Spare the Rod?

New Research Challenges Spanking Critics

Opposition to parents spanking their children has been growing significantly in elite circles over the past fifteen years.¹ No doubt much of this opposition springs from a sincere concern for the well-being of children. Child abuse is a reality, and stories of child abuse are horrifying. But while loving and effective discipline is quite definitely not harsh and abusive, neither is it weak and ineffectual. Indeed, disciplinary spanking can fall well within the boundaries of loving discipline and need not be labeled abusive violence.²

Or so most Americans seem to think. According to a recent Voter/Consumer Research poll commissioned by the Family Research Council, 76 percent of the more than 1,000 Americans surveyed said that spanking was an effective form of discipline in their home when they were children.³ These results are made all the more impressive by the fact that nearly half of those who answered otherwise grew up in homes in which they were never spanked. Taken together, more than four out of five Americans who were actually spanked by their parents as children say that it was an effective form of discipline.

In addition, Americans perceive lack of discipline to be the biggest problem in public education today, according to a recent Gallup poll.⁴ Several studies show strong public support for corporal punishment by parents.⁵ Critics claim that spanking a child is abusive and contributes to adult dysfunction. These allegations arise from studies that fail to distinguish appropriate spanking from other forms of punishment. Abusive forms of physical punishment such as kicking, punching, and beating are commonly grouped with mild spanking. Furthermore, the studies usually include, and even emphasize, corporal punishment of adolescents, rather than focusing on preschool children, where spanking is more effective. This blurring of distinctions between spanking and physical abuse, and between children of different ages, gives critics the illusion of having data condemning all disciplinary spanking.

There are several arguments commonly leveled against disciplinary spanking. Interestingly, most of these arguments can be used against other forms of discipline. Any form of discipline (time-out, restriction, etc.), when used inappropriately and in anger, can result in distorting a child’s perception of justice and harming his emotional development. In light of this, let us examine some
of the unfounded arguments promoted by spanking opponents.

**Argument #1:** Many psychological studies show that spanking is an improper form of discipline.

**Counterpoint:** Researchers John Lyons, Rachel Anderson and David Larson of the National Institute of Healthcare Research recently conducted a systematic review of the research literature on corporal punishment. They found that 83 percent of the 132 identified articles published in clinical and psychosocial journals were merely opinion-driven editorials, reviews or commentaries, devoid of new empirical findings. Moreover, most of the empirical studies were methodologically flawed by grouping the impact of abuse with spanking. The best studies demonstrated beneficial, not detrimental, effects of spanking in certain situations. Clearly, there is insufficient evidence to condemn parental spanking and adequate evidence to justify its proper use.

**Argument #2:** Physical punishment establishes the moral righteousness of hitting other persons who do something which is regarded as wrong.

**Counterpoint:** The “spanking teaches hitting” belief has gained in popularity over the past decade, but is not supported by objective evidence. A distinction must be made between abusive hitting and nonabusive spanking. A child’s ability to discriminate hitting from disciplinary span-

ing depends largely upon the parents’ attitude with spanking and the parents’ procedure for spanking. There is no evidence in the medical literature that a mild spank to the buttocks of a disobedient child by a loving parent teaches the child aggressive behavior.

**The critical issue is how spanking is used more than whether it is used.**

The critical issue is how spanking (or, in fact, any punishment) is used more so than whether it is used. Physical abuse by an angry, uncontrolled parent will leave lasting emotional wounds and cultivate bitterness and resentment within a child. The balanced, prudent use of disciplinary spanking, however, is an effective deterrent to aggressive behavior with some children.

Researchers at the Center for Family Research at Iowa State University studied 332 families to examine both the impact of corporal punishment and the quality of parental involvement on three adolescent outcomes—aggressiveness, delinquency, and psychological well-being. The researchers found a strong association between the quality of parenting and each of these three outcomes. Corporal punishment, however, was not adversely related to any of these outcomes. This study proves the point that quality of parenting is the chief determinant of favorable or unfavorable outcomes. Remarkably, childhood aggressiveness has been more closely linked to maternal permissiveness and negative criticism than to even abusive physical discipline.

