

# **Discipline of the Child**

## **Corporal Punishment: A Scientific Review of its Use in Discipline**

### **By The American College of Pediatricians**

Pediatricians are commonly confronted with questions about discipline from parents of young children. Effective advice will include a discussion of methods for encouraging proper behavior and methods for correcting misbehavior. Corporal punishment, more specifically disciplinary spanking, is one corrective method used by American parents for generations.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Most primary care physicians have approved of its use in certain situations,<sup>4</sup> but this majority support has come under pressure of late. Many psychologists today are hesitant to recommend spanking though most supported its use in the mid-seventies and acknowledged using spanking with their own children.<sup>5</sup> Social scientists, advocating a total ban, have cited associations between disciplinary spanking and suboptimal child outcomes. An international movement to criminalize, or at least limit, the use of disciplinary spanking has been led by lay organizations such as EPOCH-Worldwide.<sup>6</sup> With this decline in social acceptance, pediatricians are often hesitant to recommend spanking and at times are uncertain as to what role, if any, it can play in meaningful childrearing. This policy paper examines the issue by describing the discipline process, and reviewing the current research related to parental use of disciplinary spanking.

## **DISCIPLINE OF THE CHILD**

The fundamental goal of parenting is to teach and assist the child in acquiring character traits such as self-control, respectfulness, integrity, honesty, and competency. These traits do not come naturally to the infant, toddler or preschooler, but through the disciplinary process every child will acquire them to some degree. *Discipline* is defined as “training expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior, especially training that produces moral or mental improvement.”<sup>7</sup> In the context of parenting, the discipline process is comprised of three primary components: instruction, encouragement, and correction. These three parental efforts act upon the child’s temperament within a milieu that is influenced by environmental and parental factors. (See Figure 1) This complex process produces a child outcome through the combination of many elements — most of which are within the parents’ control, particularly at younger ages.

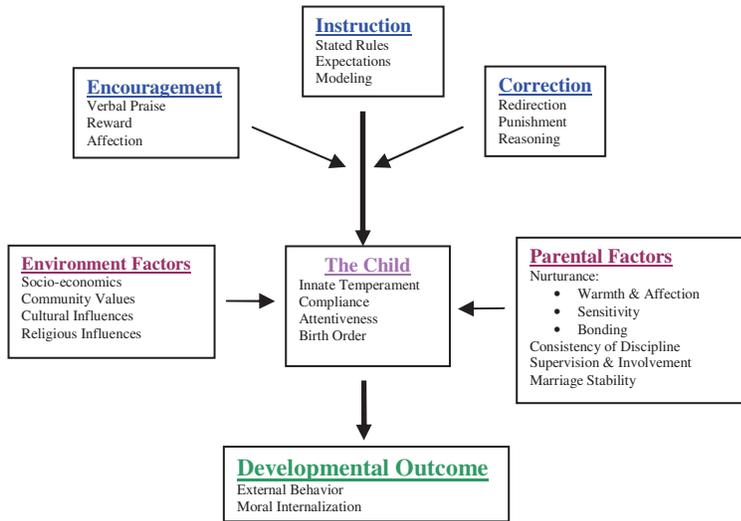
### **Developmental and Behavioral Theories**

Socialization is the term given to the complex interaction of a child’s genetic predisposition with the social and cultural expectations of the parents.<sup>8</sup> If the parents’ efforts are to be successful, their approach to discipline must accommodate to the child’s developmental stage and abilities. During the preoperative stage of development, ages 2-6 years, the child acts from an egocentric perspective with limited ability to distinguish between his own point of view and those of others. He has difficulty distinguishing causation from coincidence and reality from fantasy. During this period children are often not persuaded in their behavior by verbal reasoning alone, but respond more to its concurrent use with a combination of encouragement and punishment.<sup>9</sup> For the older, more cognitively developed school aged child, reasoning and/or penalizing consequences are effective in socializing the behavior.

Behaviorists emphasize children’s learning through the interaction of the environment with the child’s behavior. The responses are characterized by what they teach the child. A response is called a *reinforcer* (encouragement) if it increases the likelihood of the desired behavior occurring again in the future; it is called a *punisher* (correction) if it decreases the likelihood of the behavior occurring again. Parental attention to the child is a powerful reinforcer of behavior. In his study showing that reasoning alone is an ineffective modifier of behavior in young children, Blum notes that “parental attention is appropriate for desired behaviors, but often parents inadvertently reinforce inappropriate behaviors. If hitting a sibling

results in attention from a parent using verbal reasoning, it may actually increase this undesired behavior.”<sup>9</sup> A third modifier of behavior is called *extinction*, where the child’s behavior elicits no response from the environment and thus is eventually extinguished. Extinction is demonstrated when ignoring a toddler’s mild temper tantrum results in its elimination. Choosing the right disciplinary measure for the child’s particular age and offense is essential to a parent’s success.

