

## **I Was Punished, and I Turned Out Just Fine**

An excerpt from "Parents Who Love Too Much" by Jane Nelsen and Cheryl Erwin

How fine is "fine"? Fine is relative. Yes, most of us turned out just "fine." We can laugh at some of the punishments we received as a child--and even say we deserved them. However, if we had been allowed to learn from our mistakes instead of being made to pay for them, is it possible we might be even better than "fine"?

Punishment is designed to make children "pay" for their mistakes. Discipline that teaches (the definition we prefer) is designed to help children learn from their mistakes in an atmosphere of encouragement and support. In the following story, Stan was led through a process that helped him understand the difference between punishment and non-punitive discipline.

Stan told his parenting group about a time he cheated on a fifth-grade test. He said, "I was stupid enough to write some answers on the palm of my hand. The teacher saw me open my fist to find an answer." This teacher grabbed Stan's paper and, in front of everyone in the class, tore it up. He received an F on the test and was publicly called a cheater. The teacher told his parents. His father gave him a whipping and grounded him for a month. Stan said, "I never cheated again, and I certainly deserved the F."

The group leader helped him explore this experience to help everyone in the class see if there might be a more productive way to handle this situation.

Leader: Does everyone agree with Stan that he deserved the F?

Group: Yes.

Leader: Would that have been enough to teach him the consequences of his choices, or did he need the punishment also?

Group: Hmmmmm.

Leader: What do you think, Stan? How did you feel about getting the F for cheating?

Stan: I felt very guilty and very embarrassed.

Leader: What did you decide from that?

Stan: That I wouldn't do it again.

Leader: What did you decide after receiving the whipping ? (punishment)

Stan: That I was a disappointment to my parents. I still worry about disappointing them.

Leader: So how did the punishment help you?

Stan: Well, I had already decided I wouldn't cheat again. The guilt and embarrassment of getting caught in front of others was enough to teach me that lesson. Actually, the worry about disappointing my parents is a real burden.

Leader: If you had a magic wand and could change the script of that event, how would you change it? How would you change what anyone said or did?

Stan: Well, I wouldn't cheat.

Leader: And after that?

Stan: I don't know.

Leader: Who has any ideas you could give Stan? It is usually easier to see possibilities when you aren't emotionally involved. What could Stan's teacher or parents have done or said that would have demonstrated kind and firm discipline?

Group Member: I'm a teacher, and I'm learning a lot from this. The teacher could have taken Stan aside and asked him why he was cheating.

Leader: Stan, what would you have answered to that?

Stan: That I wanted to pass the test.

Group Member: Then I could appreciate his desire to pass and ask him how he felt about cheating as a way to accomplish that.

Stan: I would promise never to do it again.

Group Member: I would then tell him he would have to receive an F for this test but that I was glad he had learned to avoid cheating. I would then ask him to prepare a plan for me about what he would do to pass the next test.

Stan: I would still feel guilty and embarrassed about cheating, but I would also appreciate the kindness along with the firmness. Now I see what that means.

Leader: Now do you have any ideas how you could use your magic wand to change what your parents did?

Stan: It would have been nice if they had acknowledged how guilty and embarrassed I felt. They could have empathized about what a tough lesson that was for me to learn. Then they could express their faith in me to learn from my experience and to do the right thing in the future. They could reassure me that they would love me no matter what, but that they hoped I wouldn't disappoint myself in the future. Wow, what a concept--to worry more about disappointing myself than my parents. I find that very encouraging.

Several points are made by this discussion about non-punitive parenting:

1. Non-punitive parenting does not mean letting children "get away" with their behavior.
2. Non-punitive parenting does mean helping children explore the consequences of their choices in a supportive and encouraging environment so that lasting growth and learning can take place.
3. Most people turned out "fine" even if they were punished--and they might have learned even more had they received both kindness and firmness to learn from mistakes.

Turning out "fine" isn't the issue. Are you satisfied with "fine," or do you want your children to have the kind of nurturing that helps them bloom into the best people they can possibly be? You nurture the best in your children when your methods meet the five criteria for effective discipline. Effective discipline:

1. Helps children feel a sense of connection (belonging and significance).
2. Is mutually respectful and encouraging. (Kind and firm at the same time.)
3. Is effective long-term. (Considers what the child is thinking, feeling, learning and deciding about himself and his world – and what to do in the future to survive or to thrive.)
4. Teaches important social and life skills. (Respect, concern for otherwise, problem solving and cooperation as well as skills to contribute to the home, school or larger community.)
5. Invites children to discover how capable they are. (Encourages the constructive use of personal power and autonomy.)