

Child-Centred Disciplinary Approaches



What do you need to know about Child-Centred Disciplinary Approaches?

- There has been a significant amount of research regarding parenting styles and approaches which contribute to optimal developmental outcomes for children. This work consistently identifies that non-punitive disciplinary practices based on reasoning are associated with positive outcomes.
- Disciplinary approaches which inflict physical or psychological harm are not effective, are harmful, and are not consistent with the requirements of either the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child or the Human Rights Act. A clear distinction is made between discipline which is aimed at meeting the needs of a child and helping them meet adult expectations, as opposed to punishment which is usually initiated to alleviate adult needs and frustrations and is often associated with humiliation of the child.

What are the issues around challenging parents and carers who do not use child-centred disciplinary approaches?

- There are currently no national or local guidelines regarding appropriate disciplinary practices and it is therefore left to professionals to take a view on a case by case basis on what is reasonable.
- Evidence from reviews shows us that different phrases are used by professionals such as 'physical chastisement' and 'unreasonable punishment' which confuses understanding of what the child is experiencing. There is a reluctance to call this physical abuse.
- Furthermore, there is confusion around what terms such as 'chastisement' and 'punishment' mean as there is not a legal framework to support shared understanding
- This is a challenging topic - the reality is that it is difficult for practitioners to ask parents and carers about their disciplinary approach and whether or not it is abusive

As practitioners, how can we respond effectively to parents and carers who do not use child-centred disciplinary approaches?

- Practitioners must distinguish between what is discipline and what is child abuse. Discipline must be age-appropriate, reasonable and support the child to understand what is expected of them.
- Language matters - if a child is experiencing physical abuse in the form of physical punishment then identify it as physical abuse rather than using terms like 'harsh punishments' which prevent professionals from understanding and responding to the child's needs
- Be mindful that a parent or carer's own childhood experience of being punished/ disciplined/ abused may impact on how they discipline a child, even if they say they will use child-centred discipline based on reasoning. Under pressure and faced with certain triggers they may implement methods they experienced.
- Consider the disciplinary approach used by the parent alongside the parent or carer's attitude towards the child
- Significant concerns should be raised if a parent or carer characterises the child as inherently naughty or if they blame the child's behaviour for their response - is the parent or carer justifying maltreatment of the child?
- Take the child very seriously when they say they have been harmed by their parent or carer, even if they later retract what they said. Consider that the parent or carer may have influenced or intimidated them to do this and that abuse is potentially taking place
- If parents or carers commit to changing their disciplinary approach then this must be evidenced and monitored
- Focus on the child, not on the parent
- Consider if your own experiences of disciplinary approaches impact on your judgement of whether or not disciplinary approaches are reasonable and in the best interests of a child

Further reading...

- Article in The Independent on research into the impact that physical punishment has on children - <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/smacking-children-makes-them-more-likely-to-have-mental-health-problems-when-they-grow-up-research-a7002086.html>

Suggested activities

- In a group or within a team meeting, discuss the use of different terminology and the impact this has on our ability to determine what is a disciplinary approach, and what is abuse.
- In a group or within a team meeting, consider your experiences of discipline and punishment and discuss how this may affect or bias your views, understanding and action in relation to discipline and abuse