FIGURE 1 **DISCIPLINARY PROCESS**



**COMPONENTS OF THE DISCIPLINE PROCESS**

**Instruction**

Of the three basic components of discipline, proper instruction is first and fundamental. A parent’s expectations must be communicated clearly and repetitively in order to begin to achieve compliance. After the desired behavior is communicated, the consequence of misbehavior must also be known to the child. For the toddler, the consequence may not be understood initially due to his preoperant cognition, but with repetition his behavior will be modified by the reinforcer and punisher responses. For the older child, instruction will be understood and a volitional decision to comply or defy will consciously be made. Instruction can also be nonverbally communicated through parental modeling of proper behavior. Poor behavior outcomes are often linked to unclear or absent instruction, and inconsistent parental expectations.

**Encouragement**

Encouragement represents the reinforcer response in the behavioral model. Relative to a child’s level of development, it will take the form of verbal praise, physical affection, or material reward. Parents who use little encouragement and rely upon harsh and excessive correction fail to achieve optimal behavioral control.<sup>10</sup>

**Correction**

Correction represents the punisher response in the behavioral model and is necessary when, in spite of encouragement, the child fails to follow instruction. For the infant, this will usually involve redirection or distraction. Brief expressions of disapproval (nonverbal or verbal) will also modify behavior at this stage. As a child’s mobility and assertiveness mature, correction may require aversive punishers such as

physical restraint or physical discomfort (hand slap) following disapproval. As cognition and determination mature, the toddler (> 18 months) may require a time-out or occasionally disciplinary spanking (depending upon the situation) since reasoning alone is usually ineffective at this age. For the older preschooler, reasoning and privilege removal will begin to be effective, and with the adolescent, grounding and work duty or monetary penalties are usually sufficient to achieve compliance.

Natural and logical consequences can be effective modifiers of behavior, and with timely occurrence they may preclude the need for any additional corrective action by the parent. Examples: Natural: A toddler disobediently runs from a parent on a sidewalk and with an accidental fall skins a knee. Logical: A toddler refuses to play nicely with a toy and therefore the toy is taken away for a period of time.

Parents who balance the use of correction with encouragement produce an optimal developmental outcome in the child.<sup>10</sup>

## **FACTORS AFFECTING THE DISCIPLINARY PROCESS**

### **Child Factors**

A child's age, developmental level, and individual characteristics should be considered in the implementation of discipline. Innate temperament will influence a child's tendency toward compliance, as will his energy level and individual attentiveness. Even birth order can be a determinant, with firstborn children often being more compliant than their subsequent siblings. Age influences a child's need for behavioral correction, with punishment more frequently needed and used during the preschool years.<sup>11</sup> All these child factors influence which disciplinary measure a parent uses in correction and how it is implemented.

### **Parental Factors**

Parental factors, such as nurturance, communication, stability of marriage, and effective disciplinary skills, play a pivotal role in child discipline. Parents act as key role models for acceptable and expected behavior.<sup>12</sup> Adult models significantly influence aggressive behavior in children.<sup>13</sup> Parental consistency and predictability are necessary in promoting acceptable behavior in children. Changing consequences, delayed imposition of consequences, and irregular application of consequences are practices that often characterize parents of "out-of-control children."<sup>14</sup> Proactive versus reactive correction leads to very different outcomes. A parent who takes the *time* to instruct and forewarn a child is more likely to achieve a desired behavior than one who impulsively corrects a child's uninstructed behavior.

The parent-child relationship is foundational to the disciplinary process. Children respond best if discipline occurs in the context of warm, affectionate, accepting relationship.<sup>12</sup> Parental involvement in and monitoring of a child's activities positively affect child compliance.

Bauman and Friedman summarize the results of negative parenting: "Ineffective parenting practices predict conduct disorder in childhood, which is strongly associated with academic failure, peer rejection, and later involvement in chronic deviant behavior, including aggression. Family variables are consistent covariates for early forms of deviant behavior. Families of antisocial children are characterized by harsh, inconsistent discipline, little positive parental involvement with the child, and poor monitoring and supervision. Inept parenting practices, which include noncontingent positive and negative reinforcers, mean coercive child behaviors are unwittingly reinforced."<sup>15</sup>

Finally, the father-mother married unit is fundamental to the health of a society and to the optimal development of the child.<sup>16</sup> Marital harmony models respect for one another and provides a stable environment for emotional growth. Children in families with high levels of marital conflict are more likely to have behavioral problems than those in families with low levels of conflict.<sup>17</sup> Instability of the marriage relationship can lead a child to reject the parents' values and defy their directives.

### **Environmental Factors**

Environmental factors, such as socioeconomic conditions, cultural views, ethnicity, religiosity and

neighborhood composition, influence the effect on the child of disciplinary measures. Families with few socioeconomic resources often perceive physical punishment as more favorable than non-physical alternatives and achieve better behavioral control using it.<sup>18</sup> When the environmental risks are high, parenting practices that are firmer and higher in control result in lower levels of young adolescent antisocial behavior.<sup>19</sup> In neighborhoods where the prevalence of corporal punishment is high, its use does not lead to greater child behavioral problems.<sup>20</sup> African American and lower-income youths are more approving of parental spanking as a disciplinary method.<sup>21</sup> Greater religiousness is tied to greater positivity in family relationships.<sup>22</sup> Conservative Christian parents of young children (particularly 3 year olds) are more likely to use spanking with defiant behavior, yet without a heightened use of severe physical discipline.<sup>23</sup>

**Developmental outcome**

A child’s external behavior is one measure of the outcome of disciplinary process. However, *moral internalization*, defined as the likelihood that a child will perform a desired behavior even in the absence of corrective consequences or supervision, is the truer indicator of the long lasting impact of a parent’s disciplinary influence upon a child. It is this achievement that requires successful orchestration of the numerous factors within the disciplinary process, as illustrated in Figure 1. The use or misuse of any one disciplinary component is unlikely to determine success or failure of the process. The parent-child relationship is the most foundational determinant of moral internalization as it influences the application of all measures of discipline.

