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## **Paul A. Aleixo and Claire E. Norris**

# Moral reasoning development and classroom discipline

It was widely reported recently that 20% of teachers favour the return of the cane as a form of discipline within schools. Behaviour is reportedly so poor that such extreme measures are thought to be needed to control our youth within the learning environment today.

Whilst this figure suggests that up to 80% of teachers are still opposed to its re-introduction, it is still surprising that one in five teachers favour a return to corporal punishment particularly in the light of research in the area. At a time when the profession is being increasingly called upon to utilise research-led practice we wondered if we could stimulate a discussion on the practicalities of incorporating discipline policies founded in research and to highlight some understanding of moral development among young children and adolescents. In the process, we would like to suggest the wider use of hypothetical moral dilemmas in the classroom as a way to improve children's moral awareness and hence improve their general behaviour.

Psychology has two rich areas of research and theory which might reasonably be applicable to this discussion. The first area is the very well known research on learning theory that goes all the way from Pavlov's dogs, through Skinner's work on operant conditioning and ends with Albert Bandura's social learning theory. Learning theory is already used in schools and is the basis of many, if not all, token reward systems. Merit and house point systems, for instance, are based on operant conditioning principles.

Secondly, there is the area of moral reasoning development first suggested by Lawrence Kohlberg. This concerns how people learn to follow rules and particularly how they make decisions about whether they should break a rule. This area is arguably less well known to teachers and this is the focus of the present discussion in an attempt to encourage applying its principles within schools to encourage and shape moral behaviour.

### **Corporal Punishment**

Firstly, though, it might be worth reiterating how futile it might be to reintroduce such punitive measures as the cane. We will then be able to apply these points to non-corporal punishment responses to unacceptable behaviours within a school setting. We are confining ourselves here to issues of effectiveness rather than broader issues such as children's rights and the moral problems inherent in violence and do not want to give the impression that effectiveness is somehow more important. It is just the case that psychological research can address effectiveness issues more directly.

Corporal punishment in any sphere is assumed to work through two possible effects: individual deterrence and more general deterrence. The general deterrence argument can be dealt with fairly swiftly. Research has shown that while on a broad level corporal punishment might have a very small effect on a general population, during specific instances of rule breaking it

rarely has an impact. People simply don't factor in the possibility of corporal punishment when transgressing a rule. Research on corporal or capital punishment as a response to law breaking has shown little effect on offending or re-offending rates and there is no reason to think that this would be any more effective in non criminal settings. In other words, caning one pupil is unlikely to deter others from engaging in the problem behaviour.

On an individual level, the severity and seriousness of corporal punishment is argued to be a future deterrent to the individual receiving it. In essence, people assume that once a child has been caned, for example, he or she will not transgress again for fear of repetition of the punishment. This idea falls squarely within the remit of operant conditioning or 'learning by consequences'. Operant learning involves learning from the consequences of one's behaviour. If a particular behaviour results in punishment then the frequency of repetition of that behaviour will be reduced. However, there are fairly strict conditions under which this occurs. Firstly, the individual needs to be clearly aware of what it was about their actions that resulted in punishment and secondly, the consequences of the behaviour (in our example the caning) need to consistently follow the undesirable behaviour. Unfortunately both these conditions are often not present. In fact, operant learning research has consistently found that punishment for behaviour is less successful in extinguishing the behaviour compared to rewarding for an alternative 'positive' behaviour. A further complication to this is a result of human cognitive processes. Our complex human language allows us to have an equally complex set of social regulations and rules. This means that to be fully 'conditioned', children need to have knowledge and understanding of not only the actual rules they need to follow but, more crucially, an understanding of the reasons behind those rules being necessary.

This last point relates to the work on Moral reasoning. Lawrence Kohlberg laid down a developmental theory about different levels of moral reasoning that children are assumed to move through beginning at stage 1 and ending at stage 6; each stage in between reflects a more mature way of thinking about rules within society. Whilst there are complex explanations concerning the differences between each stage, the important difference between 'mature' (stages 1 and 2) and 'immature' (stages 3 to 6) reasoning are the understanding of internal and external behaviour controls. Those reasoning below stage 3 tend to see an adherence to rules being governed by external sources, so that a child will not speak out loud because they will be told off by a teacher for example. Those at stage 3 or above begin to understand that rules are created for the smooth running of the group and they are adhered to for this reason. Those using internal moral controls at stage 3 and above are more likely to follow societal rules as there are fewer opportunities to break rules since the controls for following the rules are governed by an understanding of the need for the rules in the first place. A child reasoning at this stage would remain silent, for example, because he or she understands the importance of other children being able to hear the teacher.

It is therefore extremely important to take a child's understanding of the rules (in moral reasoning stage terms) before trying to understand whether a particular punishment is going to be effective.

## **The Effectiveness of Punishment**

If we take a closer look at the effectiveness of non-corporal forms of punishment we find that the situation is not so very different. Punishment of any sort, corporal or otherwise, comes under the same considerations from operant conditioning and moral reasoning theories.