It is unrealistic to expect that children would never hit others if their parents would only exclude spanking from their discipline options. Most children in their toddler years (long before they are ever spanked) naturally attempt to hit others when conflict or frustration arises. The continuation of this behavior is largely determined by how the parent or caregiver responds. If correctly disciplined, the hitting will become less frequent. If ignored or ineffectively disciplined, the hitting will likely persist and even escalate. Thus, instead of contributing to greater violence, spanking can be a useful component in an overall plan to effectively teach a child to stop aggressive hitting.

**Any form of discipline (time-out, restriction, etc.), when used inappropriately and in anger, can distort a child’s perception of justice and harm his emotional development.**

**Argument #3:** Since parents often refrain from hitting until the anger or frustration reaches a certain point, the child learns that anger and frustration justify the use of physical force.

**Counterpoint:** A study published in Pediatrics indicates
that most parents who spank do not spank on impulse, but purposefully spank their children with a belief in its effectiveness. Furthermore, the study revealed no significant correlation between the frequency of spanking and the anger reported by mothers. Actually, the mothers who reported being angry were not the same parents who spanked.

**Remarkably, childhood aggressiveness has been more closely linked to maternal permissiveness and criticism than to even abusive physical discipline.**

Reactive, impulsive hitting after losing control due to anger is unquestionably the wrong way for a parent to use corporal punishment. Eliminating all physical punishment in the home, however, would not remedy such explosive scenarios. It could even increase the problem. When effective spanking is removed from a parent's disciplinary repertoire, he or she is left with nagging, begging, belittling, and yelling, once the primary disciplinary measures—such as time-out and logical consequences—have failed. By contrast, if proper spanking is proactively used in conjunction with other disciplinary measures, better control of the particularly defiant child can be achieved, and moments of exasperation are less likely to occur.

**Argument #4: Physical punishment is harmful to a child.**
Without the prudent use of spanking for the particularly defiant child, a parent runs the risk of being inconsistent and rationalizing the child's behavior. This inconsistent manner of parenting is confusing and harmful to the child and is damaging to the parent-child relationship. There is no evidence that proper disciplinary spanking is harmful to the child.

**Argument #5: Physical punishment makes the child angry at the parent.**

**Counterpoint:** All forms of punishment initially elicit a frustrated, angry response from a child. Progression of this anger is dependent primarily upon the parent's attitude during and after the disciplinary event, and the manner of its application. Any form of punishment administered angrily for purposes of retribution, rather than calmly for purposes of correction, can create anger and resentment in a child. Actually, a spanking can break the escalating rage of a rebellious child and more quickly restore the relationship between parent and child.

**Argument #6: Spanking teaches a child that "might makes right," that power and strength are most important and that the biggest can force their will upon the smallest.**

**Counterpoint:** Parental power is commonly exerted in routine child rearing and spanking is only one example. Other situations where power and restraint are exercised by the average parent include:

- 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.

Power and control over the child are necessary at times to ensure safety, health and proper behavior. Classic child rearing studies have shown that some degree of power, assertion, and firm control is essential for optimal child rearing. When power is exerted in the context of love and for the child's benefit, the

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**A Closer Look**

**Distinguishing Spanking from Abuse**

- **Corporal punishment** is often defined broadly as bodily punishment of any kind. Since this definition includes spanking as well as obviously abusive acts such as kicking, punching, beating, face slapping, and even starvation, more specific definitions must be used to separate appropriate versus inappropriate corporal punishment.

- Spanking is one of many disciplinary responses available to parents intended to shape appropriate behavior in the developing toddler and child. It is an adjunctive corrective measure, to be used in combination with primary responses such as restraint, natural and logical consequences, time-out, and restriction of privileges.

- Child development experts believe spanking should be used mainly as a back-up to primary measures, and then independently to correct deliberate and persistent problem behavior that is not remedied with milder measures. It is most useful with toddlers and preschoolers from 18 months to 6 years of age, when reasoning is less persuasive.