**CORPORAL PUNISHMENT**

*Corporal punishment* is a general term for “physical punishment.”<sup>24</sup> Included under this very broad definition is the practice of ordinary spanking, as well as abusive physical acts such as beating, kicking, punching, choking, face slapping, scalding and even starvation. *Physical child abuse* is defined as “non-accidental injury inflicted by a parent or caregiver.”<sup>25</sup> The National Clearing House on Child Abuse and Neglect defines *physical abuse* as “the infliction of physical injury as a result of punching, beating, kicking, biting, burning, shaking, or otherwise harming a child.”<sup>26</sup> *Disciplinary spanking* has been defined as “physically non-injurious, intended to modify behavior, and administered with the open hand to the extremities or buttocks.”<sup>27</sup> Although disciplinary spanking and physical child abuse fall under the broad definitional umbrella of corporal punishment, each is very different in intent and result.

FIGURE 2 **CORPORAL PUNISHMENT**

	<u>Disciplinary Spanking</u>	<u>Physical Abuse</u>
<i>The Act</i>	Spanking: one or two swats to the buttocks of a child	Physical assault, including to beat, kick, punch, choke, etc.
<i>The Intent</i>	Training: to modify behavior	Violence: "physical force intended to injure or abuse." <sup>28</sup>
<i>The Attitude</i>	Love and concern	Anger and malice
<i>The Effects</i>	Mild to moderate discomfort; Behavioral correction	Physical and emotional injury

In order to accurately evaluate the efficacy or inefficacy of disciplinary spanking, it must be extracted from the broader category of corporal punishment. Failure to do so results in confusion, inappropriate generalizations, and inaccurate conclusions.

## **PUNISHMENT**

Some of the most ardent opponents of disciplinary spanking have suggested that all punishment be eliminated from the process of child discipline.<sup>29</sup> The American Academy of Pediatrics, in its Guidelines for Effective Discipline, recommends verbal reprimand as the only form of punishment available to the parents of young children, relegating time-out to a form of extinction.<sup>30</sup> As parents discuss the care of their children with their pediatrician, questions related to discipline are commonly raised.<sup>31</sup> In so doing, the question is posed, “Should a parent avoid the use of punishment in childrearing? Is it really necessary?”

Punishment in general has been a controversial topic for decades. In the 1930’s, B.F. Skinner and Estes dismissed punishment as a useful or necessary component to effect lasting behavioral modification and instead embraced positive reinforcement (reward) as the primary means. The scientific basis for their conclusions was viewed with skepticism by contemporaries and in the following two decades, behavioral experiments validate this concern by revealing impressive data supporting the long-lasting effects of noxious stimuli (punishment) on behavioral control. In the 1980’s, Patterson reported, after years of investigation, that parent use of punishment was a necessary component of successful discipline.<sup>14</sup> He noted that the control of a child’s antisocial behavior requires the contingent use of some aspect of punishment.

Parents of socially aggressive children use punishment more often than parents of more compliant children. This observation has led some to conclude that punishment *causes* aggressive behavior. Berkowitz and Patterson reported, however, that other variables, such as nurturance, consistency and rule statements, actually mediate parental effectiveness.<sup>14</sup> The current debate about the use of punishment has been dubbed the “politicization of punishment,” noting a shift of emphasis away from the *effectiveness* of punishment towards the societal *ethics* and humanity of using punishment.<sup>32</sup>

Studies have identified certain variables, such as timing, intensity, context and consistency, which determine the effectiveness of punishment.<sup>33</sup> The shorter the delay between the act of transgression and the resulting punishment, the more effective the punishment will be. The intensity of the punishment should be high enough to generate mild to moderate anxiety, but not so high that the child is panicked or terror-stricken. Punishment is most effective within the context of a warm, affectionate parent-child relationship. Inconsistent, erratic disciplinary procedures, including punitiveness and laxity, are highly correlated with increased delinquency.<sup>33</sup>

Punishment is only necessary when a child is cognitively and willingly capable of defying a parent’s directive. Innocent curiosity and developmentally-driven exploration, which characterize most of infancy, are not grounds for punishment. Beyond a year of age, increasing mobility and cognition tempt a toddler to venture beyond a parent’s directed limits. When repeat instruction and encouragement are unsuccessful in persuading a child, punishment is necessary to achieve behavioral control. The selection of punishment techniques is determined by a child’s level of development, ranging from physical restraint and time-out for the toddler to grounding and privilege removal for the adolescent.

