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Should the use of corporal punishment by parents be considered child abuse?

EDITORS' NOTE: Corporal punishment (i.e., any hitting of children, in any form) is common in this country as well as in many others. Is it a form of abuse, or is it a necessary option for parents to use in socializing their children? Is it the reflection of cultural differences in parenting practices that should be respected? In this debate, two authors provide arguments against considering corporal punishment child abuse, one an academic and one the director of an organization called the Center for Affirmative Parenting.

Murray A. Straus, Ph.D., says YES. He is Professor of Sociology and Co-Director of the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire. He has served as president of the National Council on Family Relations (1972-1973), the Society for the Study of Social Problems (1988-1989), and the Eastern Sociological Society (1990-1991). In 1977, he received the Ernest W. Burgess Award of the National Council of Family Relations for outstanding research on the family. He is the author of many articles and author or coauthor of 15 books, including the *Handbook of Family Measurement Techniques* (3rd ed., 1990) and *Physical Violence In American Families* (1990). He is currently writing a book on corporal punishment titled *Beating the Devil Out of Them: Corporal Punishment in American Families*.

Robert E. Larzelere, Ph.D., argues NO. He is Director of Residential Research at Boys Town, where he is doing research on treatment of childhood sex abuse victims and on parental discipline. He is the author of the methodology chapter in *The Handbook of Marriage and the Family* and has published 17 articles in a variety of social scientific journals.

John K. Rosemond also argues NO. He is a family psychologist and Director of the Center for Affirmative Parenting in Gastonia, North Carolina. He is the author of *John Rosemond's Six-Point Plan for Raising Happy, Healthy Children, Ending the Homework Hassle and Parent Power!*

Corporal punishment is the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury, for purposes of correction or control of the child's behavior. The most frequent forms are spanking, slapping, grabbing or shoving a child "roughly" (i.e., with more force than is needed to move the child), and hitting with certain traditionally acceptable objects such as a hairbrush, belt, ruler, or paddle. Such acts by parents are legal and considered morally correct everywhere in the United States. In a 1986 National Opinion Research Center survey of persons age 18 and over, 84% agreed with the statement "It is sometimes necessary to give a child a good hard spanking." Between 90% and 100% of parents have actually used corporal punishment (Wauchope & Straus, 1990).

One way to answer the question of whether a certain type of parent behavior is abusive uses the criterion of whether the behavior puts the child at risk of injury (either physical or psychological) that is greater than the risk of alternative modes of child rearing. That criterion will be used in this argument.

It is well known that physical "abuse" (i.e., physical force that causes injury or has a high probability of causing injury) also tends to cause serious psychological problems and increases the probability of juvenile delinquency. It is also well recognized that when abused children grow up, they are more likely than those who were not abused to abuse children physically and to engage in crime (Elmer & Gregg, 1967; Widom, 1989; Wolfe, 1987), even though such outcomes are far from inevitable. However, one almost never hears about the research showing that ordinary and legal corporal punishment of a misbehaving child has the same consequences as physical abuse, even though not as strong. One reason these findings are not accepted is that they imply that almost all American parents are guilty of abuse, including those who write books of advice for parents and child psychology textbooks. So it is no wonder that the existence of research showing the harmful effects of spanking is one of the best-kept secrets of American child psychology.

The evidence linking corporal punishment to aggression comes from many different studies (Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder, & Huesmann, 1977; Maurer, 1974; Parke & Slaby, 1983; Straus, 1991). The evidence linking corporal punishment with other psychological problems comes from analyses of the 2,143 families in the First National Family Violence Survey (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980) and 6,002 families in the Second National Family Violence Survey (Straus & Gelles, 1990). Both surveys found that close to 100% of

parents of toddlers and half of parents of early teenage children used corporal punishment with their children. About the same proportion reported that they themselves were hit by their parents when they were adolescents.

These high rates of hitting adolescents indicate the pervasiveness of corporal punishment in the rearing of American children. They are also important because some of the research findings are based on whether the children were hit by parents when they were adolescents. As that is the majority of American children, those findings cannot be dismissed as representing only a small group of exceptional cases. Moreover, the findings from these two surveys are based on analyses that controlled statistically for possible overlap of corporal punishment with the age and socioeconomic status of the parents, the gender of the parent and the child, whether the parents explained what they were doing, and whether there was also violence between the parents.

Corporal Punishment Increases Aggression and Delinquency

The survey that asked about whether children sometimes need "a good hard spanking" also asked if spanking would be appropriate in three situations. For a child's not cleaning up his or her room, only 9% felt that spanking was appropriate. For stealing something, the figure went up to 27%. For hitting another child, it was 41%. If the survey had asked about hitting a parent, the percentage might have reached 90%.

There is a double message in these statistics. On the one hand, the parents are saying that hitting another person is a terrible thing to do. On the other hand, they are also saying *by example* that when someone does something that is clearly wrong, it is morally correct to hit. The child learns both messages, and then has to apply both principles. When the child applies those principles it is likely to produce an *increase* in that child's hitting other children. This is because children usually hit other children precisely because they are doing something that is clearly wrong, such as taking toys or throwing water at someone they shouldn't.

