

Common Parental Concerns

Questions have often been raised and concerns expressed about the rationale behind some of Bhavya's practices. How, for instance, can children learn discipline when there is so much freedom and no punishment? How would children ever be motivated to learn when there is neither competition nor praise?

We, therefore, briefly address the issues of discipline, freedom, competition, praise and punishment here.

1. Natural Internal Order and Discipline

Our experience has clearly shown us that there is a natural internal order in all of creation. The order that exists in nature seems to indicate that nature loves order and thrives on it. Children, being part of Nature, also seek an order - which must, however, come from within. It cannot be thrust on them from the outside. Freedom is an essential condition which permits this journey towards establishing a perfect internal order at each stage of human development. In the absence of freedom this journey simply cannot be made. During the natural growth process children are moving, constantly, from states of disequilibrium to states of equilibrium - a movement which constitutes growth in all human beings. When children are allowed the freedom to experience this movement from within - a movement which must necessarily occur at various stages in the growth process - they are able to reach the state of balance and order comfortably. Because this happens from the inside, and is not rushed from the outside, they experience a natural transition from stage to stage. There is peace. **Self-discipline** is this natural order which occurs within us. It

is prompted at each point by our natural needs, and hence, it is there to stay.

The effects of externally imposed discipline, on the other hand, are clearly seen in our society, today. In spite of the strict, "disciplined" upbringing most of us have been through in this culture, self-discipline is sorely lacking in our adult community. The chaos in Parliament, university administration, and so on, indicate that wherever external checks are minimal, accountability, efficiency and even basic decency of behaviour are at their lowest levels. Then what has our strict cultural upbringing really achieved? Certainly not any *self-discipline*. And certainly not a sharing and peacefully coexisting community of people.

Externally enforced discipline, by its very name, suggests violence. The order created through external enforcement stays there only as long as the enforcing factor stays, whereas the humiliation and anger experienced repeatedly by the child who is being thus disciplined, stay for life. It destroys the natural flow of growth in the human person, unless timely intervention occurs and releases him.

2. *Freedom and Dignity*

At Bhavya, we stress freedom, as we do, because we believe that without freedom there is no dignity.

In any learning environment, when the child is allowed to make his own decisions, it helps him to test the strengths and limits of time, ability and relationships. His performance on any front becomes his own prerogative and not what is desired of him by the others around him. This gives him the opportunity to give his best to whatever he decides to do. We have found that when there is freedom, children learn responsibility most effectively. They are trusted and, hence, are able to take charge of their lives. This helps them to regain lost autonomy and dignity.

A question that is often asked of us is, what happens to children who are left to make their own decisions for a large part of the day? How do they spend their time?

At the younger ages, most children are outdoors for long periods of time. As they grow older and become more settled from within, their field of focus changes. Many of the benefits of the Bhavya program depend on having adequate space for the children to run, climb and explore nature and their own bodily needs and limits.

For instance, a child who comes to us physically timid and closed, usually prefers to watch others climb trees for days on end before he decides to try it himself. For a

long time after that, his focus of interest in a day and his major source of excitement (in life) might, largely, be climbing trees. The satisfaction he feels and the strength which grows within him during this time is a wonder to be experienced. At the end of this journey, you see a child whose body is relaxed, where it was tight earlier; a child who runs with abandon, and climbs trees without fear. Simultaneously, a growth in the general level of self-confidence and courage to explore new challenges, fearlessly, is also observed.

3. Competition or Co-operation?

At Bhavya we have chosen the way of co-operation.

Contrary to the commonly accepted belief that competition is necessary to “bring out the best,” in people, we have found it to be quite limiting and, even destructive, in its effects. We have found that competition has a demoralizing effect on all but a few of the competitors. Often, when an individual is convinced that he cannot be in the leading position, he decides to give up trying altogether rather than try, and risk “failure”.

It is time to shatter the myth that competition is *necessary* to bring out the best in an individual. Our work with children has shown that the human being, by nature, strives for competence in everything he does. This natural drive for competence seeks fulfillment *all the time* and it spurs on learning at every stage. The learner sets

and pursues his own goals driven by his natural interests. When the results are not satisfactory to him, he identifies his problem area and begins to work to correct it. He feels satisfied and confident in his power to right his own errors. He does not feel reduced or destroyed by his mistakes. He merely learns from them. No one “fails” in the conventional sense, in such a system of growing.

The children in this environment learn to work together and to help one another along.

4. Praise

Praise is an external motivator and the problem with external motivation, whether it be negative (threats, punishments, scolding, or insults/abuse), or positive (gold stars, grades, or degree certificates), is that it displaces or submerges internal motivation.¹ It cripples the individual by making him approval-dependent. It ignores the sense of fulfillment and joy experienced when the individual accomplishes a task successfully.

We have found that a successfully accomplished task is a reward in itself. It motivates the individual to go further and attempt still more challenging tasks. Just the process of working through a difficult task, watching the problem unfold before him, finding solutions as he goes along, and

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Alfie Kohn says in *Educational Leadership*, 1965:

“One of the most thoroughly researched findings in social psychology is that the more you reward someone for doing something the less interest that person will tend to have in whatever he or she was rewarded to do.”

bringing the situation to a satisfactory conclusion brings with it a joy, indescribable. After all, babies learn to walk, talk, etc., **not** because they want to earn our praise or please us - but because it is part of their instinct and nature to want to explore and gain the competence, which gives them increased control over their own lives and environment

At Bhavya, we recognize this very special, intrinsic motivator as absolutely essential to healthy human development.

5. Punishment

Punishment may or may not cause physical pain, but the humiliation, the loneliness, the hate and rage felt by the punished child are real enough, intense, and affect his emotional development, adversely. Punishments and threats are insulting to the child's intelligence. They leave indelible scars over a period of time. Studies show that most students who rebel violently against authority and indulge in criminal activities are those who have grown up in extremely strict and punitive environments

We believe that punishment destroys the child's capacity to overcome obstacles and explore the unknown, which are essential qualities for learning.²

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Joseph Chilton Pearce in *Evolution's End* discusses how punishment and the accompanying rage:

"leave the child with no self-confidence, no faith in himself and he will fumble or retreat at every little difficulty or challenge."

It is commonly believed that punishment is necessary for school discipline. We are convinced that punishment, no matter how subtle, *cannot* resolve the problem of discipline in schools. There are some simple, yet significant, reasons for the breakdown of discipline in schools.

They are:

- boring and meaningless curricula
- failure
- endless rules, many of which are quite unnecessary
- imposition of a uniform style and pace of learning which disregards differences among individuals
- adult abuse of authority
- competitive approach rather than a cooperative approach
- children being forced to behave in a manner very contrary to their *natural* inclinations (For instance, neurologically, physiologically and emotionally, very young children are not capable of sitting for hours at a time. When forced to do this against their nature, the final result is an explosion.)

Punishment cannot, therefore, be the answer to the problem of discipline. We believe that the answer lies in addressing the above-listed causes. We work, consistently, to ensure that these causes do not exist in our environment. Thus, the learner, in Bhavya, has no cause to rebel.