

# Translating Research for Practice



## A Systematic Review of the Ethics of Punishment-Based Procedures for Young Children with Disabilities

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# Overview

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## What is the purpose?

To determine the degree to which researchers across studies followed ethical standards when using punishment with young children.

## What research was included in this review?

We identified 22 studies published between 1976 and 2017, the majority of which were peer-reviewed journal articles. One master's thesis and two doctoral dissertations were also identified.



# The Importance of This Review

- Procedures using punishment can limit an individual's rights or independence within their natural environment.
- Preschool children and individuals with disabilities are especially vulnerable populations.
- Punishment is used more with these populations compared to older children or individuals without a disability.

*"It is essential all practitioners, especially those working with highly vulnerable populations, have adequate access to information regarding the ethical application of punishment-based procedures and demonstrate compliance with ethical standards."*

# What is Punishment?

Punishment is a consequence of a behavior that results in the behavior being less likely to occur in the future. For example, a child's back-talking might decrease after they are sent to their room for doing so.

The Division for Early Childhood recommends: "Practitioners use functional assessment and related prevention, promotion, and intervention strategies across environments to prevent and address challenging behavior."

Punishment has been used to decrease challenging behavior in severe and specific circumstances, like when a person's behavior is likely to result in significant injury or harm to self or others. A more positive approach, like reinforcing a child's appropriate response, is recommended.



# Participant Characteristics

Punishment-based treatments were used with children with a mean age of 50 months. The majority of participants were diagnosed with autism or intellectual disability.



The majority of participants displayed either stereotypy, self-injurious behavior, or aggression as their primary challenging behavior.

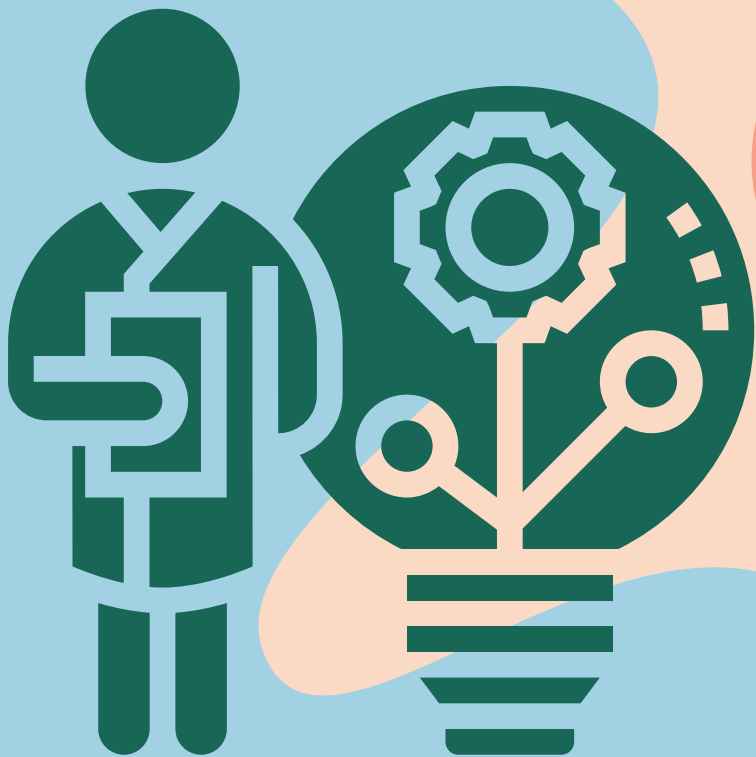


# Key Findings on Ethics

Researchers met fewer than half of ethical standards on average, with no consistent improvements across publication year.



Although professional organizations (i.e., CEC, BACB) have ethics codes in place to help practitioners make ethical decisions about punishment, results indicate they are not being used sufficiently.



# Take Aways

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- Punishment-based procedures should only be used after less restrictive methods have not worked.
- Practitioners must always do a functional analysis before using punishment to understand why a behavior is occurring and to make sure punishment is an appropriate match for that behavior.
- Punishment should not be used alone, but with the teaching of an appropriate replacement behavior for the challenging behavior that is being punished.

Additional education, training, and coaching are needed for practitioners so they can better follow ethical guidelines and use best practices for punishment-based procedures.

# References

Pokorski, E. A., & Barton, E. E. (2021). A systematic review of the ethics of punishment-based procedures for young children with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, 42(4), 262-275.

[DEC Recommended Practices](#)