Corporal punishment therefore teaches the morality of hitting. But that lesson is only one part of the "hidden curriculum" that accompanies each use of corporal punishment. Another key element of the hidden curriculum is that "those who love you are those who hit you." This is because virtually the only adults who hit infants and toddlers are those they love most—their parents. This creates the confusion of love and violence that is such a pernicious aspect of relationships between men and women. It also implicitly teaches

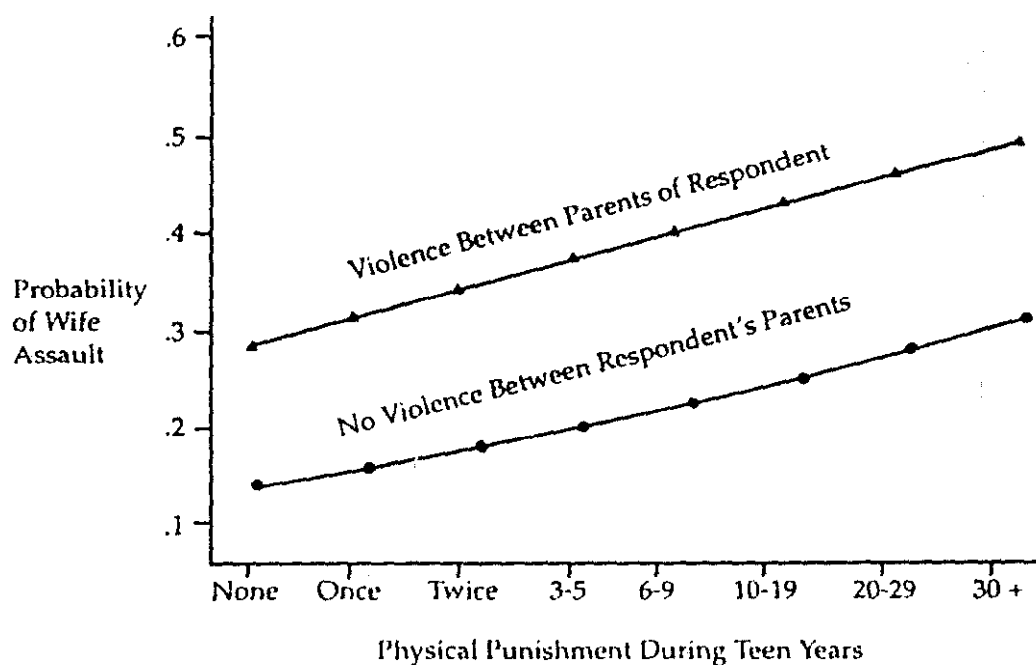


Figure 12.1. Probability of Wife Assault by Physical Punishment During Teen Years

that it is morally acceptable to hit those you love when they "do wrong." The trouble with these parts of the hidden curriculum is that they are almost a recipe for violence between spouses later in life, because, sooner or later, almost all spouses "do wrong" and "won't listen to reason," as the other spouse sees it. The results can be seen in Figure 12.1. It shows that the more corporal punishment individuals experienced as children, the greater the percentage who, only a few years later in life, hit their spouses. Figure 12.1 also shows that the increased risk of marital violence occurs among both those whose parents were violent to each other (upper line) and those whose parents were not (lower line). These findings help explain the high rate of violence between couples found in many recent studies (Gelles & Straus, 1988; Straus & Gelles, 1990).

Figure 12.2 shows that the more physical punishment individuals experienced as children, the greater the proportion who, as adults, went beyond ordinary corporal punishment and attacked their children severely enough for it to be considered child abuse. The two plot lines in Figure 12.2 show that this occurs regardless of whether there was also violence between the parents. Relationships similar to those in Figure 12.1 were also found between corporal punishment and delinquency, and between corporal punishment and assaults on people other than family members (Straus, 1991).

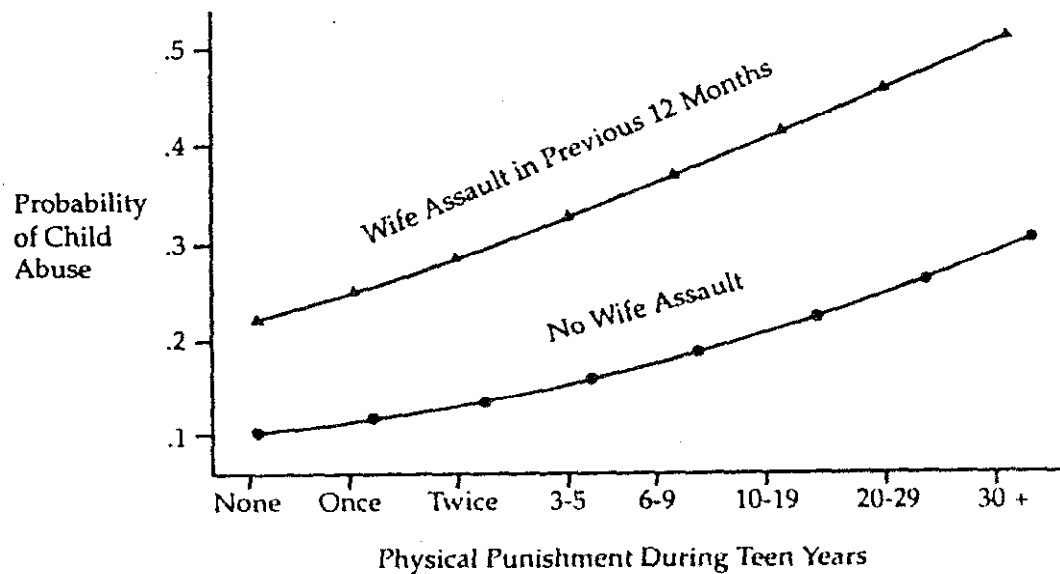


Figure 12.2. Probability of Child Abuse by Physical Punishment During Teen Years

Drinking Problems, Depression, and Suicide

In a recent study, a colleague and I analyzed physical punishment while holding constant the effects of other variables that might be the real explanation for the seeming adverse effects (Straus & Kaufman Kantor, 1992). We found that regardless of whether there was marital violence, for men as well as women, and for persons of both low and high socioeconomic status, the more corporal punishment experienced in the teen years, the higher the percentage who have a drinking problem (Figure 12.3), the higher the percentage who have depressive symptoms, and the higher the percentage who thought about killing themselves during the 12 months prior to the time they were interviewed (Figure 12.4).

