What to do instead of spanking: alternatives to physical discipline

If your primary approach to discipline has always involved physical punishment, you may find it difficult to adopt an approach which avoids the use of physical punishment entirely. There are numerous advantages, however, of learning alternative techniques for maintaining discipline. Perhaps, most importantly, rewarding desirable behavior is more effective than punishment of undesirable behavior and the negative effects of punishment can be avoided (e.g., physical punishment carries with it a risk of physically injuring the child; children associate negative feelings with the person who punishes them, etc.). Some children (e.g., those with sensory hyper- or hypo-sensitivities and children with ADHD) respond especially poorly to physical punishment and require a more thoughtful approach to discipline. The following are suggested as alternates to physical punishment:

Establishing an Environment of Encouragement

1. Change your approach from one of reacting to undesirable behavior to one of planning for appropriate behavior. Look for ways to encourage your child to succeed at positive behavior, and promptly reward his or her attempts.

2. Give clear, simple directions.

   Make sure to have eye-contact with the child when giving an instruction. Give each instruction as a statement, not in a questioning voice (e.g., say "Pick up the toys," not "Can you pick up the toys?"). Say what the child SHOULD do, not what NOT to do. (e.g., say "Put the doll in the toy box," instead of "Don't leave the doll on the floor;" and say "STOP!" instead of "Don't run!"). Young children tend to act on what they heard last, and they may not think about the "Don't" at the beginning of your sentence until they have already acted on the last part of what you said.

3. Prepare ahead for difficult situations.

   When you know you are going to a place or event where your child is likely to misbehave, make sure to bring a small bag of interesting toys to keep the child entertained. Make sure to select toys that are not only child-safe, but easy to pick up when it is time to leave.

   If you know that your child becomes very difficult in certain situations or during certain activities, try to think about what you can do to avoid this ahead of time. For example, if your child gets very irritable near meal times, you might want to bring out an interesting toy just before you are ready to serve the meal.

4. Provide a special box of toys for independent play.

   Select a few special or interesting toys that your child can play with alone and bring these out only at times when you need a few minutes to do a chore or make a telephone call, etc. Keep these special play times brief, and give the child praise for "working" well alone.
5. Establish a few firm rules that your child can understand.

Decide which rules are most important to you, and make sure that your child understands them. Repeat the rules often, and praise the child for obeying them. Let the child know immediately when one of these rules has been broken. Do not change the rules from day to day, but add rules gradually as the child seems to be able to keep them well. If your child needs to be punished more than a few times per day, this may be an indication that you are expecting a little too much, and you should remove the most difficult rules until the child can master the easier rules.

**Responding to Your Child's Behavior**

1. Punish immediately and consistently, but not frequently.

   For punishment to work, it must IMMEDIATELY follow the misbehavior. Do not change your mind about what should be punished from day to day, but make sure that you do not have a long list of behaviors that require punishment. A child who is punished frequently each day will learn to feel that he or she is a bad person. The child will continue to misbehave because punishment will seem unavoidable. To avoid this, make sure you do not start with too many rules or rules that are too hard.

2. Choose appropriate, effective punishments.

   If possible choose a punishment that is a natural consequence of the misbehavior (e.g., "You didn't pick up the toys, you can't play with them for the rest of the day.") If you find that a particular "punishment" does not seem to work even when applied consistently, it is not "punishing" for your child, and you should try another.

3. Ignore misbehavior that is not harmful.

   If you are having difficulty with a child’s behavior, try ignoring as many types of misbehavior as you can without allowing the child to hurt himself or others. Make sure to praise the child when behavior is good. When you have all harmful behavior under control, you can gradually start to work on other annoying behaviors -- one behavior at a time.

4. If you know what the child wants, try giving it to her at a better time.

   If you know that your child misbehaves for attention, give her extra attention when she is behaving well. If your child seems to "want" to be spanked, avoid physical punishment for wrong-doing, but give the child extra physical contact (hugs, holding, rocking, horse-play) at other times during the day.

5. "Time-Out" works best when used to prevent the child from getting rewarded for misbehavior.
Use this technique to remove the child from the room where other children are likely to provide "praise," laughter, etc. Make sure to use it immediately and as unemotionally as possible. One minute per year of age is a good guide as to how long to keep the child in time-out (e.g., 3 minutes for a 3-year-old). If the child leaves the time-out area, calmly return him or her, and be prepared to do so repeatedly, and UNEMOTIONALLY, as many times as necessary.

6. Rewarding a child's good behavior is MUCH more effective than punishing bad behavior.

Reward has the added advantage of helping a child feel good about himself; whereas, punishment tends to make a child feel bad about himself and resentful toward you.

**Trouble-shooting Difficult Behavior Issues**

1. Watch what happens just after a problem behavior.

If your child has a particularly difficult behavior that happens frequently, pay close attention to what USUALLY happens immediately after the child begins to misbehave. This can give you a clue as to why she does this so often.

2. Find out what is punishing and what is rewarding for YOUR child.

Punishment is whatever works to stop a child from misbehaving. Reward is whatever works to get a child to behave well. What is rewarding for one child may not be rewarding for another; what is punishment for one may not be work for another.