

Family Living Connection

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Discipline Versus Punishment

Spanking in the News

Spanking is in the news headlines as Californians await the introduction of a bill by Assemblywoman Sally Lieber that would make it a misdemeanor for anyone to use corporal punishment, including spanking, on children three years old and under. Penalties could include up to a year in jail, a \$1,000 fine or a requirement to attend parenting classes.

Spanking as a form of punishment stirs up very different opinions among parents. The majority of American parents report that they have used spanking as a strategy at least one time. Given the stress and frustration that parents often feel and the mixed messages we get about discipline, that news isn't surprising. If you have lost it once or twice and spanked your child, it's doubtful that you've done any damage your child's development or hurt your relationship with that child.

Parents know themselves and their children best, but we are most effective when we have good information so that we can make the best decisions for our family. Discipline is critical to our child's health and well-being and the more information parents have the more tools they have to choose from.

Advocates of spanking argue that it is an effective form of discipline and that parents shouldn't be told how to parent by others. Opponents say that it teaches children violence and is not the most effective form of discipline. The American Academy of Pediatrics position is clear that some forms of corporal punishment are unacceptable and

may be dangerous including: striking a child with an object, striking a child on parts of the body other than the buttocks or extremities, striking a child with such intensity that marks lasting more than a few minutes occur, pulling a child's hair, jerking a child by the arm, shaking a child, and physical punishment delivered in anger with intent to cause pain. The Academy's position on spanking is that it is a less effective strategy than time-out or removal of privileges for reducing undesired behavior in children and that it is only effective when used in selective infrequent situations.¹



There are varying degrees of physical punishment-- from spanking for extremely naughty behavior, to hitting day after day, many times a day. Often parents resort to physical punishment when they feel like nothing else seems to be working. We worry that our children may become undisciplined if we don't use corrective behaviors. Why does spanking cause so much concern and what are effective alternatives?

Pediatricians warn that spanking children under 18 months of age increases the chance of physical injury and the child is unlikely to

¹ American Academy of Pediatrics: Guidance for Effective Discipline. Retrieved on January 25, 2010 <http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/pediatrics;101/4/72307>,

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understand the connection between the behavior and the punishment. Redirecting young children, removing them from the situation, and calming yourself to be able to think through the reasons for the bad behavior and the most appropriate courses of action are all positive tools when dealing with young children.

Children may react to spanking with shock and quickly stop their undesired behavior, but research indicates that repeated spanking is linked with agitated, antisocial, and aggressive behavior in children.²

Spanking may get out of hand and lead to other kinds of physical punishment and even abuse. Sixty to seventy percent of child abuse cases began as spanking.³ Do you lose control of yourself easy? Are you spanking more with fewer results? Are you spanking harder? Do you spank out of anger? If you answered no to these questions, then there is probably little reason to be concerned about spanking escalating to an abusive act. If you answered yes to the questions, try developing some non-spanking alternatives. Educators at the Family Resource Center, UW-Extension, and other community organizations have all kinds of resources to help families find discipline techniques that work.

Young children imitate those people around them. They perceive that it's okay for them to do whatever parents do. The home is a training environment for teaching children how to handle conflicts. If they observe yelling, shaming, and physical punishment,

it is likely they will use those same techniques on others.

If spanking is the primary form of discipline, what happens when the child becomes an adolescent? Time-out and positive reinforcement of other behaviors are more difficult to implement and take longer to become effective when they haven't been practiced in the family. The more tools a parent has, the more effective they can be when it comes to discipline.

There is no one answer to parenting and we can all agree it is hard work. As a parent, I have to remind myself what discipline means. The root word means to teach or instruct. Parents are the primary teachers and nurturers of children. They are responsible for making sure children develop the know-how, self-control, self-direction, and values to be competent adults. It helps to remember that discipline is about guidance and nurturance (especially in those moments when you feel like you are going to lose it). Punishment can be one technique used in discipline, but its focus is on past behavior. It may have little or nothing to do with helping a child behave better in the future.⁴ For example, if I punish a child for spilling milk by spanking her, that doesn't teach her how to fix the problem she caused. As the parent, I take responsibility for the child's actions by cleaning up the spilled milk and she learns that big people can inflict pain.

Look for upcoming parenting classes offered at Family Resource Center. "To Spank or Not to Spank" will be offered on Friday March 16th, 10-11 at the Family Resource Center. Call 833-1735 to register.

² Eron, Leonard. *Pediatrics* Vol 98. No. 4 October 1996, pp. 821-823.

³ Swanson, Lauel. Positive Parenting, What the Research Says About Physical Punishment. University of Minnesota Extension Service. Dec. 1994.

⁴ Allen, Rose. Positive Parenting, What is Discipline? What is Punishment? University of Minnesota Extension Service. Dec. 1994.