Corporal Punishment Is a Risk Factor

It would be a mistake to think that the findings illustrated in Figures 12.1-12.4 show that corporal punishment inevitably leads to aggression, drinking problems, suicide, and so on. That could hardly be the case, or the human race would not have survived. Instead of a one-to-one causal relationship, corporal punishment is what epidemiologists call a "risk factor." A war is an example

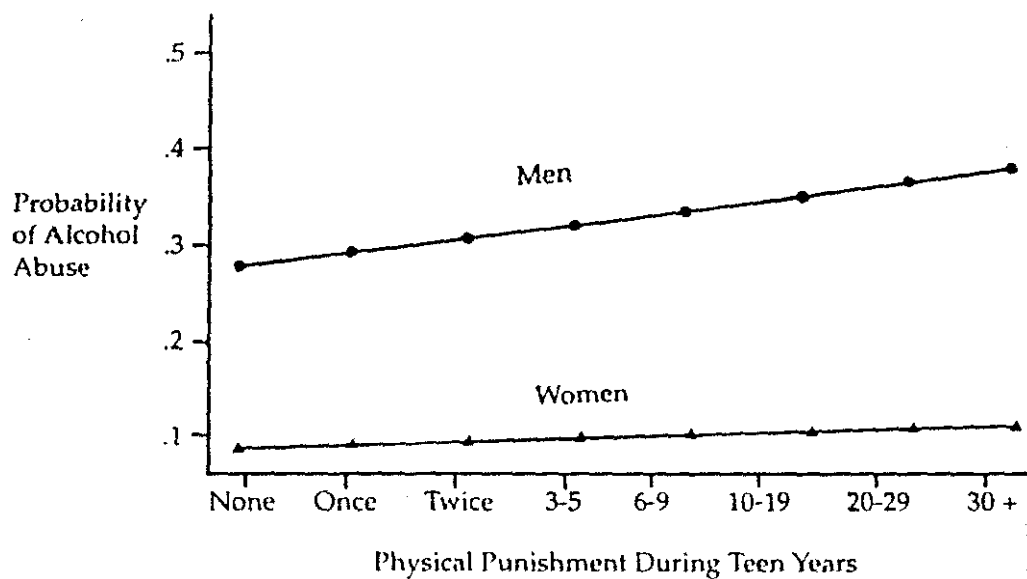


Figure 12.3. Probability of Alcohol Abuse by Physical Punishment During Teen Years

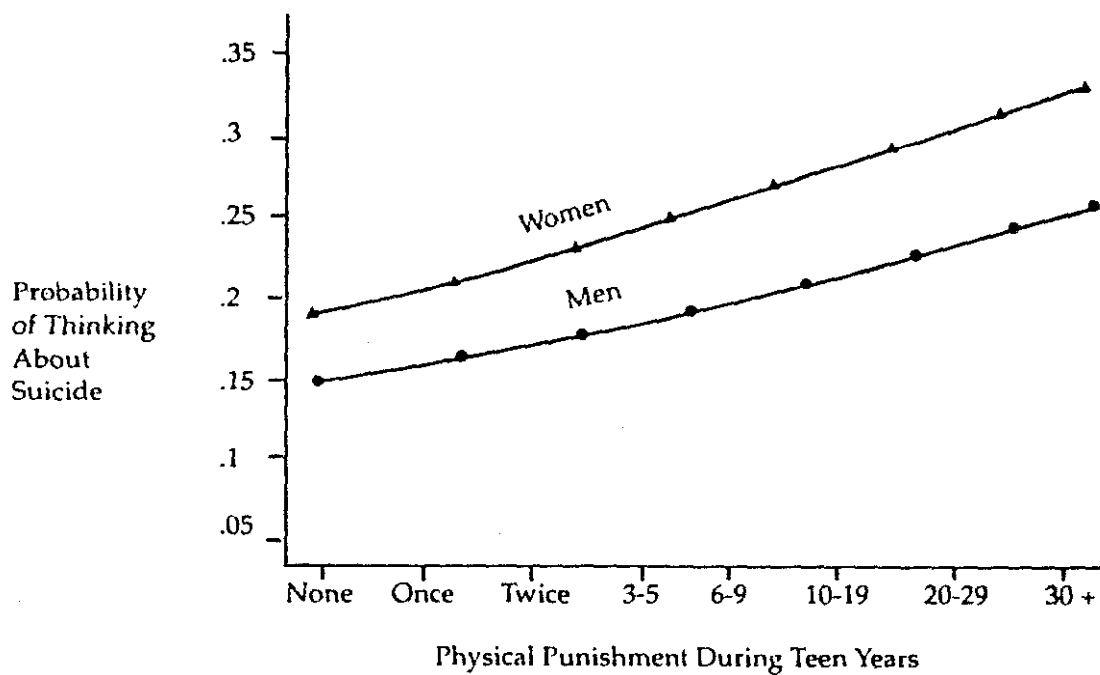


Figure 12.4. Probability of Thinking About Suicide by Physical Punishment During Teen Years

of a risk factor. It increases the risk of being killed, but even in countries that suffered millions of casualties in World War II, only a small percentage of

the population were killed. Heavy smoking (a pack a day or more) is a risk factor. It increases the risk of dying of lung cancer 34 times, but despite that, two-thirds of those who smoke this much do *not* die of any smoking-related diseases (Mattson, Pollack, & Cullen, 1987). Corporal punishment is also a risk factor. Like most pack-a-day smokers, most children who are hit by parents will experience few or no long-term problems, but the proportion who do is 1.8 to 3.9 times greater, depending on the type of problem.

Spanking Is Not Necessary

By and large, parents do not like to hit children. They do so because they want to produce well-behaved children and adults. So it is ironic and tragic that using corporal punishment to deal with immediate problems *increases* the probability that the child will ultimately engage in delinquent and criminal acts, have a drinking problem, become depressed or suicidal, and so on. Moreover, research now under way shows a number of other adverse effects that, because of space limitations, cannot be discussed in this chapter, including an increased probability of drug use, alienation, and lowered occupational and economic achievement.

There is no need to expose our children to these risks for the sake of the immediate control that corporal punishment seems to provide, because the evidence is that corporal punishment is not more effective than alternative modes of dealing with misbehavior. There is an almost limitless list of alternatives, such as expressing outrage at the misbehavior, explaining, time-out, removing the child from the situation, denying privileges, and refusing to continue an activity unless the child corrects his or her behavior.