Reward is always superior over punishment in terms of resulting in a reduction of problematic behaviour. It is always best to reward an alternative behaviour. Furthermore, reacting to rule breaking with punishment and little explanation (from both the adult and the child) is likely to limit the opportunities to increase in moral reasoning stages. In other words, punishment is likely to keep children with external rule controls rather than help to develop more mature levels of moral reasoning. Additionally, if children witness a heavily punishment-based discipline regime, they are also likely to maintain external rule control which increases the likelihood of rule breaking. In other words if a child only keeps the rules when they think there is a risk of being caught, they will be highly likely to transgress when they judge that they can 'get away with it'. Since the external controls cannot always be present it is better to try to move children onto an internal rule control.

One of the key issues about any punishment is the need for children to be afforded the opportunity to explain and discuss their wrong doing. Engaging in these explanations allows the development of moral reasoning.

### **Improving School Behaviour**

Therefore, it is clear that a call for more punitive measures, whether culminating for some in corporal punishment or not, is likely, according to the theories presented herein, to be counter-productive. However this message may well be obvious to some. How many of us simply obey the rules of society simply because we fear punishment? Surely the majority of us have reached a stage in our moral awareness that the obeying of society's doctrines is happily done for the good of the whole rather than our own personal gain. So how and when do children learn such moral awareness and can schools speed up this awareness through their discipline policies and thus

improve general behaviour? School discipline policies need to ensure that they do not inadvertently keep moral reasoning levels below stage 3 and thus prevent the development of internal moral control.

Operant conditioning research suggests quite clearly that behaviour can be changed if certain principles are adhered to. Firstly reward is preferable to punishment. Secondly, the rewards and punishments (if these are felt necessary) need to be consistent and individual. Collective punishment or reward is problematic to justify as the individual can feel helpless to control the behaviour of their peers. Thus keeping a class in at playtime for the transgression of one or two is likely to be fruitless. Finally, the discipline needs to follow clearly defined behaviours, being rewarded for 'being good' or punished for 'behaving badly' can be too vague to result in any positive effect on behaviour.

These points can be highlighted by looking at an apparently popular method used in primary schools. The use of a class 'jar' whereby marbles are added for good class behaviour and a reward given when a certain number of marbles is reached needs to be used carefully, particularly since there is the temptation to remove marbles as a punishment for rule breaking. Under these circumstances, children may feel helpless as their own good behaviour cannot prevent the marble removal for another child's transgression. Using such a jar for positive reward only would be more effective. Obviously, the behaviours that are to be rewarded need to be carefully defined so that they are clearly understood by the pupils.

The use of a collective class 'marble jar' and other group discipline practices is also discouraged by moral reasoning research. Whilst it is easy to assume that this would develop an awareness of following rules for the good of the group, it is unlikely to do so without direct educational input. In other words, following rules for the good of a

class requires an understanding of the reasoning behind the rules in the first place. With external rule control, children (who by definition do not understand this reasoning) are more likely to simply look at the likelihood of being punished for a behaviour rather than conforming for the greater good.

Like cognitive development, moral reasoning development requires educational input. However, the conditions for advancement in moral reasoning stages are not always met and it is possible that some adults have not had the opportunities to develop their moral reasoning and are indeed using external controls to adhere to societal rules. According to Kohlberg, there is no automatic movement from stage 1 to stage 6. The way that this development is thought to happen is through the availability of situations whereby children can discuss and think about moral situations.

Traditionally, the most effective method of advancement in moral reasoning stages involves the discussion of moral dilemmas. One of the most famous moral dilemmas used by Kohlberg involves the fictional account of Heinz, whose wife is dying of cancer. He has the opportunity to steal an experimental drug from a greedy chemist who will not sell it to Heinz for a fair price (Heinz cannot afford the extortionate price the chemist is charging for the medicine). The discussion of the dilemma involves deciding if it is morally acceptable for Heinz to steal in order to save his wife's life. Further prompts are asked concerning more 'what if' scenarios. 'What if the person dying is a stranger?' 'What if his wife asks him to steal the drug?' and so on.

It is thought that through the discussion of these types of dilemmas, individuals can

develop their moral ideas and hence advance in moral reasoning stages. It seems a likely suggestion that using 'personal and social' lesson times or 'circle time' in primary schools to discuss moral dilemmas that are relevant to the pupils might help to engender a more morally compliant atmosphere in a school. It would be a relatively simple task to adapt moral dilemmas to a school setting, and even very young children could partake in discussions.

A possible dilemma with these children would be to ask opinions about what would be a worse transgression: Deliberately making a small mark on a table or accidentally making a large mark. Children at early stages of moral reasoning are likely to concentrate on the size of the damage and this could be a good point to start discussions. Older, secondary pupils could discuss more advanced dilemmas and perhaps even tackle some of Kohlberg's classic examples.

### **Stimulate discussion**

Clearly the points discussed here are based on academic considerations from psychological research and as the pioneering psychologist William James pointed out, it remains for teachers to understand and study such research and to use their skills and experience to apply the principles to their specific classroom setting and needs. It is possible that other research would add or even be contradictory to that presented here.

However, the ideas presented are intended to stimulate discussion rather than provide definitive answers to a complex problem. What seems clear is that calling for punitive measures is unlikely to be an answer to discipline in schools.