



Social Control Theory

There is a widely held, informal theory of child development that unwanted behaviours will somehow be “switched off” if they attract sufficiently disadvantageous responses, a kind of informal, social learning approach. However, there is little empirical support for this idea. One of the ideas put forward by the Chicago School in the 1920s & 30s is that violating social norms is potentially so pleasurable that we should perhaps be more interested in finding out what constrains people from doing so more often than they do. Social Control Theory (Hirschi) suggests that individuals are constrained from anti-social behaviours by four types of control:

1. Inner controls that result from internalizing pro-social beliefs and values. I would add to this the idea that pro-social values take root more readily when the individual has an internal representation of themselves and others as worthwhile.
2. Outer controls, which are typically social and economic sanctions. I would add to this the point that many traumatized children will not experience typical social sanctions as unwanted. One example would be that negative attention from a telling-off might be preferred to no attention at all
3. Indirect controls that arise through identification with, for example, a victim's discomfort or a parent's disapproval. I would add to this the idea that such identification requires a degree of empathy that may be inhibited in traumatized children
4. Satisfaction of needs. Anti-social behaviour may arise as a way of satisfying needs, from material needs for possessions though to internal needs such as power, revenge and control. If the individual can satisfy these needs in legitimate ways then the need for anti-social behaviour is reduced. The imposition of outer controls (sanctions) may well increase a need for revenge, power and control, and therefore increase rather than decrease unwanted behaviour.

Outer controls and indirect controls can only be effective at “switching off” unwanted behaviour if an individual has a degree of self-control; they clearly cannot be effective if there are significant impulse control difficulties. This also applies to earning rewards and privileges, or gaining levels. We also know (e.g. from the Cambridge Study of Delinquency Development, Farrington, 1990) that delinquent behaviour is more likely when an individual's social bonds are weakened or diminished. The combination of low levels of affection and the failure to adequately protect a child is both traumatising and associated with weak bonding, and so children who are traumatized in their families are at high risk of exhibiting a wide range of unwanted behaviours. The problem with social learning approaches for this group of children is that both the earning of rewards and the losing of privileges weaken, rather than strengthen, bonds.

Another reason sometimes put forward for reward-punishment approaches to unwanted behaviour is that all children need opportunities to learn about the

consequences of their actions. This is undoubtedly true, but we have to be careful what the child is learning. From the exertion of adult power they may learn that they are small and powerless and what they really want is revenge. But there cannot be a problem with exerting some level of discipline; the question is more of how it is done, and why. Getting a child to help clear up a mess they've made, or making them wait a little for something they want to do, can help them make amends, teach a sense of consequence, promote experience of delayed gratification, and distinguish wanted behaviours from unwanted. However, it is essential that the use of consequences is accompanied by good quality explanation and genuine, authentic warmth. Explanation promotes the child's ability to generalize to other situations, and authentic warmth allows the child to experience discipline as a supportive intervention for their benefit, rather than the exercise of adult power.