

# Corporal Punishment: A Scientific Review of Its Use in Discipline

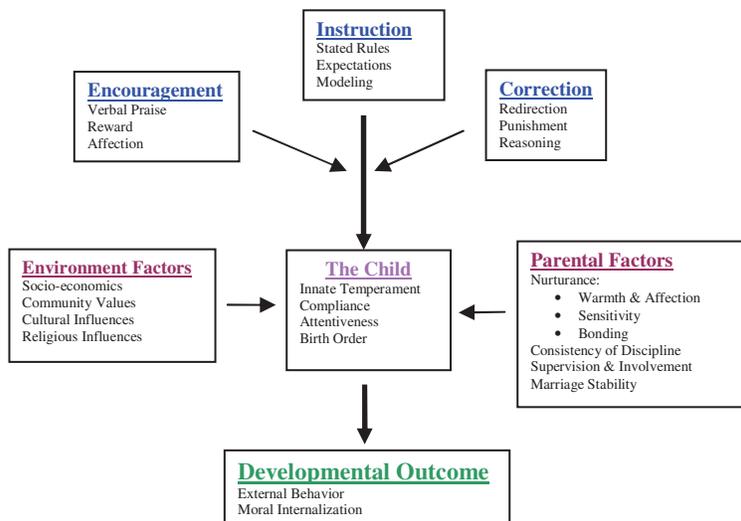
By The American College of Pediatricians

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. 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 paper examines the issue by describing the discipline process, and 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>5</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.

FIGURE 1 **DISCIPLINARY PROCESS**



## COMPONENTS OF THE DISCIPLINARY 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 for misbehavior must also be known to the child.

## Encouragement

Encouragement, specific to a child's level of development, will take the form of verbal praise, physical affection, or material reward. Parents who use little encouragement and rely upon harsh and excessive correction will fail to achieve optimal behavioral control.<sup>6</sup>

## Correction

Correction 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 will also modify behavior at this stage. As a child's mobility and assertiveness mature, correction may require aversive measures 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. Parents who balance the use of correction with encouragement produce an optimal developmental outcome in the child.<sup>6</sup>

## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

A clarification of definitions is essential in describing the effects of corporal punishment on children. *Corporal punishment* is a general term for "physical punishment."<sup>7</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>8</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>9</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>10</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.

## DISCIPLINARY SPANKING

Although 94% of American parents spank their 3-and 4-year olds at least occasionally,<sup>11</sup> most of the current literature advises against the practice. Two major perspectives in the spanking 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>12</sup> The second position, which has been called the conditional-spanking perspective,<sup>13</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>14</sup>

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

- Disciplinary spanking is grouped with other forms of corporal punishment including abusive acts, such as punching, face slapping, kicking, and beating. For example, Gershoff used a broad definition of corporal punishment and therefore 65% of her cited studies include overly harsh forms of physical punishment.<sup>15</sup>
- Research is not limited to the disciplinary spanking of young children; rather, the focus is on corporal punishment of adolescents. An example is Straus's studies which are often cited as evidence for a link between spanking during "childhood" and poor adult outcomes, such as alcohol abuse, marital violence, depression, and suicidal thinking.<sup>16</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.
- Study findings are correlational and do not show clear causation.
- The effects of disciplinary spanking are not compared against the effects of alternative disciplinary responses, such as time-out, grounding, or privilege removal.
- Studies rely upon surveys of parents as the reporters of both their children's behavior and their own discipline practices.
- Studies fail to prescribe the methodology and application of spanking and, instead, evaluate the effects of the varying personal practices of its use.
- 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.
- 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>17</sup> or on the use of reasoning,<sup>18</sup> the association of spanking with negative child behaviors disappears.

Longitudinal behavioral studies of three to ten years duration have demonstrated that a parent's use of disciplinary spanking is not linked to childhood aggressiveness.<sup>19,20,21,22</sup> Poor quality of parenting is, however, linked to childhood aggressiveness and psychological ill health.<sup>23</sup>

There is a paucity of published research focusing on ordinary, non-abusive disciplinary spanking of young children administered by loving, well-intentioned parents. In clinical field trials that meet the rigorous requirements for evidence-based medical practice, spanking proved effective and preferred as an enforcer to time-out with clinically oppositional children.<sup>24,25,26</sup> In another randomized clinical field trial, the two-swat spank procedure was found to be "the most feasible back-up for the child leaving the time-out chair."<sup>27</sup> Using spanking in this manner strengthens the milder measure, time-out, and thereby reducing the need for more aversive measures.

Long-term longitudinal studies of parenting styles have consistently found that the effects of disciplinary spanking, or any non-abusive disciplinary measure, is primarily determined by the total pattern of parental control and nurturance.<sup>21, 23</sup> The authoritative parenting style, which is

marked by a balance of firm behavior control (including disciplinary spanking) and generous encouragement of the child, results in optimal child development. There has been no evidence that parental use of spanking fosters aggression in young children.<sup>28</sup>

In a systematic review of the literature, Larzelere examined child outcomes in families where parents used nonabusive, customary physical punishment.<sup>29</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:<sup>(p.215)</sup>

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>30</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 disciplinary 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 likely respond to reasoning and less assertive corrective methods, such as privilege removal and logical consequences, thereby diminishing any need for spanking.

## CONCLUSION

When advising parents on child discipline, pediatricians should emphasize the importance of balancing correction with encouragement. The parent-child relationship is pivotal in determining the success of any disciplinary measure. The selective use of disciplinary spanking with young children can be useful component of the disciplinary process.

► Attached is a reproducible handout, *Guidelines for Parental Use of Disciplinary Spanking*.

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## Endnotes

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