Spanking Should Be Illegal

The laws of every state permit parents to use corporal punishment, and the informal cultural norms verge on requiring it "when necessary." This cultural norm should be replaced by one that says that a child should *never* be hit. Those are the rules for employees and even prisoners. We owe our children and ourselves nothing less. That has been the law in Sweden since 1979, and several other countries have followed that lead. If a Swedish parent does use corporal punishment, he or she is not punished. Instead, the transgression is taken as evidence that the parent is having trouble managing the child and needs help, and the help is provided.

There are signs that other industrial nations are moving to outlaw corporal punishment. Many long-run benefits are likely to accrue when this happens in the United States. For parents it will mean, on average, less hassle in bringing up children; it should also result in better-behaved children. For children it will mean less risk of being physically abused and less risk of being delinquent. For the next generation of Americans it will mean less wife beating, "street crime," drug and alcohol abuse, and depression and suicide, and greater occupational and economic achievement. For American society, bringing up children without any use of corporal punishment is likely to result in less money being expended on treatment for the many social and psychological problems that the use of corporal punishment engenders; the nation will be healthier, less violent, and wealthier.

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NO**ROBERT E. LARZELERE**

Some corporal punishment used by parents is clearly abusive, as evidenced by unacceptable rates of physical child abuse in our society (Straus & Gelles, 1986). The controversial aspect of this issue concerns whether all corporal punishment by parents should also be considered abusive. Because of the high rates of child abuse, several advocates are pushing an Eighteenth Amendment type of approach to its prevention. Just as that amendment failed to stop alcohol abuse, the available evidence suggests that a blanket prohibition of all parental spanking would also be counterproductive, an overly simplistic solution to the child abuse problem.

An alternative preventive approach is to clarify the distinctions between abusive and beneficial forms of corporal punishment. The available data, though sketchy, indicate that parental spanking is generally beneficial to the child at least under the following conditions:

1. Spanking is limited to a maximum of two slaps to the buttocks with an open hand.
2. The child is between ages 2 and 6.
3. Spanking is used to supplement positive parenting, not to replace it.
4. Spanking is used primarily to back up less aversive discipline responses, such as verbal correction or time-out.

Behavioral parent training programs have done an excellent job of documenting their own effectiveness for reducing children's behavior problems. These programs include a time-out discipline response to targeted misbehavior. Most behavioral programs for children from ages 2 to about 10 also prescribe a detailed spanking procedure to be used only for noncompliance with time-out. For example, Forehand and McMahon (1981) specify:

The parent is then instructed what to do if the child decides to leave time out while it is still in force. The child should be immediately returned to the chair. The first time this ever occurs, the parent states, "If you get off the chair again, I will spank you." This warning is only presented once. . . . If the child gets off the chair again, the parent returns the child to the time out area. She or he then administers two (and only two) spanks on the child's bottom with an open hand. (pp. 79-80)

They go on to say, "While we are basically opposed to physical punishment, we have found a mild spanking to be the most feasible backup for the

child leaving the time out chair" (p. 80). Research has shown that such a backup procedure improves the effectiveness of time-out (Bean & Roberts, 1981). Further, the only alternative backup procedure that has done as well at improving time-out compliance is the "barrier" method, which could be considered even more aversive than a mild spanking (Day & Roberts, 1983; Roberts, 1988; Roberts & Powers, 1990). It involves using a barrier (e.g., a 4-foot-high plywood sheet) to prevent a child from escaping the time-out room. Other backups, such as a holding procedure (Roberts & Powers, 1990) and response cost (McMahon & Wells, 1990), work significantly less effectively. Other behavioral parent training programs for children under 9 years of age also explicitly prescribe a mild spanking to enforce time-out compliance (e.g., Barkley, 1987; Dangel & Polster, 1984).

A second line of research has found that a combination of punishment and reasoning delays the next misbehavior recurrence in toddlers significantly longer than does punishment alone, reasoning alone, or other discipline responses (Larzelere, in press; Larzelere & Schneider, 1991). This holds true for both corporal and noncorporal punishment and for both fighting and disobedience. The combination of punishment and reasoning was found to reduce the subsequent probability of a fighting recurrence by 32% and a disobedience recurrence by 16%. The only response that was as effective as a combination of reasoning and corporal punishment was a combination of noncorporal punishment and reasoning. The latter combination was equally effective for fighting incidents and slightly but not significantly more effective for disobedience incidents (Larzelere & Schneider, 1991).

A further advantage of pairing reasoning with punishment during the toddler years is that it increases the effectiveness of reasoning alone. Sather (1992) found that reasoning alone delays the next misbehavior recurrence longer to the extent it had been recently combined with punishment. This increased effectiveness of a reasoning-alone response occurred whether the recent backup consisted of corporal or noncorporal punishment.

Together, these results suggest the following view of optimal parental discipline responses: In the toddler years, parents should first respond with the least aversive discipline they think will stop the misbehavior. If that does not elicit compliance, they should then turn to more aversive responses, such as noncorporal consequences (e.g., time-out). If the child still fails to comply with the noncorporal consequences, such noncompliance should result in a mild prescribed spanking, patterned after Forehand and McMahon's (1981) guidelines. Such a sequence will make both nonpunitive discipline responses (e.g., reasoning) and noncorporal punishment (e.g., time-out) more effective in achieving compliance later on. Consequently, parents will use such discipline responses more frequently and more effectively, and they will thus use

more aversive responses less frequently as the child grows older. This developmental pattern will lead to the effectiveness of noncorporal punishment documented by parent trainers and to the subsequent tendency for parents of well-behaved preadolescents to resort more frequently to reasoning alone than do other parents (Hoffman, 1977).

This view of parental discipline responses is consistent with other lines of research. For example, Baumrind (1973) found authoritative parenting to be associated with optimal child development, both in social responsibility and in individual initiative. According to Baumrind, authoritative parenting is characterized by firm control, high nurturance, and nonrestrictiveness. Authoritative parents are as willing as authoritarian parents and more willing than permissive parents to use corporal punishment as part of their firm control. Baumrind concludes, "The evidence . . . does not indicate that negative reinforcement or corporal punishment per se were harmful or ineffective procedures, but rather that the total pattern of parental control determined the effects on the child of these procedures" (p. 36).