- Moreover, child development experts say that spanking should always be a planned action by a parent, not an impulsive reaction to misbehavior. The child should be forewarned of the spanking consequence for each of the designated problem behaviors. Spanking should always be administered in private. It should consist of one or two spans to the child's buttocks, followed by a calm review of the offense and the desired behavior.

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**Spanking**

- **The Act:** Spanking: One or two spans to the buttocks
- **The Intent:** Training: To correct problem behavior
- **The Attitude:** With love and concern
- **The Effects:** Behavioral correction

**Physical Abuse**

- **The Act:** Beating: To strike repeatedly (also kick, punch, choke)
- **The Intent:** Violence: Physical force intended to injure or abuse
- **The Attitude:** With anger and malice
- **The Effects:** Emotional and physical injury
Argument #7: Spanking is violence.

Counterpoint: Spanking, as recommended by most primary care physicians, is not violence by definition ("exertion of physical force so as to injure or abuse"). Parents who properly spank do not injure or abuse their child.

The use of this term "violence" in the spanking debate only serves to deepen the confusion. Why do anti-spanking authors repeatedly fail to distinguish between abusive violence and mild spanking? The distinction is so fundamental and obvious that its omission suggests that these authors use such terminology for its propaganda value, not to clarify issues.

Argument #8: Spanking is an ineffective solution to misbehavior.

Counterpoint: Though the specific use of appropriate spanking has rarely been studied, there is evidence of its short-term and long-term effectiveness. When combined with reasoning, the use of negative consequences (including spanking) does effectively decrease the frequency of misbehavior recurrences with preschool children. In clinical field trials where parental spanking has been studied, it has consistently been found to reduce the subsequent frequency of noncompliance with time-out. Spanking, as a effective enforcer of time-out, is a component of several well-researched parent training programs and popular parenting texts.

Dr. Diana Baumrind of the Institute for Human Development at the University of California-Berkeley, conducted a decade-long study of families with children 3 to 9 years old. Baumrind found that parents employing a balanced disciplinary style of firm control (including spanking) and positive encouragement experienced the most favorable outcome in their children. Parents taking extreme approaches to discipline (authoritarian-types using excessive punishment with less encouragement or permissive-types using little punishment and no spanking) were less successful.

Baumrind concluded that evidence from this study "did not indicate that negative reinforcement or corporal punishment per se were harmful or ineffective procedures, but rather the total patterns of parental control determined the effects on the child of these procedures."

This approach of balanced parenting, employing the occasional use of spanking, is advocated by several child rearing experts. In the hands of loving parents, a spanking to the buttocks of a defiant toddler in appropriate settings is a powerful motivator to correct behavior and an effective deterrent to disobedience.

Argument #9: Adults who were spanked as children are at risk for using violence as a means of resolving conflicts as adults.

Counterpoint: This theory comes from work done by Murray Straus of the Family Research Lab at the University of New Hampshire. Straus' conclusions are based upon theoretical models and survey results of adults recalling spankings as teenagers. His work is not clinical research, and many experts believe that his conclusions go far beyond his data. As with most of Straus' survey research, teenage spanking is the focus, not the selective use of spanking of young children by reasonable parents. The evidence for his conclusion disappears when parental spanking is measured between the ages of 2 and 8 years, and when childhood aggression is measured at a later age.

In a 1994 review article on corporal punishment, Dr. Robert E. Larzelere, a director of research at Boys Town, Nebraska, presents evidence supporting a parent's selective use of spanking of children, particularly those 2 to 6 years old. After thoroughly reviewing the literature, Larzelere concludes that any association between spanking and antisocial ag-
gressiveness in children is insignificant and artifactual. After a decade of longitudinal study of children beginning in third grade, Dr. Leonard Eron found no association between punishment (including spanking) and later aggression. Eron, a clinical psychologist at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research, concluded, Larzelere concludes that any association between spanking and antisocial aggressiveness in children is insignificant and artifactual.

