

# Double Jeopardy

## The Difference Between Punishment and Consequences

By Michael Rebel, LMHC

**W**hat is double jeopardy? It generally means the state of being subject to two or more threats at once. Actually it is against the law in our judicial system, where it means being punished twice for the same crime.

I have a story about double jeopardy that I have been sharing since the night I experienced it. At that time, I swore I would never again use double jeopardy on my children. I knew I would tell every parent who would listen, this story.

### Father and Son

One night in March, when I was 25 years old, a friend invited me to an outdoor cookout. He was a gourmet outdoor cook. As usual when we arrived, he had a huge oak fire going with a large bed of glowing coals. He had all his inventions for cooking over coals spread out around the fire. Jim had ovens and grills and kettles suspended from tripods. The whole operation ran like a well-oiled machine. Jim was preparing a seven-course feast, and we eagerly looked forward to the fare. We were laughing and playing, having a great time.

Finally, the sun went down and the meal was ready, so we retired to the Florida room and the carport to eat. We enjoyed course after course of great food, and everyone enjoyed the usual friendly conversation. After about 45 minutes someone noticed that Billy, Jim's 10-year-old son, was missing, which was very unusual. Billy loved company, and he loved the attention he received for his antics at these parties. No one was very concerned. We knew he must be playing somewhere in the neighborhood or he was playing a joke on us.

We searched for about 15 minutes and when we didn't find him, we grew concerned. Someone suggested phoning around and contacting the sheriff. We decided to look one more time, agreeing to look everywhere he could possibly be, with a much more critical eye.

After a few minutes, one of the men spotted Billy and

**When a situation gets too painful or distressing, children tend to block it out. By doing so, they block out the potential learning.**

called out to the rest of us. Jim began to walk over to the spot in the front yard where the other man knelt looking behind a holly bush up against the house. Apparently, Billy was lying against the foundation of the wall, out of sight, behind the bush.

"There's something wrong with him!" the man suddenly cried out. Jim began running. When he got there he rolled Billy over and looked at him. Billy had fallen in the coals and had burns so severe that the front of his shirt was burned into his flesh and one rib bone could be seen. Jim exclaimed, "Oh my God, Billy. Why didn't you come to me?" Billy replied weakly,

"Because you hurt me when I make mistakes."

### Punishment and Consequences

In my work as a therapist for adults, and now with youth, I spend much time working to help repair the longstanding harm caused by doubled and redoubled consequences. Punishment, added to the initial painful consequences for mistakes made by children in their exploration, only adds to the pain. The rift between parents and children then becomes one of conflict and secrecy, instead of trust and support. Kids begin to see their parents as enemies, not allies.

This story illustrates just that phenomenon. Billy was a good kid. His father was a strict disciplinarian, not a bad thing. But uninformed and frequent use of punishment for mistakes had led to this mistrust, a rift between a father and his son. In this instance, Billy had already learned the lesson, "Don't run near the fire!" The fire taught him that, and he did not need to be punished further or admonished for the mistake. He needed to be held and nurtured and taken to the doctor because he could have died. However, because Billy's father had punished him for smaller mistakes, Billy expected severe punishment. He needed to hide because he could not face the risk of more pain.