Many readers may be asking, But what about all the empirical evidence against spanking? The major evidence against ordinary parental spanking is that its use correlates positively with antisocial aggression in children. In a review of the relevant literature, the average correlation was a meager .16, explaining only 3% of the variability in children's antisocial aggression (Steinmetz, 1979). Further, some or all of that 3% may be accounted for by the children's effect on the parents instead of the parents' effect on the children. In four longitudinal studies, only 1 of 26 tests showed a significant association between spanking and subsequent aggression. The average correlation between spanking at the first measurement occasion and antisocial aggression at the second measurement occasion was .03 (Chamberlin, 1978; Johannesson, 1974; Lefkowitz, Huesmann, & Eron, 1978; Sears, 1961).

Other evidence against the aggression-modeling view of spanking is that the outlawing of all parental spanking in Sweden may have increased that country's child abuse rate. Gelles and Edfeldt (1986) found that, one year after spanking by parents was abolished, the Swedish rate of child beating or threatening to use or using a weapon against a child was two to four times as large as the U.S. rate. However, they report that this did not produce a significant difference on their indices of severe violence. (It probably would have been significantly higher than the 1985 U.S. rate reported in Straus & Gelles, 1986.) This high rate of child abuse is surprising, because Sweden is less violent than the United States on other measures. For example, the Swedish murder rate is less than half that of the United States. Further, the antispanking law would supposedly suppress self-reports of child abuse, even phone reports made anonymously. So there are several reasons to expect a lower

child abuse rate in Sweden than in the United States, and the effect of outlawing spanking is one of the few possible explanations for why it was so high in 1980.

But what mechanism might lead to the paradoxical result that banning spanking would increase rates of child abuse? We have little empirical evidence on this issue because of the widespread assumption that decreased spanking would decrease child abuse. Baumrind (1973) does report that permissive parents, who were the most antispanking of her three parenting groups, admitted more often to "explosive attacks of rage in which they inflicted more pain or injury upon the child than they had intended. . . . Permissive parents apparently became violent because they felt that they could neither control the child's behavior nor tolerate its effect upon themselves" (p. 35). So it could be that a prohibition against all spanking eliminates the type of mild spanking that serves to maintain control before a child's misbehavior leads to an escalation into a coercive cycle of violence (Patterson, 1982). The use of mild spanking as a backup for less aversive discipline responses may subsequently make those less aversive responses more effective by themselves, thereby eliminating the need for further corporal punishment.

Given the meagerness of the data against moderate spanking, the anti-spanking movement is in danger of becoming merely an attempt to impose the values of one segment of society upon others. Well-educated social scientists tend to be highly verbal and thus to favor exclusively verbal solutions to interpersonal conflict of all kinds. To others, however, actions may speak louder than words, a reasonable alternative as long as those actions are not abusive. For example, one parent training program that used lower socioeconomic groups of parents as an advisory committee in its development found that those parents advocated the inclusion of additional material about spanking in the program (Dangel & Polster, 1984). Asian immigrants who have traditionally included spanking as part of parental socialization but hear that spanking may result in their children being taken away from them in the United States often end up abdicating their parental responsibility altogether (Thomas, 1992). At a minimum, some implementations of the current child abuse laws have been insensitive to cultural differences (Thomas, 1992), and these problems of cultural insensitivity may be increased if moderate forms of spanking also come to be considered abusive.

In conclusion, the available evidence suggests that some moderate spanking of children from 2 to 6 years of age is effective, particularly as a backup to less aversive discipline responses such as reasoning and time-out. We need more research if we are to be able to distinguish further between appropriate from inappropriate uses of corporal punishment. Until we do our research homework on potentially beneficial spanking, it is premature to impose a guilt trip on the vast majority of parents for ordinary spanking. However, we are

in a position to suggest spanking guidelines to parents who intend to include it in their discipline repertoire. It is conceivable that such an approach may do more to reduce child abuse and other negative effects on children than would a premature call to consider all spanking abuse in order to abolish it.

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NO**JOHN K. ROSEMOND**

Discussion (hah!) of this volatile topic generally begins with someone asking, Do you *believe* in spanking children? Strange—as if spanking is some sort of religious principle or experience. There are some, in fact, who would have parents believe that by spanking children on a regular basis, they are pleasing God and doing His (this is definitely a guy-God) will, but I am not one of those.

Speaking for myself, spanking has never been a religious experience. I do not believe that one spoils the child by sparing the rod, or switch, or belt, or hand. But, true confession time, I have, on occasion, spanked my children. When they were much younger, that is (they're both adults). And, in retrospect, given the same situations and outrageous behaviors, I would probably do so again. I have no regrets. But I don't *believe* in spanking.

I am not of an extremist persuasion on this issue. I issue that disclaimer realizing that by admitting I've taken an occasional hand (and only a hand, I assure you) to my children, I join, in the minds of some, the ranks of the vile. Nonetheless, I do not believe that spankings are necessary to the proper rearing of children. Nor do I believe that spankings are, in and of themselves, abusive.

So, what *do* I believe? I believe that spankings are a lousy form of discipline. In fact, I believe they do not warrant being classed as discipline at all. At best, a spanking is nothing more, nothing less, than a dramatic form of nonverbal communication. It is a means of getting the attention of a child who needs to give that attention quickly; of terminating a behavior that is rapidly escalating out of control; of putting an exclamation point in front of a message the child needs to hear.

The spontaneously delivered (as in without warning) spank to the child's rear end says, "Stop!" and "Now hear this!" Having terminated the behavior in question (a tantrum, for example), having secured the child's attention, it is necessary that the parent follow through with a consequence of one sort or another. The spank is merely the prelude to the consequence. In the final analysis, the spank is, therefore, inconsequential. The follow-through is what's important. Without proper follow-through a spanking is, at the very least, stupid.