## **MEDICAL LITERATURE ON DISCIPLINARY SPANKING**

Although 94% of American parents spank their 3-and 4-year olds at least occasionally,<sup>34</sup> most of the current literature advises against the practice. Two major perspectives in the debate and literature have emerged recently. The first is an unconditional anti-spanking position which opposes all forms of physical punishment. Supporting this position, Gershoff concluded in a 2002 meta-analysis of the literature that parental use of corporal punishment was associated with lower levels of moral internalization and mental health, as well as higher levels of aggression in children.<sup>35</sup> The second position, which has been called the conditional-spanking perspective,<sup>36</sup> has attempted to identify conditions under which spanking may be beneficial or, at least, not detrimental to children. Larzelere and

Kuhn provide support for this position with their 2005 meta-analysis which concluded that spanking in certain settings can be more beneficial than alternative methods in effecting optimal child behavior.<sup>37</sup>

## **Evidence for detrimental effects of disciplinary spanking**

The studies cited for showing adverse outcomes of disciplinary spanking often ignore critical research methods necessary to reach objective conclusions.

- **Disciplinary spanking is grouped with other forms of corporal punishment including abusive acts, such as punching, face slapping, kicking, and beating.** Gershoff used a broad definition of corporal punishment and therefore 65% of her cited studies include overly harsh forms of physical punishment.<sup>38</sup>
- **Research is not limited to the spanking of young children; rather, the focus is on corporal punishment with adolescents.** An example is Straus's survey-based studies which are often promoted as evidence for a link between spanking during "childhood" and poor adult outcomes, such as alcohol abuse, marital violence, depression, and suicidal thinking.<sup>39</sup> These conclusions are built entirely upon situations of "physical punishment during the teen years", not during childhood, with teens experiencing up to thirty or more hitting events in a year. These correlates of teenage corporal punishment reveal nothing about the effect of ordinary spanking with preschoolers.
- **Study findings are correlational and do not show clear causation.** Baumrind, et.al, in a critical review of Gershoff's meta-analysis, noted that her results are only correlational, finding disciplinary spanking "guilty by association."<sup>40</sup> They stated that "the links between corporal punishment and detrimental outcomes in young children may be artifactual." For instance, physical punishment and physical abuse had a consistently positive association, because all physical abuse was defined as occurrences of physical punishment.
- **The effects of disciplinary spanking are typically not compared against the effects of alternative disciplinary responses, such as time-out, grounding, or privilege removal.** Using the same studies and method of analysis in Gershoff's meta-analysis, Baumrind found more links to detrimental outcomes for alternative disciplinary tactics than for physical punishment.<sup>40</sup>
- **Studies rely upon surveys of parents as the reporters of both their children's behavior and their own discipline practices.** This is problematic since parents' desire to justify their disciplinary actions may bias their reporting of resulting child behavior. Likewise, surveys of adults' recall of being spanked as a child may be biased toward recalling the harsher practices of corporal punishment experienced in later childhood years.
- **Studies fail to prescribe the methodology and application of spanking and, instead, evaluate the effects of the varying personal practices of its use.** In the earliest studies examining the effectiveness of time-out, parents were first trained in the proper use of the discipline response by instruction and role-playing.<sup>41</sup> Proper and consistent application of a technique, such as spanking, should ideally be verified in order to generate accurate conclusions about its effectiveness.
- **Longitudinal research often relies upon the measure of frequency of spanking without controlling for the frequency of a child's misbehavior or for a child's behavioral temperament.** Just as a child's difficult temperament will elicit more frequent corrective responses early in life, it also increases the probability of a poorer outcome later in life. In other words, frequent misbehavior or a difficult temperament tends to predict subsequent child behavior problems, regardless of the disciplinary measure employed. Larzelere, Kuhn and Johnson, in their paper examining this "intervention selection bias," note "the detrimental outcomes of ordinary physical punishment tend to disappear with more adequate statistical controls for the initial child misbehavior."<sup>42</sup>

- **Important variables within the disciplinary process are largely ignored**, such as parental nurturance, parental use of other measures (reasoning, consequences, timeout) in conjunction with spanking, and the parent-child relationship. When comparing parents who are equivalent on positive parental involvement<sup>43</sup> or on the use of reasoning<sup>44</sup>, the associations of spanking with negative child behaviors disappear.
- **Much of the anti-spanking literature consists of opinion-driven editorials, reviews, and commentaries.** Lyons, Anderson and Larson conducted a systematic review of articles published between 1984 and 1993 that addressed corporal punishment.<sup>45</sup> They found that 83% of the 132 articles were editorials or commentaries devoid of empirical data. All but one of the few empirical studies was flawed by the inclusion of severe physical abuse with disciplinary spanking. The one remaining study specific for disciplinary spanking revealed no detrimental effects on the child.

### *Childhood Aggression and Antisocial Behavior*

Straus, Sugarman and Giles-Sims concluded in a 1997 study that there was a causal relationship between spanking and antisocial behavior in children.<sup>46</sup> In controlling for the child's initial behavior, they argued that their results should indisputably compel professionals to oppose all spanking as a disciplinary option for parents. However, an independent reassessment of the same data found that all four alternative disciplinary tactics in the study (grounding, privilege removal, allowance removal, and sending children to their room) also predicted higher subsequent antisocial behavior.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, when initial child behavior was more rigorously reanalyzed, the negative outcomes of spanking and all four alternatives became insignificant, thus invalidating the conclusion of the study.

