Punishment: It’s Natural, not “Negative”

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Punishment is a very controversial topic in applied behavior analysis today. Because reinforcement, antecedent manipulations, and certain skill acquisition procedures are often described as “positive,” the implication is that punishment procedures must be “negative.” Some procedures – mostly those described as “positive” – are also characterized as “natural,” with the implication that they’re automatically good, or at least benign. Well, that’s not the case at all. In fact, there is no evidence that all reinforcement procedures are “positive” in the sense of always being pleasant and producing no ill effects. And it’s certainly not the case that all “positive” procedures are “natural,” or vice versa. Indeed, there are many naturally occurring consequences that most of us would not describe as pleasant or “positive.” The terms “positive,” “negative,” and “natural” in this context are more political in nature than scientific or logical, and carry with them more baggage than a fully loaded 747. Punishment has undeniably become ABA’s redheaded stepchild, and the use of punishment procedures typically invokes the wrath of the local behavioral program review committee and the “positively” enlightened crowd.

But fear not; this article is not meant to encourage the use of punishment procedures. Instead it will discuss common problems in the implementation of those procedures, why they often fail, and some alternatives. First, however, it must be stated there is absolutely nothing wrong with punishment. In fact, one could say that punishment is positive because this author is quite positive that not a single one of you reading this article would have made it to this point in your life were it not for your ability to “handle” punishers and ultimately to benefit from them (in both the short and the long term). Remember that punishers, like reinforcers, can occur in several ways. Both types of consequences may be programmed, they may occur naturally in a socially mediated fashion, or they may occur naturally with no social mediation whatsoever. Keep in mind that those distinctions are somewhat arbitrary, and are not universally accepted.

When they hear the term “punishment,” many behavior analysts probably think of programmed consequences that are designed to reduce behaviors and are administered by someone, as in “Every time Billy bites his hand, the therapist will deliver water mist contingently.” But there are also naturally occurring punishers that are not programmed, but do involve the actions of others; that is, they are socially mediated. For example, if Billy takes Sam’s toy, Sam is likely to deliver some consequence to Billy. (Hence the phrase “Do unto others…then run!” If you don’t run, something will probably be done unto you, and possibly with greater vigor than what you initially delivered). Finally, there are many naturally occurring, non-socially mediated punishers. These are the ones that are probably
essential to our survival. Whacking a hornet’s nest typically gets punished quickly, as does picking up a hot metal pan by its metal handle, holding a nail incorrectly while hammering, or failing to let sleeping dogs lie. This last category is not always thought of as punishment because no person acts as the punishing agent, but the contingencies and the behavioral effects are similar, if not identical, to programmed punishment procedures.

For purposes of this discussion, the issue is not whether punishment procedures are effective, because that makes no more sense than arguing about whether reinforcement is effective. The real question is “How effective are typical legally and ethically sanctioned forms of programmed punishment with people who have longstanding behavior problems and significant deficits in what might be called their punishment repertoires?” Put another way, how well do people with disabilities “handle” punishment – whether naturally occurring or programmed -- and how well do programmed punishers suppress their longstanding behavior problems? Do they have the skills to respond appropriately to punishment? Do they know what they should and should not do when being punished?

Sometimes when consulting to schools I tell teachers that I don’t recommend using punishment procedures with a student. That is not because punishment is bad or evil or doesn’t work, or because of any personal aversion of any sort. It is based on consideration of the current strength of the behavior and the consequences that are maintaining it pitted against the strength of what can be legally and ethically used as programmed punishing stimuli. The way I often put it is, “You ain’t got nothin’ big enough or bad enough.” That is not very elegant, but it makes the point. What the teacher often does have, however, is a stimulus with sufficient aversive qualities to evoke aggression, but that is insufficient to cause an immediate or permanent suppression of the target behavior.

