Punishment and reinforcement are two concepts in the field of psychology that can be applied in the educational setting. Reinforcement is any event that increases the frequency of a behavior. In contrast, punishment is any event that aims to decrease the frequency of a behavior (Ciccarelli & White, 2015). We might often think of punishment as something sinister or fearsome. But, actually, merely reprimanding your sibling to not eat your food stored in the fridge is already punishment, in technical terms. In this case, you reprimand them so they stop eating what is yours. Substituting this onto our definition, you are decreasing the frequency of an undesired behavior. Similarly, corporal punishment is also a form of punishment. In fact, it is an example of punishment by application, where something unpleasant is unadded to try to eliminate an unpleasant behavior (Ciccarelli & White, 2015).

Corporal punishment inflicted on children is often justified as discipline. Data from PLAN Philippines (2009, in Rappler, 2012) indicate that at least 50% of children grades 1-3, 70% of those in grades 4-6, and 60% in high school have experienced violence at school. However, is it really doing children and schools any good? Actually, it is well-established in psychology that corporal punishment is the most discouraged form of discipline and punishment. Let’s begin unwrapping how by starting on an example: pinching a child after making excessive noise in the classroom or after not submitting their homework.

Firstly, harsh punishments do not necessarily correct behavior, but simply eliminate it (Ciccarelli & White, 2015). In this example, perhaps the child will stop making noises, but will not necessarily internalize why being quiet is important. Second, the child may only be doing the correct behavior (i.e. being quiet) only at the presence of the punisher. At the absence of the punisher, the unwanted behavior (i.e. being loud) may resurface (Ciccarelli & White, 2015). In other words, the behavior that we want to teach children may not be learned at all, if we correct them through corporal punishment.

Studies have found that corporal punishment, unfortunately, increases the chance of children committing aggressive and delinquent behaviors in the future (Morris & Gibson, 2011). This can be explained by the psychological concept of modelling, where learning can occur by observing others. If children interpret corporal punishment as a means for adults to get what they want, children could emulate this behavior and channel their aggression towards others. These include peers, parents, and teachers. Ultimately, corporal punishment damages both the child and possibly good social relationships.
“There is no need for corporal punishment based on the research. We are not giving up an effective technique. We are saying this is a horrible thing that does not work,” psychologist Alan Kazdin, PhD, a former president of the American Psychological Association, stated. Does this mean we cannot use punishment at all? No, it does not. However, corporal punishment, verbal aggression, and other unhealthy forms of punishment should be prohibited.

There are healthier and more ethical ways of teaching correct behaviors to children. One of the key measures is to explain why the behavior is wrong, then teach them the correct behavior. Generally, it is also better to not publicly shame children and adults alike whenever they commit an undesired behavior. Alternatively, reinforcement in the form of praise or material rewards may also be used. However, such use must be balanced as it alters the motivation of children and adults to perform the correct behavior for the sake of getting the award and not for the essence of the task (Ciccarelli & White, 2015).

Overall, the use of corporal punishment and verbal aggression in schools as forms of discipline is a practice that must be abolished. Such aggressive acts may also be experienced by children at home. Hence, as a second home to children, schools must foster a space where children and adults alike will feel safe. So, perhaps, it isn’t that children and teenagers have become more entitled, but rather only more assertive and aware of their right to safety and humane treatment.

References