Gunnoe and Mariner specifically examined the effects of parental spanking on childhood aggression in a six year longitudinal study of a racially mixed population of 1112 children ages 4 to 11 years.<sup>48</sup> They concluded, "Regression analysis within subgroups yielded no evidence that spanking fostered aggression in children younger than 6 years and supported claims of increased aggression for only 1 subgroup: 8-11-year-old white boys in single-mother families." They speculate that, for this higher risk subgroup, spanking may serve as "a proxy for other family problems such as lost parental authority, poor management practices, stress, or lack of support." If this is so, they suggest "for families experiencing severe family management problems, spanking is not a viable solution to these problems and may exacerbate them." Their conclusions, once again, highlight the fact that the setting has a profound effect upon the outcome of the disciplinary measure.

Behavioral research highlights parental factors as a major determinant of child outcome. Childhood aggressiveness has been more closely linked to maternal permissiveness and maternal negativity than even to abusive physical discipline.<sup>49</sup> Rivara and Farrington found that, overall, longitudinal experimental and cross-sectional studies show that parental aggression is related to later delinquency in children.<sup>50</sup>

In a longitudinal three-year study, Simons et al. examined the impact of corporal punishment and the quality of parental involvement on three adolescent outcomes — aggressiveness, delinquency, and psychological well-being.<sup>43</sup> A strong association was found between the quality of parenting and each of these three outcomes. "Once the effect of parental involvement was removed, corporal punishment showed no detrimental impact on adolescent aggressiveness, delinquency, or psychological well-being." Other prospective longitudinal studies concur.

*After more than 10 years of study (Baumrind):*<sup>10</sup>

This study's findings "did not indicate that negative reinforcement or corporal punishment per se were harmful or ineffective procedures, but rather the total pattern of parental control determined the effects on the child of these procedures."

*After 10 years of study (Eron):*<sup>51</sup>

"Upon follow-up 10 years after the original data collection, we found that punishment [including

physical punishment] of aggressive acts at the earlier age was no longer related to current aggression, and instead, other variables like parental nurturance and children's identification with their parents were more important in predicting later aggression."

*After 4 years of focused study (Chamberlain):*<sup>23</sup>

Children from authoritarian homes, where physical punishment was often used, were "no. . . more aggressive and resistant" than those from accommodative homes.

Physical punishment seems to be most effective when implemented by an affectionately warm parent.<sup>52</sup>

#### *Power Assertion*

Disciplinary spanking has been criticized as an expression of power assertion over the child. Parental power, however, is commonly exerted in routine child rearing and spanking is only one example. Other situations where power and restraint are exerted routinely by parents include:

- The uncooperative two-year-old who refuses to brush his teeth.
- The young child who insists on running from his parent in a busy mall or parking lot.
- The toddler who refuses to sit in his car seat.
- The young patient who refuses to hold still as a vaccination is administered, or as a laceration is repaired.

Some degree of power assertion<sup>53</sup> and firm control<sup>10,54</sup> over the child is necessary at times to ensure safety, health, and proper behavior. Power exerted in the context of love and for the child's benefit is not perceived as bullying or demeaning. The real issue is *how* parents will use their power advantage for the child's optimal development.

#### *Risk of Physical Child Abuse*

Does the decision to use disciplinary spanking with a young child increase a parent's risk of physically abusing their child? There is compelling evidence against such a link.

- Surveys indicate that as many as 94% of parents of preschoolers use spanking,<sup>34, 55</sup> yet the incidence of physical child abuse in the America is less than 1%.<sup>56</sup> Statistically, the two practices are far apart. Moreover, the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse and the National Incidence Studies have reported a steady increase in physical child abuse that over the past two decades, while approval for parental spanking has steadily declined.<sup>57</sup>
- More than 70% of primary care pediatricians who work every day with families reject the idea that spanking sets the stage for parents to engage in forms of physical abuse.<sup>58</sup>
- Socolar & Stein found that most parents who spank do *not* spank on impulse, but purposefully spank their children with a belief in its effectiveness.<sup>59</sup> No significant correlation between the frequency of spanking and the anger reported by mothers was found. Actually, the mothers who reported being angry were not the same parents who spanked.
- Teaching parents appropriate spanking may actually reduce child abuse.<sup>60</sup> Spanking bans, on the other hand, seem to primarily reduce the mild type of spanking that may actually stop the escalating frustration of the parent that puts the child at risk for physical child abuse.<sup>61</sup> Parents who are ill-equipped to control their child's behavior, or who take a more permissive approach (refusing to use spanking), may be more prone to anger<sup>47</sup> and explosive attacks on their child.<sup>10</sup>
- Parental child abuse is an interactive process involving a mix of parental competence, parental and child temperaments, and situational demands.<sup>62</sup> Abusive parents are more angry, depressed and impulsive, and emphasize punishment as the predominant means of discipline. Abused children are more aggressive and less compliant than children from nonabusive families. There is less interaction between family members in abusive families and abusive mothers display more negative than positive behavior. The etiology of abusive parenting is multifactorial with emphasis on the personalities involved and has not been simply linked to a parent's method of

discipline.

