

Corporal Punishment: Ever or Never?

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Over one hundred years of social science research and many hundreds of studies on physical punishment conducted by professionals in the fields of psychology, medicine, education, social work, and sociology supports the following conclusions:

- There is little evidence that physical punishment improves children's behavior in the long term
- There is substantial evidence that physical punishment makes it more, not less, likely that children will be defiant and aggressive in the future
- There is clear evidence that physical punishment puts children at risk for increased mental health problems (increased anti-social behavior, depression, and anxiety)
- And there is consistent evidence that children who are physically punished are at greater risk of serious injury and physical abuse

The mounting research evidence that physical punishment of children is an ineffective parenting practice comes at a time of decreasing support for physical punishment within the U.S. and around the world. The majority (77 percent) of American adults are opposed to physical punishment by school personnel, and an increasing percentage (30 percent, up from 6 percent in the 1960s) of Americans are opposed to physical punishment by parents.

And there is growing momentum among other countries to enact legal bans on all forms of physical punishment. 85 countries now ban the use of physical punishment in schools, and 23 countries (18 of them European) ban all forms of physical punishment inflicted upon children even when at home.

Physical punishment is defined as *the use of physical force with the intention of causing the child to experience bodily pain or discomfort so as to correct or punish the child's behavior*. This definition includes light physical force, such as a slap on the child's hand, as well as heavier physical force, including hitting children with hard objects such as a wooden spoon or paddle.

Physical punishment does not refer only to hitting children as a form of discipline. Other forms of purposefully causing children to experience physical discomfort in order to punish them are included, such as washing a child's mouth with soap, making a child kneel on sharp or painful objects, placing hot sauce on a child's tongue, forcing a child to sit or stand in painful positions for long periods, or compelling a child to engage in excessive exercise or physical exertion.

Nearly two-thirds of young children in the U.S. continue to suffer some form of physical punishment. By the time children reach 5th grade, 80 percent have been physically punished. By adolescence, 50 percent report having been hit with a belt or similar object.

Physical punishment still occurs in some schools in some regions of the U.S., especially in the South. However, only 1 percent of U.S. schoolchildren report having been physically punished in school, a dramatic decrease over the past several decades. Nevertheless, while 28 states ban corporal punishment of public schoolchildren, only two states have banned physical punishment in both public and private schools.

Parents who use physical punishment most often were physically punished as children. Their cultural, religious (the use of force as a God-given right), or ethnic background supports the use of corporal

punishment. They are typically socially disadvantaged, in that they have low income, low education, or are enduring stresses such as economic hardship or marital conflict. They are more likely to be single parenting, and to be suffering from depression. And they are usually under 30 years of age.

Children most often physically punished are preschoolers, defined as the age range from 2 to 5 years.

No matter the country in which the effectiveness of physical punishment has been studied, the results are consistent: there are strong links between physical punishment and anti-social behavior, verbal and physical aggression, physical fighting and bullying, and behavior problems generally. The conclusion to be drawn from these studies is that, contrary to parents' goals when using it, the more parents use physical punishment, the more disobedient and aggressive their children will be.

The frequency or severity with which children experience physical punishment is also associated with increased mental health problems, such as stress, anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and delinquency and alcohol and drug use in adolescence. Strong evidence exists that these mental health problems often continue into adulthood, and affect workplace, social, and marital relationships.

Children carry into adulthood the lessons they have learned about the acceptability of aggression as a problem-solving measure, and as a method of controlling others' behavior. Youth who have experienced physical punishment are more likely to report having hit a dating partner than those who have not been physically punished. Research has also consistently found that the more individuals were physically punished in childhood, the more likely they are, as adults, to perpetrate violence on their own family members.

Worst of all, because physical punishment involves hitting or otherwise hurting children, there is an inherent risk that children can be injured by their parents. Research has found that children who are routinely spanked by their parents are at 7 times greater risk of being severely assaulted (such as punched or kicked) than children who are not physically punished, and more than twice as likely to suffer an injury requiring medical attention.

Why is physical punishment not effective, or even counterproductive, as a discipline technique? Physical punishment is likely to have few positive and many unintended negative effects:

- It does not teach children *why* their behavior was wrong or *what* they should do instead
- The pain and fear associated with physical punishment can interfere with children's perception and acceptance of the parents' disciplinary message
- It teaches children that they should behave in desired ways because if not they will be punished, not because there are important, positive reasons for behaving properly. Consequently, when the threat of punishment is not present, there is no reason to behave appropriately.
- It models for children that it is acceptable to use aggression to get their way, especially if they are bigger and more powerful than the other person. Hitting teaches that it's OK to be violent when you're mad.
- It can increase the likelihood that children will fear their parents. Such fear can erode the parent-child relationship and can cause children to avoid their parents, which may lead to significant problems in adolescence.
- It may teach children to link violence with loving relationships.

For tips on effective discipline, locate online the "Guidance for Effective Discipline", AAP, April 1998.