

Crime and Punishment



Send her mail.

"Love Perspective" is an original column appearing every other Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Serenity. Serenity is the mother of 4 boys and both a recovering mainstream parent and statist. She seeks to share what she has learned along her journey to voluntarism, radical unschooling, and living a counter-culture lifestyle. Archived columns can be found [here](#). LP-only RSS feed available [here](#).

In mainstream society, we tend to see the actions of others as the result of their conscious choices and decisions. We seem to believe every action and behavior is the result of a well-conceived idea, a thoroughly rehearsed and planned course of action followed through to fruition. Thus, when someone acts in a way we perceive as wrong or bad, we quickly want to assign a punishment or consequence to "teach a lesson."

Think about it – you read a story online about a man who has robbed a liquor store, and immediately you and the others commenting on the article are advocating punishments like, "Throw him in jail!" Or you hear about a woman who has badly abused her children, and suddenly "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" becomes the overriding mantra. I remember learning about Susan Smith murdering her two young sons and believing she should be forever locked in a prison cell with the cries of her children piped in to torment her for the rest of her life.

But when do we stop to ask ourselves, "What could have led to this?" Rarely do we try to understand the circumstances which were in place long before a crime happened. I could write a book on this as it applies to adults, but for now, I'd like to focus on how we tend to have this same knee-jerk condemnation in regard to the actions of children.

Let's say your 2-year-old is caught red handed sneaking a cookie after you've clearly told him, "No, you may not have a cookie." Mainstream thinking would tell you the 2 year old has blatantly defied your authority and *chosen* to do wrong. Therefore, the "correct" course of action is to enforce a consequence and punish him in order to "teach him a lesson." Let us examine that a bit more closely. Based on the assumption that a child is deliberately making a "wrong" choice, we make his life miserable as a consequence. When we really evaluate it, the logic sounds a bit like this:

If I punish my child for what he's done, the goal is to ensure that the next time he's "plotting to defy me," he will pause to have an internal dialogue of something like, "Gosh, last time mom told me, 'No,' and I did it anyway, I was put on time out for 2 minutes [or put in the corner, spanked, yelled at, jerked by the arm and led away, held by the face as my parent yelled at me, lost my trip to the park, had my favorite toy taken away, etc, etc.]. Perhaps I should reflect on what I want to do and seriously reconsider my actions in order to avoid consequences. After all, I can trust when my mother says, 'No,' she means business."

Writing that makes me feel silly! And if we substitute in 4-year-old or 8-year-old or even 12-year-old, I still struggle to accept that the predominant groupthink in our society actually believes this is what will happen when we have strongly enforced rules and issued consequences and punishments!

Children are 1) not actively plotting ways to defy you, 2) not thinking through their actions to any type of logical conclusion. The only way the above actions would deter them is by scaring the crap out of them until they are afraid to do *anything*. You have inhibited their natural curiosity, you have planted seeds of distrust, you have shown by your actions that you are *not* to be trusted because sometimes you're all lovey-dovey and other times you are an angry person who is very scary.

I am not saying there should never be accountability, but that's very different than arbitrarily assigning punishments. There are many, many better ways to encourage positive behavior choices, but the *best* is by allowing children to seek to do good by intrinsic motivation.

First, *a brain which is afraid is not a brain which is open to learning*. A scared mind is a mind which has closed off cognitive function and is operating from a primal place of fight, flight, or freeze. Executive function ceases when fear is heightened.

Second, *children learn by exploring*. In exploring, sometimes they make choices which appear to defy us. However, when we've accepted that these things are natural and par for the course in their growth and development, we can view these choices as a learning moments rather than reacting as if we have been personally betrayed by their "defiance." If you stop seeing it as defiance and start viewing it as raising a happy, healthy, normal human being driven by curiosity and a desire to explore, you can gain perspective without resorting to knee-jerk assumptions.

Third, *focus on the positives!* Your child managed to think through getting a chair from the dining room, sliding it to the kitchen counter, climbing up, and opening the cookie jar?! Wow! That's awesome! In my house, that would be a well-earned cookie. But that's not what you want to know, is it? No, you want to know how to make him *stop* doing it. To that,

I suggest you realize he is going to want to do it and offer a variety of interesting alternatives. Can you replace crappy cookies with healthy treats? Can you help him learn how to safely climb if you're worried about him falling? Can you put the treat jar down lower and put healthy treats in it so the temptation is gone? You're smart – I bet you can come up with a dozen different ways you can curb the undesirable behavior!

Finally, *anticipate that need*. If you are tuned in to your kid, you will know when he is hungry, thirsty, tired, overwhelmed, etc. Children whose needs are met consistently do not need to act out in angry or defiant ways. It is your job to not just ensure the child stays alive, but to actually be a caretaker – provide what is needed, and do it with loving, compassionate, gracious kindness. Be caring.

The thing about parenting is that few parents actually spend time learning what is normal for children. Our society tends to think children should have a fully developed cognitive skill set far and above that of most adults. Be realistic about who they are and what they are capable of. Be compassionate about the struggles they are facing as small, powerless people in a big, scary world. Role model with your own behavior what you want them to do. Be amazed at the changes. There is no need to punish, especially when you realize the “crime” is often just part of how they are learning about their world and trying to get their needs met.