The parent might send the child to his or her room for a time, or take away a privilege for the remainder of the day, or simply give the child a stern reprimand. For the most part, and for the purposes of our discussion, the form the consequence takes is fairly arbitrary. All-important is that the spanking not be the consequence, the end in itself. When spankings are treated as an

end in and of themselves, parents misuse, overuse, and edge ever closer to abuse. No doubt about it, spankings can be administered abusively.

But, then, banishing a child to his or her room can be done abusively. It would be abusive, for instance, to lock the child's door and keep the child in confinement for days. And one can reprimand a child about his or her misbehavior abusively. It would, for example, be abusive to refer to the child as a "little shit." But sending children to their rooms and reprimanding them are not, in and of themselves, abusive. Nor are spankings. But, in the wrong hands, they can be.

At this point, the naysayer is probably inclined to say, Given that there's no way of knowing in advance who will spank abusively and who will not, let's just bypass the risk by making spanking illegal. The same argument can be made for sending children to their rooms and talking to them, thus it is absurd, rhetorical (as all the naysayer's arguments will prove to be).

The term *corporal punishment* is problematic to this, uh, discussion because a properly administered spanking is not, strictly speaking, a punishment. Nor, for that matter, is a wrongly administered spanking. According to the scientific definition, a punishment is a consequence that renders the behavior that preceded it less likely to reoccur. But people who believe they can spank certain behaviors out of existence are going to discover otherwise. Their frustration is likely to drive them to spank more often and harder. Almost inevitably, these folks wind up spanking abusively. But it is important to understand that these are not necessarily abusive people. Often, perhaps more often than not, these are people who want to do right by their children. The proper intervention here is education, not legislation.

When I am asked, by the courts or social services, to counsel parents who have spanked a child or children abusively, I rarely waste time attempting to persuade these folks to stop spanking. Instead of trying to paddle back up the stream of their upbringing, I advise them on how to spank *strategically*, as in occasionally, at carefully selected times, and only to secure the child's attention. This has not won me friends at social services (where one can generally find one of the largest concentration of emotionally charged zealots in the free world), but has definitely reduced recidivism among these clients.

It is appropriate, at this point, to define what, in my estimation, constitutes an appropriate manner of applying a spank to a child's rear end. I believe (that word again) in spanking as a first resort; in spanking in anger; in spanking only with one's hand; in spanking only the child's rear end; in administering only one, certainly no more than two, spanks at a time. I also believe that the more often one spansks, the less effective the spankings will be at terminating undesirable behaviors and securing the child's attention. In order to retain a

spank's effectiveness, parents must spank only once in the proverbial blue moon.

Spank as a first resort? That's right. Spontaneously. As soon as you see that the child is losing control or as soon as the child commits whatever completely outrageous act (e.g., spitting on an adult). Whack! "Now hear this!" Send the child to his room. Done. As one builds up to a spanking with warning and threat, one builds frustration. When, under those "last resort" circumstances, the spanking finally comes, it is likely to consist of a whack, whack, whack, whack, whack, whack, whack, whack, whack. That's when spankings become abuse.

Spank in anger? That's right. If you're going to spank a child's rear end, it is rightful to make perfectly clear you disapprove of the child's behavior. You are displeased, as in angry. Not in a rage, however. You are not in a rage because you've spanked as a first resort. You are just angry, and you are able to communicate that emotion clearly.

Add the hand only, not belts, switches, spoons, or whatever. Add to the child's rear end only, not thighs, face, arms, or whatever. Add once, maybe twice. Add the message and the consequence, the follow-through, and you've got a properly administered spanking. But I don't believe in spanking. You can do without them, if you choose.

"So, then, let's do without them!" No, I said you can do without them. You choose for you. I'll choose for me. You accept responsibility for your behavior, but do me the favor of not trying to accept responsibility for mine, okay? I'll handle that myself, thank you.

You see, what really, truly bothers me about the naysayers is they think they know what's best for everyone. Beneath the veneer of social concern, they're pseudointellectual, politically correct megalomaniacs. If you don't agree with them, they want to pass laws that make you agree, or at least conform to their ideas of what constitutes appropriate behavior. They believe they are ordained, by virtue of moral superiority, to create a perfect world, and have a right to impose that vision on us all, by whatever means necessary.

They say spankings are abusive. Why? Because they are acts of violence. I say not necessarily. Spankings can be violent. On the other hand, spankings can simply be dramatic. But the naysayers' swollen egos prevent acceptance of any other point of view. There is but one proper point of view. Theirs.

They say that spankings teach children that violence is an acceptable means of responding to interpersonal conflict. This, they assert, is "proven" by the "fact" that violent and/or abusive adults, almost to the person, were abused as children. Accepting the truth in the latter, it nonetheless proves nothing about spanking. By assuming, a priori, that spankings are abusive, the argument violates one of the precepts of rational inquiry. Furthermore, the

argument fails to consider the many, many, many people who were spanked as children (some, like myself, fairly often) who are not, as adults, violent or abusive. (I realize, however, that by admitting I was spanked as a child and that I spanked my children, I've "proven" their argument.)

They wave research that "clearly proves" that spanking destroys self-esteem, promotes violent behavior, and so on. The research stinks. All of it. There is not one study into the effects of spanking on children that's worth the paper it's written on. Every single one of them (I've reviewed them all, I think) is rife with design problems. This so-called research would be ridiculed in a sophomore course in experimental psychology.

In the first place, there is no research that tracks children who were spanked properly as opposed to improperly. To my knowledge, that distinction has never been made by any researcher. That reveals something important about many, if not most, of these so-called researchers. They're not doing research at all. They're trying to promote their own personal agendas. And they cloak this promotion, this shameless propaganda effort, in the guise of "science."

But as long as we're talking lousy research, I'll bring out some of my own. We'll compare lousy research with lousy research. That way, we'll stand on equal ground. My lousy research involves me and my two children. As I said, I spanked them. They're fine, thank you. They're achievement oriented, but not compulsively so. They're responsible, but do not take life seriously. They're gregarious, but not self-centered. They've never given one indication of an inclination toward violence. They're not perfect. They have their share of problems, as do we all, but not big ones. Just typical ones, the ones that come with lack of experience and maturity. Therefore, the research—my research—disproves all the other research. My research "clearly proves" there is a proper way of spanking children that is not abusive, that does not result in damage to a child's self-esteem or significant emotional damage of any other description.