- Trickett & Kuczynski<sup>63</sup> found in their clinical study of abusive and nonabusive families that abusive parents used punishment as the predominant type of discipline, regardless of the type of child misbehavior. They reported being angry and disgusted after disciplinary interventions. Nonabusive parents disciplined their children with a balanced combination of reasoning and punishment (including some spanking), and reported more satisfaction with their efforts.
- Wissow and Roter in a reply to Trumbull, et al.'s Letter to Editor in *Pediatrics* acknowledge that a definitive link between spanking and child abuse has yet to be established.<sup>64</sup>
- Finally, there is no evidence that the Swedish experiment to reduce child abuse by banning spanking in 1979 has resulted in any reduction in physical child abuse. One year after the spanking ban, the rate of physical child abuse in Sweden was 49 % higher than that of the United States.<sup>65, 42</sup> The percentage of Swedish parents who reported beating up their child during the year after the spanking ban was 3.0%, compare to American rates of 1.3% in 1975 and 0.6% in 1985.<sup>66</sup> According to a 1995 report from the governmental agency Statistics Sweden, the reports of child abuse by family members had increased four fold since 1981 and teen violence was up six fold.<sup>67</sup>

Using the same simple misguided logic that disciplinary spanking and physical child abuse may be on a continuum, should physicians advise parents not to *talk* with their child for fear that they might one day abusively *yell* at the child? Or, should parents be instructed to avoid the use of time-out for concern that they would abusively isolate their child in a closet for extended periods. With parenting, it is the "user" and *how* a measure is used, much more than the actual measure used, that determines the outcome of the disciplinary effort.

#### *Corporal Punishment Conference*

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) cosponsored a symposium of experts on child development to examine the research data on the use of corporal punishment with children.<sup>68</sup> The group's goal was to develop "consensus statements regarding the scientific evidence on the long and short term effects of corporal punishment on children." The panel clarified the following definitions:

Corporal Punishment: "bodily punishment of any kind."

Spanking: "physically non-injurious, intended to modify behavior, and administered with the open hand to the extremities or buttocks."

Using these definitions, the committee could not reach any strong conclusions favoring or opposing a parent's use of disciplinary spanking. An exhaustive systematic review of the then current medical and psychological literature on nonabusive corporal punishment was presented by Larzelere.<sup>69</sup> In this review, he found stronger evidence of beneficial than detrimental effects of disciplinary spanking by parents with preschool children, ages 2 to 6 years. Baumrind began her response to that review, "As Dr. Larzelere's review of quality studies documents, a blanket injunction against disciplinary spanking by parents is not scientifically supportable." In particular, not one of the 35 best studies in the review identified a single alternative discipline response that had superior child outcomes to that of nonabusive physical punishment of children under the age of 13 years.

Among the findings of the conference:

- The strongest studies do not support a definitive link between spanking and later violent behavior.
- The strongest studies do not indicate spanking to be detrimental to a child.
- Spanking should not be the primary or only response used by a parent.
- Limited data suggest short-term effectiveness of spanking in a controlled setting.
- More research is needed on the use of spanking with children.

The co-chairpersons, Stanford Friedman, MD and Kenneth Schonberg, MD, concluded "whether spanking is harmful or beneficial to a child must be viewed within the total context of a child's life and

environment.... Given a relatively 'healthy' family life in a supportive environment, spanking in and of itself is not detrimental to a child or predictive of later problems... [T]here is a lack of research related to the use of corporal punishment."<sup>70</sup>

In spite of the findings of this conference, but with the support of papers rejected in the conference literature review, two years later the AAP later issued a policy statement condemning the use of any physical punishment in childrearing.<sup>71</sup>

## Evidence for Efficacy of Disciplinary Spanking

There is a paucity of published research focusing on ordinary, non-abusive disciplinary spanking of young children administered by loving, well-intentioned parents. The only studies that meet the most rigorous requirements for evidence-based medical practice are clinical field trials conducted by Roberts with clinically oppositional children.<sup>72,73,74</sup> To determine which back-up or enforcer procedure was most effective in controlling a child's escape from time-out, a spank procedure was tested against 3 other procedures in randomized clinical field trials. The two-swat spank procedure was found to be the most effective, most preferred and most practical of all measures tested. Forehand and McMahon in their research similarly found "a mild spanking to be the most feasible back-up for the child leaving the time-out chair."<sup>75</sup> Even though these studies focused on spanking only as an enforcer of time-out, they are significant for other reasons:

- They are well-designed, randomized, clinical field studies that compare spanking to other responses.
- The problem behavior of noncompliance with time-out is very similar to other types of problem behaviors a defiant child might display. These studies offer evidence of spanking's effectiveness in changing problem behavior.
- The effectiveness of time-out is crucial to most behavioral parenting programs. The spank procedure can strengthen time-out's effectiveness and reduce a parent's need to use spanking independently or primarily.

As shown earlier, the long-term effects of any disciplinary measure, including spanking, is enormously influenced by the parental and environmental factors within the disciplinary process. Baumrind conducted a decade-long prospective study of families with children ages 4-9 years.<sup>10</sup> She identified three general parenting styles and evaluated the effects these styles had upon the children's development. The following parenting styles were identified:

*Authoritarian Parents* were more controlling, more restrictive, less inclined to explain, more punitive, detached, and less warm. To discipline they used fear, little encouragement and often corporal punishment.

