

Fear Hinders Learning

Kishan Lal Salvi

A good school is where every child is provided with respect, safety, compassion, joy, and an environment that inspires learning. The common notion that ‘only punishment and fear make children study well’ hinders learning. This essay examines the detrimental effects of corporal punishment and fear on children and suggests experiential approaches to enhance learning that foster a positive school environment.

Society’s perspectives on fear

I am a primary school teacher in a small village in Rajsamand, Rajasthan. I have been teaching here for around 16 years. The villagers are not very well off owing to their dependency on agriculture. When I started teaching here, I observed that most parents said they had no problem if their children were given a beating (by the teacher) from time to time to make them study.

It is a common societal notion that if children are to be taught, they have to be beaten. It is a shared notion among teachers and parents that any problem related to children has just one solution – physical punishment. They also believe that the fear of physical punishment will prevent children from doing anything wrong and that this would make them better human beings. Another aspect of this idea is that a teacher loves children so much that they beat them, so they do not get spoiled. But such beliefs are not based on reality.



Figure 1. Being happy and interested are important aspects of learning.



Figure 2. The fear of making mistakes obstructs children's learning.

The impact of fear on children

When I first joined the school, I noticed that children were very reserved. They would hesitate to approach the teacher to understand a new concept or to learn something new. While teaching them, I realised that they were not following what was being taught. There would be no questions from them while I taught the lessons. There would be no answers either when I asked them questions. Most of the time, they would be sitting lost in my class. There was no enthusiasm among the children for new lessons. It felt like they were physically present in class, but not mentally. When I tried to conduct activities in class, their participation was poor. The participation when I tried conducting activities in class was poor. They had to be forced to participate in the activities.

Children, physical punishments, and learning

If we really want children to learn, then we must refrain from corporal punishment. While physical punishment can make them do tasks, it cannot help us teach them anything. If we beat them or instil the fear of physical punishment in them, they will always remain distracted by the fear of getting a beating. They will start living in fear of making mistakes and will not be able to learn because of this fear. They always keep a watch out for the moment the teacher may raise their hand to beat them.

“ Every child in the classroom has the freedom to ask questions. Children can ask questions related to their lessons or any other matter. ”

We have to understand that children come to school with an identity and dignity. They hail from families where beating is common. And if they are beaten in school, too, it hurts their dignity. This is why children shy away from school.

Mukesh's story

There was a child named Mukesh in class V. He would pick fights with the other children at the drop of a hat. He would not pay attention to his studies either. He used to rebel, which made it very difficult to work with him. Then we spoke to him. We learned that his family controlled him a lot. He used the foul language spoken at home in school as well. We started having discussions with him on various topics. We explained things to him in his language. We included and encouraged him in activities. We chose activities in which he would be able to perform well. For instance, we taught him *verbs* and then asked him to pick words that were verbs from a unit in his textbook. His self-confidence soared once he finished the task.

He was also encouraged to speak and put forth his thoughts during the morning assembly. This child had not participated in any activity during the previous year's summer camp. But slowly and gradually, his participation in activities began to increase. Now he is doing well in studies. The biggest achievement is that Mukesh now spends more time in class because he has been accepted into the class. We show him his portfolio from time to time, so that he can see his progress and feel good about his achievements.

When Mukesh was in class IV, he had trouble reading Hindi and English books. However, now he is doing well in both subjects.

How we made classroom processes fear-free

Remove the cane from the classroom

If we wish to teach children in a humane manner that is true to the spirit of education, we have to remove the cane and other such things from the classroom. Our aim is that children come running to school joyfully and without any fear. They should enjoy school; only then will it feel like school and not like a punishment. Hence, we made our best efforts to eliminate the environment of fear and punishment as much as possible.

Use children's language and encouragement

If we eliminate fear from children, they will be free to share their feelings with us. I would talk to them calmly, and more importantly, I would listen to them carefully and be friendly towards them. To help them get rid of their hesitation, I started talking to them in their language, mingling with them and celebrating their little victories. Now the children have slowly begun getting close to me.



Figure 3. Children learn through meaningful conversations.

Provide opportunities for free expression

While teaching, I realised that the absence of fear promotes self-confidence and increases self-esteem in a child. In order to help children overcome their hesitation, we made a framework with several activities. We made it mandatory for them to participate in the morning assembly. Even the youngest of children were to come forward during the prayer assembly and express their views with full confidence without any fear or hesitation, whether in the form of a story, poem, or any other presentation. The result of this was that now most children speak freely in the morning assembly.

Sometimes children also share their personal stories in the morning assembly. We encourage this. We believe that when children share their personal stories, they are building an intimate relationship with the school.

Activity-based teaching

Most of the teaching-learning in the classroom is activity-based. Owing to this, we are not required to control children much. Plenty of activities have been created to ensure maximum participation of children. For instance, a 'word game' has been made wherein children pick a word card on their own. If the child can read that word properly, he takes a step forward.

These word cards are circulated among all the children. The more correct words the children are able to read, the more steps they take forward. Children find these activities interesting, and they also facilitate a stronger engagement between children and the learning process. It ensures that there is minimal chaos in the classroom.

Similarly, activities before the class begins also make the children organised. For instance, which group would be cleaning, which one would be responsible for filling the water, or who would be watering the plants, and so on.

Restriction-free environment

There are no restrictions on children. If they want to go out to drink water or use the toilet, they just get up and go and then come back. Similarly, if a child wants to say something, they can go to the office and share without any restrictions. There is no restriction when it comes to the usage of items kept in the office, either. The rule is that after use, the item should be returned to its place.

Problem-solving approach

Often, children are beaten because they fight with each other. In such a scenario, the child who has beaten another is punished. This creates anger among

them. They think that they got punished because of the other child. If punishment is removed from the equation when children fight, they get over fighting episodes quickly and start working and playing together once again. This is why when we see two children fighting, we first call them together to talk to them, then we talk to them separately. In that moment, a child's biggest need is to be heard, not to get the other child punished.

Freedom to question

Every child in the classroom has the freedom to ask questions. Children can ask questions related to their lessons or any other matter. Our effort is to answer their questions satisfactorily so that their curiosity is satiated. Children's questions always stem from curiosity.

Another aspect of this is that the moment we provide children the freedom to ask questions, we also become accountable. Then, in case a child asks us a personal question, we cannot ignore it. For instance, if I arrive late to school, and children ask me, 'Sir, why did you get late?', it is my responsibility to answer the children with complete honesty. In this process of asking questions, both students and teachers are equally accountable to each other.

“ This is why when we see two children fighting, we first call them together to talk to them, then we talk to them separately. In that moment, a child's biggest need is to be heard, not to get the other child punished. ”

My reflections

- Fear and physical punishment do not make children learn; in fact, it slows down their learning further. In some cases, learning and understanding get permanently blocked owing to fear.
- Children slowly and gradually start to lose their self-confidence because of fear, and they hesitate to start or learn anything new.
- There are many ways other than fear to discipline children and to engage them in creative activities.
- If there is a set time and routine for every activity, it makes it easier for children to organise their day and time.
- Childhood fear lingers throughout life. Fear at the subconscious level hinders the development of children's overall personality.

Translated from Hindi. Translator: Manjari Vetter: Simran Luthra



Kishan Lal Salvi has been a teacher for 17 years with Government Primary School, Gadriyawaas, Baamniyaan Kala, Rajsamand District, Rajasthan. He is especially passionate about teaching English and Environmental Science to students. He likes to read literary works, especially stories.

Contact: kishankunj2@gmail.com