

Crime and Punishment

Educational psychologists have been portrayed by recent correspondents as “..self deluding ..front benchers of wishy washy liberalism... contributing to the moral decline of our society”. (Understanding bad behaviour 24.11.00, Old Time Punishment 1.12.00) It is perhaps not surprising that the professional group entrusted with the statutory duty of understanding troublesome pupils are sometimes, like their clients, scapegoated and caricatured. Such comments take me back to the reactionary attitudes epitomised by John Major’s plea to his party conference to “ understand a little less and condemn a little more.” While research has confirmed beyond doubt that positive discipline is more effective than punitive approaches, psychologists are not blind to the fact that punishment has an important feedback role in children’s journey towards self-regulation.

While thinking on punishment has progressed from the time when prisoners in our early jails mindlessly climbed tread wheels and turned crank machines, two problems remain. There is confusion about the goal of punishment, perhaps because it has many potential uses, some of which are more readily acknowledged than others. It can deter pupils from misbehaviour, rehabilitate, provide retribution and meet our need for revenge. Furthermore it can certainly make the punisher feel better, but it is hard to find evidence that it does much else. Punishment is often a short term palliative with little long lasting effect. At worst it can be a time consuming way of making badly behaved pupils even worse, particularly boys. Its negative side-effects include resentment, rebellion and retreat. It models both an angry reaction to conflict and aspects of bullying. It fails to teach pupils what to do or ask anything of them. Instead it makes children pay for mistakes, focuses on the past and emphasises external controls. Like pest control it can often effect the good as well as the bad. Punishment is also likely to undermine the quality of the pupil / teacher relationship. Punishment without instruction offers only authoritarian control and as such is self-perpetuating.

There will always be a need for punishment however to signal that certain behaviours are unacceptable. What we really need now is better methods of making pupils responsible for their behaviour. Effective punishment is always best combined with positive strategies. If our aim is to help children do better in future it is not helpful to start by making them feel worse about themselves. Care needs to be taken to ensure punishment doesn’t damage any interests that maintain the child’s motivation, become identified with learning tasks or withdraw the child from the curriculum.

While teachers’ unions clamour for tougher sanctions, the certainty of sanctions is more important than the severity. As the effectiveness doesn’t depend on the scale, the number of punishments can be increased by breaking sanctions into smaller bits, e.g. go to the end of the queue can become lose 10 places, 5 places etc. Punishment must be aversive. If it doesn’t stop the behaviour happening again it is not a punishment. In some circumstances it can inadvertently

encourage misbehaviour. Exclusion or removal from class for example may give disaffected boys a welcome relief and provide much needed status within the peer group. Punishment doesn’t always need to be in public and discrete sanctions allow a low key response to misbehaviour, which can be particularly beneficial with boys.

A key ingredient of punishments should be logical consequences which should be related to the misbehaviour, respectful of the child and revealed in advance. For example, failing to bring the correct jotter might be followed by the pupil having to use a sheet of paper and then spend his own time transferring it to his jotter. Punishment is most appropriate when it follows from and as soon as possible after the offence, so that pupils can see the connection between their actions and the consequences. The use of logical will help encourage recovery by recognising the misbehaviour as a mistake and looking for some kind of reconciliation that builds solutions rather than allocate blame. They are about bad choices not bad pupils and the future not the past. They aim to translate blame labels such as pest into actions that hold the pupil accountable rather than culpable and require the pupil to rectify the situation and make amends.

Personalised punishments that condemn the offender as a bad person is a form of stigmatising shame that cuts the moral bonds between him and the community. By labelling the pupil as someone who cannot be trusted, it traps the pupil into the persistent troublemaker role. The problem is, whether we like it or not, children who are made to feel bad about themselves are much less likely to be able to repair their behaviour as they either block out the problem or become angry at the teacher rather than accept the blame. A more constructive shame is one that restores these same bonds by focusing on the misbehaviour and linking it with the punishment without emphasising the pupil’s personal qualities. To earn the right to a fresh start and to remain included in their community, offenders must repair the harm caused by their misbehaviour. This approach minimises the risk of resentment or retaliation and avoids labelling the pupil. It challenges the pupil to face up to the consequences of his behaviour without diminishing him as a person.

Misbehaviour provides both the threat that all parties will emerge from it further disrupted but also the opportunity that the unacceptable behaviour is recognised, equity restored and the future clarified so that all participants are more respectful to each other. Educational psychologists prefer to tackle disruption as a need for the child to learn new ways of behaving and this requires an early response and minimum coercion since repairing relationships and nurturing learning is best done in co-operation. This is one example of the many ways psychologists try to make a balanced, objective and rational contribution rather than take the easy option of colluding with the emotional reactions of an admittedly stressed system.