"Upon follow-up 10 years after the original data collection, we found that 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."21

Again, it is the total pattern of parenting that determines the outcome of a parent's efforts.

**Argument #10:** Spanking leads a parent to use harmful forms of corporal punishment which lead to physical child abuse.

**Counterpoint:** The abuse potential when loving parents use appropriate disciplinary spanking is very low. Since parents have a natural affection for their children, they are more prone to underutilize spanking than to overutilize it. Both empirical data and professional opinion oppose the concept of a causal relationship between spanking and child abuse.

Surveys indicate that 70 to 90 percent of parents of preschoolers use spanking,22 yet the incidence of physical child abuse in the America is only about 5 percent. Statistically, the two practices are far apart. Furthermore, over the past decade reports of child abuse have steadily risen while approval for parental spanking has steadily declined.23

More than 70 percent of primary care pediatricians reject the idea that spanking sets the stage for parents to engage in forms of physical abuse.24 Teaching parents appropriate spanking may actually reduce child abuse, according to Larzelere, in his 1994 review article on corporal punishment.25 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 anger26 and explosive attacks on their child.27

Parental child abuse is an interactive process involving parental competence, parental and child temperaments, and situational demands.28 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 cannot be simply explained by a parent’s use of spanking.

In a letter to the editor in a 1995 issue of *Pediatrics*, Drs. Lawrence S. Wissow and Debra Roter of Johns Hopkins University's pediatrics department acknowledge that a definitive link between spanking and child abuse has yet to be established.29

Finally, the Swedish experiment to reduce child abuse by banning spanking seems to be failing. In 1980, one year after this ban was adopted, the rate of child beatings was twice that of the United States.30 According to a 1995 report from the government organization Statistics Sweden, police reports of child abuse by family members rose four-fold from 1984 to 1994, while reports of teen violence increased nearly six-fold.31

Most experts agree that spanking and child abuse are not on the same continuum, but are very different entities. With parenting, it is the "user" and how a measure is used much more than the measure used that determines the outcome of the disciplinary effort. Clearly, spanking can be safely used in the discipline of young children with an excellent outcome. The proper use of spanking may actually reduce a parent’s risk of abusing the child.

**The Swedish experiment to reduce child abuse by banning spanking seems to be failing.**

**Argument #11:** Spanking is never necessary.

**Counterpoint:** All children need a combination of encouragement and correction as they are disciplined to become socially responsible individuals. In order for correction to deter disobedient behavior, the consequence imposed upon the child must outweigh the pleasure of the disobedient act. For very compliant children,
milder forms of correction will suffice and spanking may never be necessary. For more defiant children who refuse to comply with or be persuaded by milder consequences such as time-out, spanking is useful, effective, and appropriate.

Conclusion

The subject of disciplinary spanking should be evaluated from a factual and philosophical perspective. It must be distinguished from abusive, harmful forms of corporal punishment. Appropriate disciplinary spanking can play an important role in optimal child development, and has been found in prospective studies to be a part of the parenting style associated with

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the best outcomes. There is no evidence that mild spanking is harmful. Indeed, spanking is supported by history, research, and a majority of primary care physicians.

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Guidelines for Disciplinary Spanking

The following are guidelines that Dr. Den Trumball has used to advise the parents he serves in disciplining children. These guidelines should help policymakers appreciate the legitimacy 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, time-out, and logical consequences, should be used initially, followed by spanking when noncompliance persists. Spanking has 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 a 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, never for revenge.

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 spank 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 spans should be 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 never cause physical injury.

9. If properly administered spankings are ineffective, other appropriate disciplinary responses should be tried, or the parent should seek professional help. Parents should never increase the intensity of spankings.
### Endnotes

2. Lyons, Dr. John S., Anderson, Rachel L., and Larson, Dr. David B., memo.
25. Larzelere, Dr. Robert E., op. cit.
27. Baumrind, Dr. Diana, op. cit.
30. Larzelere, Dr. Robert E., op. cit.