldwide, but it is far from rare. In the first years of the twenty-first century, among low-SES, two-parent families in the United States, 68 percent of parents say they spanked their 3-year-olds within the previous 30 days (S. Lee et al., 2015). Can such a popular method be wrong?

One pro-spanking argument is that the correlations reported by developmentalists (between spanking and later depression, low achievement, aggression, crime, and so on) may be caused by a third variable, not spanking itself. A suggested third variable is child misbehavior: Parents who use corporal punishment think the disobedient child caused the spanking, not vice versa. Perhaps such children are more likely to be delinquent, depressed, and so on, not because they were spanked but in spite of being spanked.

As one team, noting problems with correlational research, explains, "Quite simply, parents do not need to use corrective actions when there are no problems to correct" (Larzelere & Cox, 2013, p. 284). These authors note that every disciplinary technique, if used frequently, correlates with misbehavior, but the punishment may be the result, not the cause.

Another third variable may be poverty. Since people who spank their children tend to have less education than people who use other punishment, SES may be the underlying reason spanked children average lower academic achievement.

The solution may be to eliminate poverty, not to forbid spanking. When researchers try to eliminate the effect of every third variable, especially SES, they find a smaller correlation between spanking and future problems than most other studies do (Ferguson, 2013).

*What might be wrong with spanking?* One problem is adults' emotions: Angry spankers may become abusive. Children are sometimes seriously injured and even killed by parents who use corporal punishment. One pediatrician who hesitates to argue against all spanking, everywhere, nonetheless notes that physical injury is common and that parents should never spank in anger, cause bruises that last more than 24 hours, use an object, or spank a child under age 2 (Zolotor, 2014).

Another problem is the child's immature cognition. Many children do not understand why they are spanked. Parents assume the transgression is obvious, but children may think the parents' anger, not the child's actions, caused spanking (Harkness et al., 2011).

Almost all the research finds that children who are spanked suffer in many ways. They are more depressed, more antisocial, more likely to hate school, and less likely to have close friends. Many continue to suffer in adulthood. One developmentalist says, "We know enough now to stop hitting our children" (Gershoff, 2013, p. 133).

Yet the evidence does not satisfy everyone. For example, one study of parents who attend conservative Protestant churches found that, as expected, they spanked their children more often than other parents did. However, unexpectedly, children spanked during early (but not middle) childhood did not develop the lower self-esteem and increased aggression that spanked children usually do (Ellison et al., 2011). Indeed, the opposite was more likely.

The authors of the study suggest that, since spanking was the norm among those families, conservative Protestant children do not perceive being spanked as stigmatizing or demeaning. Moreover, religious leaders tell parents to assure children that they are loved and never to spank in anger. As a result, their children may "view mild-to-moderate corporal punishment as legitimate, appropriate, and even an indicator of parental involvement, commitment, and concern" (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 957).

As I write these words, I realize which perspective is mine. As you saw in the opening of this chapter, I believe that children should never be hit. I am one of many developmentalists who are convinced that alternatives to spanking are better for the child and a safeguard against abuse. But a dynamic-systems view considers every form of discipline as part of a complex web, and a multi-cultural perspective suggests that, whenever cultures differ radically about child development, it is wise to reflect before judging.

I do not think children should be spanked. Yet I know that I am influenced by my background and context. So is every researcher; so are you.



**She Understands?** Children who are spanked remember the pain and anger, but not the reason for the punishment. It is better for parents to explain what the misbehavior was. However, sometimes explanations are not understood.

**psychological control**

A disciplinary technique that involves threatening to withdraw love and support, using a child's feelings of guilt and gratitude to the parents.

**time-out**

A disciplinary technique in which a person is separated from other people and activities for a specified time.

Many studies of children from all family constellations and backgrounds find that physical punishment of young children correlates with delayed theory of mind and increased aggression (Olson et al., 2011). To prove cause without a doubt would require parents of monozygotic twins to raise them identically, except that one twin would be spanked often and the other never. Of course, that is unethical as well as impossible.

Nonetheless, most developmentalists wonder why parents would take the chance. The best argument in favor of spanking is that alternative punishments may be worse (Larzelere et al., 2010; Larzelere & Cox, 2013). Let us consider alternatives.

- **PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTROL** Another common method of discipline is called **psychological control**, in which children's shame, guilt, and gratitude are used to control their behavior (Barber, 2002). Psychological control may reduce academic achievement and emotional understanding, just as spanking is thought to do (Alegre, 2011).

Consider Finland, one of the nations where corporal punishment is now forbidden. Parents were asked about psychological control (Aunola et al., 2013). If parents strongly agreed with the following questions, they were considered to use psychological control:

1. "My child should be aware of how much I have done for him/her."
2. "I let my child see how disappointed and shamed I am if he/she misbehaves."
3. "My child should be aware of how much I sacrifice for him/her."
4. "I expect my child to be grateful and appreciate all the advantages he/she has."

The higher the parents scored on these four measures of psychological control, the lower the children's math scores were—and this connection grew stronger over time. Moreover, the children tended to have negative emotions (depression, anger, and so on). Thus, psychological control may have some of the same consequences as corporal punishment.

**TIME-OUT AND INDUCTION** A disciplinary technique often used with young children in North America is the **time-out**, in which a misbehaving child is required to sit quietly, without toys or playmates, for a short time. Time-out is not to be done in anger, or for too long; it is recommended that parents use a calm voice and that the time-out last only one to five minutes (Morawska & Sanders, 2011). Time-out works as a punishment if the child really enjoys "time-in," when the child is happily engaged with the parents or with peers.

Time-out is favored by many experts. For example, in the large, longitudinal evaluation of the Head Start program highlighted in Chapter 5, an increase in time-outs and a decrease in spankings were considered signs of improved parental discipline (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010).

However, the same team who criticized the correlation between spanking and misbehavior also criticized the quality of research favoring time-out. They added that time-out did not always work: If "misbehavior is motivated by wanting to escape from the situation . . . time-out reinforces the misbehavior" (Larzelere & Cox, 2013, p. 289).

Often combined with the time-out is another alternative to physical punishment and psychological control—**induction**, in which the parents talk extensively with the offender, helping children understand why their behavior was wrong.

Ideally, time-out allows children to calm down. Then a strong and affectionate parent-child relationship means that children explain their emotions and parents listen carefully. Children can explain what they *might have* done instead of what *was* done, although such hypothetical reasoning is difficult—maybe impossible—for young children.



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**Bad Boy or Bad Parent?** For some children and in some cultures, sitting alone is an effective form of punishment. Sometimes, however, it produces an angry child without changing the child's behavior.