

Parenting the Preschooler

 **Working for Wisconsin Families**

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What the Research Says About Physical Punishment

Why do parents spank their children? According to Murray Straus, a national family violence researcher, the obvious answer is to correct misbehavior. But another reason is that it's expected of them. In the United States legal and social norms give parents the right to use physical punishment to control and train their children. Parents are expected or obligated to use physical punishment "when necessary."

So How Much Spanking Do Parents Do?

In a 1994 USA Today/CNN Gallup Poll, 67 percent of a national sample of American adults agreed with the statement, "It is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good hard spanking." The share of Americans holding that opinion has dropped 20 percent since 1986, when 84 percent said spanking was acceptable discipline.

Corporal Punishment: What Is It?

For some parents spanking means hitting the child on the buttocks. For others it refers to all hitting of a child, such as slapping the hand or the child's face. Spanking, hitting, and slapping are forms of physical punishment or corporal punishment. Murray Straus, defines *corporal punishment* as the use of physical force with the intention of causing bodily pain, but not injury (which is the distinguishing factor for child abuse), for the purpose of correction or control.

Is There Anything Wrong With Spanking?

Research on spanking has identified a number of harmful side effects.

Aggression

1. Spanking teaches that hitting others is morally correct.
2. When parents hit children for misbehavior it's no wonder it increases the probability of children hitting each other.
3. They are learning by example.

Not surprisingly, spanked children grow up to spank their own children. A 1983 national survey found that parents who had been physically punished beyond age 13 were more likely to severely assault or abuse their own children. Furthermore, the more physical punishment experienced by either men or women during childhood, the more likely they were to be abusive of their spouses. In societies where physical punishment is rare or infrequent, the existence of wife abuse is also rare or infrequent.

Frequency of spanking contributes to a child's aggressive behavior. The more a child is spanked, the greater the probability he or she will hit other children outside the family.

Difficult-to-Control Children

Spanking chips away at the bond of affection between parent and child. Children are more likely to do what parents want if there is a strong bond of affection with the parents. Several research studies have found that 40 to 50 percent of people, when asked how they felt when they were spanked, said they hated the parent. Consider how this would affect the relationship of parents and their teens, who are often too big to control by physical force. The only real resource we have with teens is the bank of goodwill created through parenting over the years.

Research indicates that children of non-spanking parents tend to control their behavior on the basis of what is right or wrong. Spanked children control their behavior to avoid being hit. Spanked children tend to see their parents as enforcers who stand over them to make sure they do the "right" thing. They are less likely to take responsibility for their own behavior. In contrast, children with nurturing, non-spanking parents tend to adopt parental standards and to assume the responsibility for checking on their own behavior. They become their own "enforcers," monitoring and checking themselves, rather than expecting their parents to play such a role. What this all means is that if parents avoid spanking and diligently use alternatives to physical punishment, they are more likely to have children who are easier to manage and better behaved.

Depression, Alienation, Lack of Achievement

Research from the National Family Violence Survey found that the more corporal punishment a person experiences, the greater the probability of being depressed and the higher the likelihood of thinking of committing suicide. Another finding was the more corporal punishment experienced, the greater the alienation. Also, independent of one's social class of origin, those who experienced more corporal punishment as children, had lower earnings and occupational achievement as adults. This was interpreted to be a consequence of the higher rate of depression and alienation associated with corporal punishment.

Other Arguments Against Spanking

- ▶ Spanking as a discipline strategy can get out of hand and escalate into physical abuse. Sixty to seventy percent of child abuse cases began as spanking.
- ▶ Spanking hinders development of empathy, remorse, and compassion. The child focuses on the pain rather than the effect of his or her behavior on others. The natural human reaction to being hurt is a flood of anger and fear that psychologists call the "fight or flight" reaction. It makes it unlikely that your child will listen, think, or feel remorseful while in the midst of a painful experience.

- ▶ Corporal punishment used at the toddler age can reduce the degree to which children develop a conscience.
- ▶ Results for adolescents are greater juvenile delinquency-in reference to legal crimes, not violent crimes. Studies present a clear relationship between the use of physical punishment and delinquency. The following three factors contribute to the probability of a child committing delinquent acts: 1) parents making inconsistent demands on children, 2) parents using physical punishment, and 3) parents punishing intermittently.

Changing Trends

- ▶ The incidence of corporal punishment has been decreasing since the 1700s.
- ▶ Corporal punishment of toddlers has not decreased, but changes are seen in the severity (not using paddle and hairbrush) and decreased frequency of its use and the age at which it ends.
- ▶ Corporal punishment is illegal in Wisconsin schools.
- ▶ Media and parent advice books are changing. Few parenting experts advocate the use of corporal punishment.

Implications of No Corporal Punishment

For Parents

- ▶ Less hassle
- ▶ Better behaved children
- ▶ Less child abuse

For Children

- ▶ Less risk of child abuse
- ▶ Less delinquency

For the Next Generation

- ▶ Less street violence
- ▶ Less depression and suicide
- ▶ Less wife beating
- ▶ Higher economic achievement

A less violent, more healthy, wealthier society.

Source:

Laurel Swanson, *Positive Parenting*, Minnesota Extension Service, 1994