When all is said and done, this argument isn't about spanking, or corporal punishment. It's about people. It's about people who want to create a perfect world. It's about politics and political correctness. It's about people who want to impose their ideology on everyone, by hook or crook. And the more frustrated they become, the more outrageous they become, the more dangerous they become. That's the problem with moral superiority, in any form. Frustrated, it inclines toward totalitarianism.

The problem with spanking is not spanking, it's people. It's a people problem that will not be solved through legislation. It will, in fact, never be completely solved, only mitigated. It can be mitigated through education. So, let's begin

the education, keeping in mind that the best, most effective educators, the ones who cause people to truly want to listen, inquire, and learn, don't promote extremist points of view.

JOHN K. ROSEMOND RESPONDS

I've come to the conclusion that this debate is more about politics than it is about psychology. The hidden agenda is the desire on the part of a vocal minority within my profession and related fields to write social policy and thereby impose their vision of a perfect world upon the rest of us.

Everyone would agree that *at some point* a spanking does indeed become abuse. Likewise, a reprimand, at some point, becomes abuse. According to the logic of the antispanking argument, therefore, we should ban the use of all "negative language" when addressing children. Or, because confining a child to his or her room puts the child at greater risk for claustrophobia, parents should be prohibited, by law, from exercising this "riskier" form of discipline. If you think these are absurd parodies of the antispanking mentality, you are naive. Let me assure you that we are talking about folks who, if given an inch in the social policy realm, will want a mile.

We are to believe spanking has a "hidden curriculum" that teaches children, first, that hitting is morally acceptable and, second, "those who love you, hit you." Antispankers cannot, of course, prove any of this. The rhetoric of the argument is emotionally seductive (which is, after all, the point of rhetoric), but in the final analysis it is nothing more than undiluted psychobabble—a construction of language, not of fact.

On the matter of studies that demonstrate a correlation between spanking and the later abuse of wives, children, and self, it should be noted that these studies—all of them—are characterized by design problems so obvious and pervasive as to send a graduate student of experimental methods into gales of laughter. For one thing, the self-reports of people who have run afoul of authorities because of such problems can hardly be relied upon. For another, correlation is not cause. For another, as every text on experimental methods will tell you, *ex post facto* investigations are next to worthless. For yet another, the authors of such studies cannot be accused of objectivity. In other words, despite the impressive bibliography, this isn't science. What we have here is a shrewd attempt on the part of social policy activists within the professional community to use psychobabble and pseudoscience as the basis for law.

According to the politically correct argument, a hand laid to a child's rear end is abuse. Americans are engaged in mass denial of this "fact." Only the chosen few see through the wall of denial. As the rest of us are unwilling to admit our error, the only option is to pass laws that turn the average parent into a criminal. Not to worry, however, because offending parents won't be

punished. They will be given "help." And **who**, pray tell, will provide this help? Why "helping professionals," of course. So the hidden agenda is not just political, but economic as well.

We are told that antispanking laws will transform us into a "healthier, less violent, and wealthier" society. In truth, such laws will only line the pockets of desperately codependent professionals whose lust for power and need to "help" people know no bounds.

ROBERT E. LARZELERE RESPONDS

Here and elsewhere, Murray Straus provides better data to support the blanket antispanking position than do other advocates for that position. The juxtaposition of his data and mine suggests some important differences between potentially abusive and beneficial uses of corporal punishment. The most relevant distinctions seem to depend upon the age of the child, the intensity of spanking, whether or not spanking is used in combination with reasoning, and whether or not spanking is used to back up less aversive discipline responses.

He also suggests an important hypothesis about the hidden curriculum of corporal punishment: Does it teach people to hit the ones they love? It will be important to get adequate data on this hypothesis and to determine whether this hidden curriculum applies to all parental uses of corporal punishment or to some types more than others.

Straus's data do show that the frequency of parental spanking of teenagers is at least a marker variable for increased risk of a wide variety of negative outcomes. The crucial question is whether such corporal punishment is a causal or noncausal marker variable. For example, being in a hospital would be a marker variable indicating an increased risk of dying. That does not imply, however, that we can reduce premature deaths by eliminating hospitals. Instead, hospitalization is a noncausal marker variable indicating that something is medically wrong, which in turn increases the risk of death. Straus has shown that frequently spanked teenagers are at increased risk for negative outcomes, but the data do not yet indicate whether spanking itself increases that risk or whether it is a noncausal marker variable. It might merely reflect the level of teenage antisocial behavior or a breakdown in the parent-child relationship. This by no means justifies parental spanking of teenagers, but simply points out that the current data do not conclusively support even a blanket prohibition of parental spanking of teenagers.

The evidence is clear that mild parental spanking is beneficial for the child under certain circumstances at least between ages 2 and 6. Straus provides a list of alternative discipline responses, but the effectiveness of the most important alternatives (explanation and time-out) has been shown to improve after being backed up with a mild spanking. This suggests that many nonspanking parents of well-behaved teenage children may have arrived at that point by shaping the effectiveness of nonspanking discipline responses with a

mild-spanking backup in earlier years. Such an optimal pattern of discipline responses should not be undermined by a premature conclusion that all spanking is abusive.

MURRAY A. STRAUS RESPONDS

Response to Larzelere

Although I admire the care and scientific skill with which Robert Larzelere has investigated this critically important issue, I would like to present here some critical points on which we disagree.

Larzelere writes as though the sole issue is whether corporal punishment is effective in correcting misbehavior. But that is only one of the issues. Just as important are the harmful side effects, such as increased risk of the child using those same methods later in life to correct the misbehavior of *a spouse*, increased risk of depression and suicide, and the danger that what starts out as ordinary corporal punishment can escalate into physical abuse. The last of these is not just a theoretical possibility; research by Kadushin and Martin (1981) shows that it is typical of the majority of physical abuse cases.