For example, consider this scenario: Timothy punches Bobby. The teacher, implementing a planned response cost procedure following a functional assessment of Timothy’s aggressive behavior, informs Timothy that he has just lost 100 points and will not be able to attend the class pizza party at the end of
the week. Timothy then punches the bearer of bad news, the teacher. In this example, the alleged punishing consequence not only fails to suppress aggressive behavior, it actually produces a second attack. Many people tend to react aggressively when subjected to an aversive condition. The point here is not that response cost procedures are bad and should never be used. The problem in this scenario is that our friend Timothy does not have the repertoire to benefit from a mild (potential) punisher. An appropriate response following the teacher’s statement that Timothy will lose points might be “Oh, darn it! I’m sorry, Ms. Johnson, I really messed up. Man! I really wanted to go to that pizza party! Is there any way I can get those points back?” If Timothy is not exposed to punishment contingencies and taught to respond appropriately to them, will he be able to make it in a society where he is going to encounter many such contingencies? If he can’t handle relatively minor aversive consequences, shouldn’t we teach him what to do when faced with those types of situations?

Movies explain everything. In the 1984 movie “Gremlins,” a father bought his young son a cute furry creature called a Mogwai that should never be fed after midnight and must never get wet. The boy let both happen and things went very, very badly. In the end, the old man who sold the creature to the father said that the boy “wasn’t ready for Mogwai.” Some people with disabilities are not ready for punishment. They do not have the requisite repertoires and have not yet learned how to remain reasonable even in the face of minor aversives, be they punishers or other forms of aversive stimulation.

Why should we teach people with disabilities to tolerate minor punishers? The answer is that, like the rest of us, if they can learn to handle minor punishers, they may be able to avoid major ones. We may be angry at the police officer who gives us a ticket (programmed potential punisher), but if we can keep from striking the officer, we can avoid going to jail. Every day we learn what to do (and what not to do) in the face of minor punishers so that we may avoid major ones. Cumulatively, those repertoires are the stitches that keep the fabric of society from unraveling. If a person with a disability is to be a reasonably independent member of society, then it stands to reason that we have a responsibility to teach her how to respond to punishment contingencies, because she will encounter them.
How should behavior analysts go about doing that? First and foremost, we can stop using punishers that are only strong enough to provoke aggression. We can start building our consumers’ skills in handling minor aversive consequences. Think about what people can do when faced with unpleasant circumstances in order to make those situations more tolerable, and teach those repertoires to consumers (with modifications as needed). For example, a student with reasonable language skills could be prepared for a response cost procedure by rehearsing with him what will happen, what he can do to avoid losing points, and what he should do when informed of a point loss, as follows:

Teacher: “Bobby, if a classmate teases you, you may not hit him. Instead you should come get me and I promise you will not get into trouble.”

Bobby: “OK.”

Teacher: “Now, if you hit someone, what happens?”

Bobby: “I lose 100 points.”

Teacher: “That’s right, I’m glad you remember. But when I tell you that you lose points, what can you do to get some of those points back?”

Bobby: “I can stay calm by breathing in and out 10 times. Then I have to tell you I understand.”

Teacher: “That’s right! And what happens if you do that?”

Bobby: “I get back 50 points, right?”

Teacher: “You’ve got it!

In the foregoing, Bobby is coached on what to do and say when he is informed of a point loss. Note that Bobby is told what to do to earn reinforcers,
not just what he shouldn’t do. If he can learn to handle that situation, he is well on his way to being able to handle more difficult circumstances.

There seems to be a trend lately toward trying to make sure that people with disabilities never experience anything “bad” or “negative.” There must be nothing but “positive” situations and constant free choices -- no demands, no disappointments, no schedule changes, and most definitely no “aversives.” Unfortunately, that is not real life. There will always be aversives; they are truly inevitable. We can either pretend that they don’t exist, never program them into our behavior plans, and let them occur haphazardly so that they catch our consumers unaware and ill-prepared, or we can program in some kinder, gentler aversives of the type that occur in all “natural” environments and prepare consumers to manage them through good teaching and skill building. We’re not just talking about programmed punishers here, but all sorts of aversives, especially those that cause behavior problems and occur frequently in normal life. It seems reasonable to help the individuals we serve get ready to confront the world on their own, doesn’t it? Let’s get them ready for Mogwai.

The author is grateful to Ennio Cipani, PhD, for many discussions about these issues and recommends Dr. Cipani’s book Punishment on Trial (2004, Context Press), which can be downloaded at no cost from http://www.ecipani.com/PoT.pdf