In sum, cognitive dissonance theory predicts that participants in the $1 condition will subsequently come to have more positive attitudes toward the task than will participants in the other two conditions. Figure 6.8 shows that these predictions were confirmed. When asked to indicate how much they enjoyed the experimental task, participants who received $1 indicated that they liked the task more than did participants who received $20 or those who never told another participant the experiment was interesting. According to Festinger and Carlsmith, this occurred because telling another participant a boring task is interesting created cognitive dissonance and, having little justification for what they had done, participants in the $1 condition were forced to change their attitude toward the task in order to reduce their psychological discomfort (see also Zimbardo, Weisenberg, Firestone, & Levy, 1965).

E. Aronson and Carlsmith (1963). Let’s look at another classic dissonance study. Suppose you wanted someone to develop a negative attitude toward some activity or issue. How would you go about instilling it? Learning theorists would maintain that the most effective way to create a negative attitude is to punish it severely. The more severe the punishment, the more negative the person’s attitude will be. Cognitive dissonance theory makes a different prediction. Just as small rewards can sometimes produce more liking for a task than do large rewards, mild punishment can create greater disliking for an activity than severe punishment.

This effect was demonstrated in an experiment by E. Aronson and Carlsmith (1963). The participants were preschool children (approximately four years of age). They were brought into a playroom filled with several toys. After they indicated how much they liked each toy, they were instructed not to play with their second most favorite toy.