*Permissive Parents* were markedly less controlling, minimally demanding, freely granting of the child's demands, uninvolved with the child, and benign toward the child's impulses and actions. To discipline they used ridicule, guilt provocation, little power and reasoning, and rarely corporal punishment.

*Authoritative Parents* employed a combination of firm control and positive encouragement of a child's independence. They affirmed the child's qualities and, yet, set a standard for future conduct. They made reasonable demands of their children and promoted respect for authority. They were more consistent with the discipline. To discipline they used reasoning, power, reinforcement to achieve objectives, and some corporal punishment.

Some of the study's findings included:

- The Authoritative parents who balanced firm control with encouragement reared the most socially responsible and assertive children, i.e. achievement orientation, friendliness toward peers,

- cooperativeness with adults, social dominance, nonconforming behavior and purposiveness.
- The Authoritative parents favored corporal punishment over other negative sanctions.
- Permissive parents (both mothers and fathers) admitted to "explosive attacks of rage in which they inflicted more pain or injury upon the child than they had intended." They became more "violent because they felt they could neither control the child's behavior nor tolerate its effect upon themselves."
- Nonbrutal punishment, including physical expressions, by loving parents who used correct methodology achieved superior behavior control as well as:
  - More rapid re-establishment of affectional relationship between parent and child following an emotional release.
  - Less guilt reactions to transgression since an unpleasant consequence is imposed.
- Punishment is an effective means of controlling childhood behavior, and is not intrinsically harmful to the child.

Guarendi found that 70% of the parents of "outstanding" (self-motivated, strong character, considerate of others, and high morality) students employed some physical punishment in the rearing of their children.<sup>76</sup> Some relied upon it often and others rarely used it. He found, "Spanking was generally considered to be one tool in a parent's discipline repertoire."

Larzelere and Kuhn's 2005 meta-analysis of a quarter-century of literature uniquely compared physical punishment of children with alternative disciplinary measures, such as time-out, reasoning, privilege removal, physical restraint, and scolding.<sup>37</sup> To address the methodological problem inherent in grouping all forms of physical punishment, they distinguished the following four categories: *conditional* spanking (used under limited conditions), *customary* physical punishment (typical manner of use by ordinary parents), *overly severe* physical punishment, and *predominant* physical punishment. Additionally, Larzelere and Kuhn's methods took into account selection biases, a confounding problem inherent in most studies of parental discipline since parents use disciplinary tactics to the extent that they perceive behavior problems in their children. The review's findings are summarized below.

- Conditional spanking was associated with better child outcomes than were 10 of 13 alternative disciplinary tactics, with no differences in outcomes compared to the other three alternatives.
- Conditional spanking and customary physical punishment were never associated with worse outcomes than any other alternative tactic.
- The meta-analysis results favored conditional spanking over nonphysical punishments in general for reducing defiance and antisocial behavior.
- Customary physical punishment was associated with less substance abuse than was non-contact punishment in one large retrospective study. Otherwise, customary physical punishment was equally as effective as any alternative disciplinary tactic.
- All types of physical punishment were associated with lower rates of antisocial behavior than were alternative disciplinary tactics.
- Physical punishment predicted more adverse child outcomes than alternative tactics only when it was used severely or predominantly.
- No evidence was found that physical punishment was more strongly associated with physical aggression than other disciplinary tactics.

In a positive family setting, spanking has been found to be a positive predictor of outcome. Tennant found that the childhood antecedents that were most associated with non-use of illegal drugs by young men were being spanked as a child, attending church and having a "happy" parental marriage.<sup>77</sup>

## **DISCIPLINARY SPANKING: NECESSARY OR NOT?**

Although disciplinary spanking may be seen as unwarranted by some from a philosophical perspective, most primary care physicians who field parenting questions every day view spanking as acceptable in at least certain situations.<sup>78,58,79,4</sup> In spite of its popular use and majority approval, caring parents do not enjoy or even desire to spank their children. So, the question arises, “Is spanking necessary?”

When clear instruction has been given and measures of encouragement are insufficient in directing a child’s behavior, measures of correction are necessary. When simpler measures of correction (such as redirection, disapproval, and ignoring of mild misbehavior) fail to persuade a child to comply, punishment is needed. Methods of punishment for the cognitively immature toddler are limited to consequences (natural and logical), time-out and disciplinary spanking. For the most defiant child, milder forms of punishment will often fail and spanking may be necessary to deter uncontrolled behavior. If used strategically, spanking can strengthen milder measures thereby diminishing its need as the child matures. Without disciplinary spanking, a parent can quickly exhaust the limited punishment repertoire and is left with feelings and expressions of exasperation (yelling) in a coercive cycle to convince an unreasoning toddler to behave. This is potentially a prescription for abuse and neglect.