Even if, for the moment, we restrict the discussion to whether spanking is effective in correcting misbehavior, the studies cited by Larzelere and his own research found that "a combination of *noncorporal* punishment and reasoning" was as effective as corporal punishment (emphasis added). Given that the best that can be said for spanking is that it is just as effective as noncorporal punishment, why risk the possibility of harmful side effects by using corporal punishment?

The issue is not whether punishment should ever be used. Even informing a child that what he or she has done wrong has a punishment element, because that information is painful. This approach therefore combines punishment with information. I agree with Larzelere when he says that "parents should first respond with the least aversive discipline they think will stop the misbehavior." However, I disagree that spanking should ever be one of the punishments used when less aversive steps do not work.

Larzelere cites an excellent study by Baumrind, but the children of Baumrind's "authoritative" parents are socially responsible and self-directed because their parents use a combination of firm control, love, and nonrestrictiveness, not the fact that these parents also used corporal punishment occasionally. My hypothesis is that if those parents had been equally firm, loving, and nonrestrictive, but left out the corporal punishment, they would have been even more effective in producing responsible and self-directed children.

Gelles and Edfeldt's (1986) study of the Swedish law banning corporal punishment cannot be used to evaluate that law. The study was done only a

year after the law was passed, and that is too short a time for it to have had much effect. Even if the study had been done 5 or 10 years after, it would not provide data on whether the law reduced corporal punishment and physical abuse, because the rates in existence before the law was passed are unknown.

I agree that nonspanking would be a disaster if parents were to take this to mean being permissive regarding children's misbehavior. Children do need firm but loving control, as in Baumrind's authoritative group. But spanking is not needed to achieve this. Some parents, if denied the opportunity to spank, will "give up" on trying to correct misbehavior, but my guess is that these parents would be very few, because most parents are deeply committed to producing responsible children. A more likely danger is that efforts to correct misbehavior will shift from physical aggression (spanking) to verbal aggression (attempts to cause psychological pain by insulting or depreciating the worth of the child). That would truly be disastrous, because psychological attacks have even more harmful effects than do physical attacks (Vissing, Straus, Gelles, & Harrop, 1991). Consequently, educational programs to end corporal punishment must give equal weight to ending verbal attacks on children. Such programs are also needed for parents who spank, because my research shows that parents who spank the most also tend to use the most verbal aggression.

Response to Rosemond

I agree with Rosemond's view that "without proper follow-through a spanking is . . . stupid." But I also disagree with him; in my opinion, what Rosemond thinks of as "follow-through" (such as sending the child to his or her room, taking away a privilege, or administering a stern reprimand) should be the *first* step, not a follow-up. In most cases, such steps alone will do the job.

A related issue concerns Rosemond's advice "to spank *strategically*, as in occasionally, at carefully selected times." The problem is that he contradicts himself by repeated advice to "spank first" (e.g., three paragraphs earlier) and advice to use "spanking as a first resort" (the following paragraph). How limited and strategic can it be if every misbehavior is *first* dealt with by "a spank to the child's rear end"? I think that Rosemond does genuinely want parents to use spanking only rarely, but his advice to do it as a first resort almost guarantees they will do it frequently, with all the adverse effects that he himself notes.

I readily admit to starting from the assumption that spanking is "abusive," just as Rosemond starts from the opposite assumption. The difference between scientists, such as Robert Larzelere and myself, and the "zealots" and

"pseudointellectual, politically correct megalomaniacs" (who are well illustrated by John Rosemond!) is that scientists *test* their assumptions and are willing to let the findings of scientific tests have the last word. My research was designed to give the assumption that all spanking is abusive a chance to be either supported or disproved. Unfortunately for prospanking zealots such as John Rosemond, the research found that spanking is associated with harmful side effects. For various technical reasons, we cannot be sure this proves that spanking causes these problems, but we can be sure that the assumed harmful effects of spanking were given the opportunity to be disproved but were not.

Rosemond accuses researchers of shameless propaganda efforts in the name of science. I accuse him of just plain shameless propaganda. He uses the typical propagandist tools of the "big lie" and inflammatory language. He seems to think that the research can be dismissed by calling it "lousy" and saying that it "stinks."

Moreover, Rosemond's idea of evidence is to cite the example of his children and himself—both were spanked and both are okay. Smokers used to make a similar argument; now, however, we know that heavy smoking increases the risk of death from lung cancer and other smoking-related diseases 34 times. But because "only" a third of heavy smokers die from it, two-thirds can say, "I've smoked more than a pack a day all my life and I'm okay," just as Rosemond can say that he spanked his children and they're okay.

Response to Both

Although Larzelere would not put it that way, both he and Rosemond think the previous research "stinks." Some does, but much is excellent, including the study by Larzelere himself, which shows that corporal punishment is *not* more effective than other methods of discipline. In fact, all studies have design defects. However, when many studies are done that have different defects and they all nonetheless find that spanking is associated with harmful side effects, the weight of the evidence supports the idea that spanking is not necessary for bringing up children and should therefore be avoided.

Larzelere and Rosemond favor limited use of spanking but not frequent spanking. The research does show the most harmful side effects occur with frequent spanking. However, my research also shows that even when spanking is used only rarely, there is an increase in the probability of harmful side effects, but only a small increase.

Both Larzelere and Rosemond argue that it is wrong to impose the values of those opposed to spanking on groups and individuals who favor it. I strongly agree with this principle. However, I also strongly agree with

another, conflicting, principle: that it is wrong to treat children in ways that threaten their mental and physical health. The evidence is not all in, but when it is, we will have to work out an accommodation between our commitment to individual freedom and our commitment to the well-being of children and of society. In Sweden, this is done by not having a penalty for spanking. Instead, the law assumes that when parents spank, it is because they are having trouble managing a child. The Swedes try to help such parents achieve the kind of control the parents want and that children and society need. This does not involve imposing on people's values, because even parents who approve of spanking "when necessary" prefer that it never be necessary.

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