

What Does a Punishment-Free Home Look Like?

Written by Mama Eve.

I'm always a little surprised when people are horrified to hear I don't punish my children.

"How will they learn right from wrong?" is usually the first question, and I can see them picturing a household run by unruly hellions jumping on furniture and swinging from the ceiling fans.

It's not that we don't have those moments (maybe not quite that extreme) — but as much as I want punishment-free to mean always calm, always peaceful, and rules always followed, that isn't the truth either.

What we have in our home is a lot of love, a lot of respect, a lot of empathy, and a lot of communication.

I can't remember exactly when I started time-outs in our home, but I definitely remember when we stopped them. It was after one or two efforts, and putting my son in the corner was like doing an exorcism. I stayed calm, I took a deep breath, I explained what the transgression was and how long he needed to sit there, and those were the worst thirty seconds of my life.

I could see that if I wanted a punishment to work on my strong-willed, spirited, and stubborn son, I would have to break his will and wield complete control over him. I needed to find another way. It's been over two years since then, and we've traveled on our journey together as a family.

We have two hot-button issues in our house: hitting and sharing; not surprising considering my sons are 4 and 2. My goal is that some day not too far in the future, my boys will be self-motivated to share, and also have the self-control to not hit when they're frustrated or angry. They're showing signs of doing this — all without punishment.

When it comes to sharing, I want them to have control of their toys and their actions — I'm not an all-knowing, omnipresent being who dictates toy possession. *They* are responsible for working out who plays with what toys, for what length of time, and in what manner. When scuffles inevitably arise, I'm there to narrate, prevent feelings from escalating to the point of hurting each other, and suggest alternatives if they get stuck.

When I deal with sharing issues in this way, there is no room for punishment — it's just all about learning. My boys are learning to control themselves. They're learning to problem solve. They're learning to negotiate, and to look at situations from different angles. Once

we started working out conflicts like this, the idea of punishment seemed ridiculous.

With hitting, it's not quite as clear-cut.

It pains me when one of my children hurts the other, and these are situations where my husband and I still learning how to effectively deal with it — mostly because we have to check our own anger. Sometimes we separate everyone until we all calm down, but then we still have to come together afterwards and talk about what happens. Usually it's best when we deal with it straight away.

First, I attend to whoever got hurt, and I give kisses and cuddles. I include whoever the aggressor was. If they're acting out, they need cuddles too. I narrate what happened, and if there is still anger and hot tempers, I firmly say, "I won't let you hurt your brother again". We talk about alternatives to hitting when our tempers rise, and we talk about how it hurts the other person.

In these situations, I can of course see how it makes sense to punish, but I don't see how it would benefit my children.

I don't understand what they would learn from a punishment, but I can see them learning when I bring them together. They're learning that someone cares about them and doesn't want them to hurt other people when they get out of control. They learn that *they* are the ones who control their actions, and they have different options. They learn that when they make mistakes, they have a safe, loving place to come to where they can learn a better way of doing things.

The result of not punishing my children is *trust*.

While they still have occasional squabbles over toys they need me to help them work out, more and more they can play together for hours and regulate themselves. They still hit each other, but more and more they move away and say, "I'm so mad! I want to hit him" and come to me for a hug. They don't run away from me, and they respect me.

Ending punishments was the best thing we've ever done for the relationships in our family. Now that we've had some practice at it, I really can't imagine our life any other way.

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