

# Spanking: Facts and Fiction

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## Definitions:

### Corporal punishment:

Synonymous with “physical punishment.” It means the intentional infliction of pain on the body for purposes of punishment or controlling behavior. It includes slapping, spanking, hitting with objects, pinching, shaking, and forcing to stand for long periods of time.

### Spanking:

Hitting with the flat of the hand usually on the buttocks for punishment or for stopping a behavior.

In the United States, spanking as punishment has shown a long-term decline. In the 1950's, ninety-nine percent of parents supported the use of corporal punishment of children. In recent years that number has fallen. Surveys generally report about fifty percent of parents supporting its use. Studies show that a majority of parents who use corporal punishment feel badly about it and don't think it works to improve behavior.

Parents who support spanking often use one of the following arguments:

- Spanking is an effective way to manage behavior.
- I got hit when I was a kid and I turned out OK.
- If we don't spank children, they'll grow up rotten.
- The bible says, “Spare the rod and spoil the child”

## Look at the facts:

### **Spanking argument #1 - “Spanking is an effective way to manage behavior”**

Hitting a small child will usually stop misbehavior temporarily. However, other ways of discipline such as verbal correction, reasoning, and time-out work as well and do not have the potential for harm that hitting does. Hitting children may actually increase misbehavior. One large study showed that the more parents spanked children for antisocial behavior, the more the antisocial behavior increased (Straus, Sugarman, & Giles-Sims, 1997). The more children are hit, the more likely they are to hit others including peers and siblings and, as adults, they are more likely to hit their spouses (Straus and Gelles, 1990; Wolfe, 1987). Hitting children teaches them that it is acceptable to hit others who are smaller and weaker. “I'm going to hit you because you hit your sister” is a hypocrisy not lost on children.

### **Spanking argument #2 - “I got hit when I was a kid and I turned out OK”**

Being spanked is an emotional event. Adults often remember with crystal clarity times they were paddled or spanked as children. Many adults look back on corporal punishment in childhood with great anger and sadness. Sometimes people say, “I was spanked as a child, and I deserved it”. It is hard for us to believe that people who loved us would intentionally hurt us. We feel the need to excuse that hurt. Studies show that even a few instances of being hit as children are associated with more depressive symptoms as adults (Strauss, 1994, Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit & Bates, 1994). A landmark meta-analysis of 88 corporal punishment research studies of over six decades showed that corporal punishment of children was associated with negative outcomes including increased delinquent and antisocial behavior, increased risk of child abuse and spousal abuse, increased risk of child aggression and adult aggression, decreased child mental health and decreased adult mental health (Gershoff, 2002). While most of us who were spanked “turned out OK”, it is likely that not being spanked would have helped us turn out to be healthier.

### **Spanking Argument #3 - “If we don't spank children, they'll grow up rotten”**

Children in more than twenty countries are growing up without being hit in homes, in daycare or in schools. Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Austria, Finland and other countries that have banned corporal punishment of children in general have low rates of interpersonal violence compared to the United States. Critics predicted that Swedish youth would grow up more unruly after parents stopped spanking because of the 1979 corporal punishment ban. Dr.

Joan Durrant who studied effects of the ban for 15 years reported that this did not happen. Her studies indicate youth did not become more unruly, under socialized or self-destructive following the ban. In fact, she said most measures demonstrated a substantial improvement in youth well-being (Durrant, 2000). Professor Adrienne Haeuser who studied these educational laws in Europe in 1981 and 1991 said "Children are receiving more discipline since the law in Sweden passed. Parents think twice and tend to rely more on verbal conflict resolution to manage their children". Discipline is important. Discipline means "to teach". We need more discipline of children such as explaining and reasoning, establishing rules and consequences, praising good behavior in children and being good models for or children. Such methods develop a child's conscience and self-control. Children who experience teaching discipline are less likely to misbehave and more likely to become self-disciplined adults.

#### **Spanking Argument #4 - "The bible says 'Spare the rod and spoil the child' and I must obey God"**

Spanking is deeply rooted in the history and culture of the United States. The bible is often used to support, even perhaps to require, that parents use corporal punishment on children. Many clergy today are speaking out against that interpretation of scripture. The Reverend Dr. Thomas E. Sagendorf, retired Methodist Minister, says the following "I can find no sanction in the teaching of Jesus or the witness of the New Testament to encourage the practice of corporal punishment at home, school or anywhere else. A number of popular voices take a different view, often quoting Old Testament scriptures to prove their point. Those who subscribe to this argument misunderstand and misuse scripture. A similar method of selective reading could just as well be used to justify slavery, suppression of women, polygamy, incest and infanticide". At its General Conference in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in April and May, 2004, the United Methodist Church passed two resolutions against corporal punishment in homes, schools and child-care. The United Methodist Church is the second largest Protestant denomination in the United States.

#### **Conclusion**

Look at the facts. Accumulated research supports the ineffectiveness and harm of corporal punishment. Children who are spanked most are more likely to be aggressive and hit others. Children hit for antisocial behaviors are more likely to increase those misbehaviors. Hitting children teaches acceptance of violence. While most of us who were spanked as children grow up to be healthy adults, spanking causes anxiety, contributes to feelings of helplessness and humiliation, and often provokes anger and a desire for revenge, feelings which have usually been repressed in adulthood but may lead to depression, adult violence, and hitting our own children. Effective discipline exists. It does not involve hitting and humiliating children.

#### **References and Resources**

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