### **Method of Disciplinary Spanking**

In a systematic review of the literature, Larzelere examined child outcomes in families where parents used nonabusive, customary physical punishment.<sup>80</sup> Among the review’s conclusions were that disciplinary spanking has “consistently beneficial outcomes when it is nonabusive and used primarily to back up milder disciplinary tactics with 2- to 6-year olds by loving parents.” Also, “most detrimental outcomes in causally relevant studies are due to overly frequent use of physical punishment.” The following conditions were more characteristic of effective spanking than of counterproductive physical punishment:  
(p.215)

1. Use is not overly severe.
2. Used by a parent under control, not in danger of “losing it” from anger.
3. Used during ages 2 to 6, not during the teenage years. Although conclusive evidence is scarce, spanking should be phased out as soon as possible between ages 7 and 12 years.
4. Used with reasoning, preferably eliciting an intermediate rather than a high level of child distress.
5. Used privately.
6. Motivated by concern for the child, not parent-oriented concerns.
7. Used after a single warning (generalizing from Roberts).<sup>81</sup> Roberts showed that a single warning before time-out reduced the necessary time-outs by 74% without sacrificing any effectiveness of the behavioral parent training.
8. Used flexibly. If spanking does not work, parents should try other approaches and other tactics rather than increasing the intensity of the spanking.

It is clear that parents should not solely rely upon spanking to accomplish control of their child’s behavior. Evidence suggests that it can be a useful and necessary part of a successful disciplinary plan. Like any corrective measure, its application requires a proactive rather than reactive approach to produce an optimal outcome. Disciplinary spanking is most beneficial and necessary during the ages 2 to 6 years when reasoning alone is often ineffective and even counterproductive in managing behavior. With cognitive development, a child will more readily respond to reasoning and less assertive corrective methods, and the need for spanking should therefore diminish.

The following guidelines have been compiled from available data on disciplinary spanking.

### *Guidelines for Parental Use of Disciplinary Spanking*

1. Spanking should be used selectively for clear, deliberate misbehavior, particularly that which arises from a child's persistent defiance of a parent's instruction. It should be used only when the child receives at least as much encouragement and praise for good behavior as correction for problem behavior.
2. Milder forms of discipline, such as verbal correction, extinction, logical and natural consequences, and time-out should be used initially, followed by spanking when noncompliance persists. Spanking has been shown to be an effective method of enforcing time-out with the child who refuses to comply.
3. Only a parent, or in exceptional situations someone else who has an intimate relationship of authority with the child, should administer disciplinary spanking.
4. Spanking should not be administered on impulse or when a parent is out of control. A spanking should always be motivated by love, for the purpose of teaching and correcting, and not for revenge or retaliation.
5. Spanking is inappropriate before 15 months of age and is usually not necessary until after 18 months. It should be less necessary after 6 years and rarely, if ever, used after 10 years of age.
6. After 10 months of age, one slap to the hand of a stubborn crawler or toddler may be necessary to stop serious misbehavior when distraction and removal have failed. This is particularly the case when the forbidden object is immovable and dangerous, such as a hot oven door or an electrical outlet.
7. Spanking should always be a *planned* action (not a reaction) by the parent and should follow a deliberate procedure.
  - The child should be *forewarned* of the spanking consequence for designated problem behaviors.
  - Spanking should always be administered in *private* (bedroom or restroom) to avoid public humiliation or embarrassment.
  - One or two spanks are administered to the buttocks. This is followed by embracing the child and calmly reviewing the offense and the desired behavior in an effort to reestablish a warm relationship.
8. Spanking should leave only transient redness of the skin and should not cause physical injury.
9. If properly administered spankings are ineffective, other disciplinary responses should be tried again rather than increasing the intensity of spankings. Professional help should be obtained when a satisfactory behavioral response cannot be achieved through the process of discipline.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

1. The disciplinary spanking debate has become very emotional and political, which has led to inaccurate statements of absolute conclusions where none exist. Proper definitions and terminology must be used in objectively evaluating the issue.
2. The discipline of a child is a multifaceted process and the assessment of any one of its components must be considered within the milieu of the other components to arrive at accurate conclusions.
3. The effects of disciplinary spanking, or any nonabusive discipline measure, are largely determined by the total pattern of parental control and parental nurturance.
4. Acts of harsh corporal punishment resulting in poor child outcomes are often associated with parental anger and depression, marital dysfunction and ineffective parenting skills.
5. There is no established causal link between a parent's use of ordinary nonabusive spanking and

- the occurrence of physical child abuse, or the development of childhood aggression.
6. There is evidence of short-term effectiveness and positive long-term outcomes when parents use disciplinary spanking within a nurturing environment.
  7. In implementing the disciplinary process, a parent must accomplish a moderate degree of behavioral control of the child for optimal development. This will require both encouragement and correction. In the rearing of the young child (particularly under 6 years), a parent's corrective measures are limited. At this age, disciplinary spanking, when properly employed by a parent, can be effective, appropriate, and at times necessary.
  8. Parents should be allowed considerable latitude with the disciplinary responses they choose to implement, as long as the responses are not abusive or harmful to the child. To deny a parent the use of disciplinary spanking may result in loss of behavioral control over the young child, thus creating an environment for detrimental parental practices such as yelling, nagging, belittling, and even explosive outbursts of rage.
  9. Pediatricians may counsel parents on how and how not to use disciplinary spanking with their children. This advice should emphasize the value of encouragement in establishing an optimal parent-child relationship.
  10. An unconditional, legal ban against all physical punishment of children by their parents would be irresponsible and unfounded based upon current data.
  11. Any future research investigating the effects of disciplinary spanking should specify an exact technique, prescribe its usage, and control for child temperament, parental factors, and environmental factors.

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