



## Discipline of the Child

### Physical Punishment: A Scientific Review of its Use in Discipline

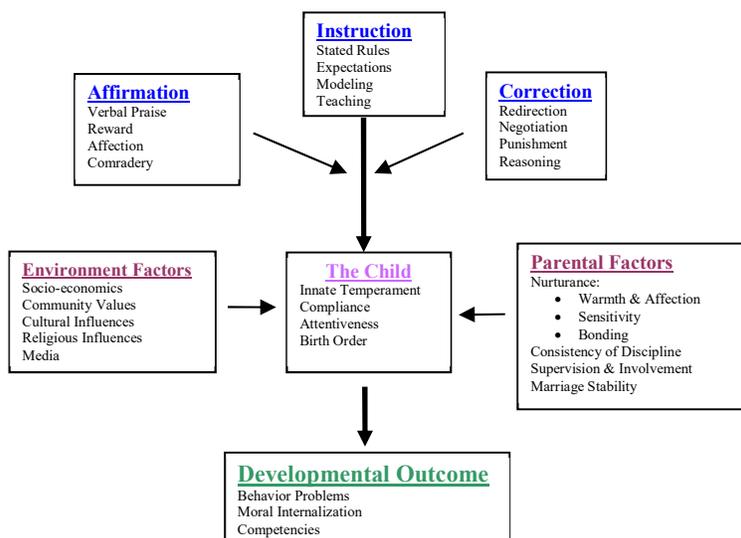
#### Executive Summary

A proper understanding and application of the disciplinary process is fundamental to effective parenting. Basic to the process of discipline are the components of instruction, affirmation, and correction. This policy statement explores the component of correction, specifically the role of physical punishment. Not long ago, the limited use of spanking was considered an acceptable method of correction by a majority of psychologists and over 90% of parents. Today that support has declined. When evaluated objectively, however, research supports the use of spanking in specific disciplinary situations rather than the banning its use all together, which some have proposed.

### DISCIPLINE OF THE CHILD

The fundamental goal of parenting is to teach and assist the child in acquiring character traits such as self-control, teachability, respectfulness, integrity, honesty, empathy and competency. These traits do not come naturally to an infant, toddler or preschooler, but can be acquired with the help of the disciplinary process. *Discipline* is defined as “training expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior, especially training that produces moral or mental improvement.”<sup>1</sup> In the context of parenting, the discipline process is comprised of three primary components: instruction, affirmation, and correction. The effectiveness of these three components is then influenced by a host of factors in a child’s life, such as the environment, parental tendencies, and child temperament (See Figure 1 below).

FIGURE 1 **DISCIPLINARY PROCESS**



## COMPONENTS OF THE DISCIPLINE PROCESS

### Instruction

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

### Affirmation

Affirmation represents the reinforcer response in the behavioral model. Relative to a child's level of development, it will take the form of physical affection or verbal praise. Affirmation encourages the child to repeat the target behavior, and it strengthens the parent-child relationship which in turn enhances the effectiveness of mild corrections, such as reprimands or time out. Additionally, when parents seek to cooperate with reasonable child requests, the likelihood of child cooperation in the future is increased.<sup>2</sup> Parents who use little or no affirmation and rely upon harsh and excessive correction fail to achieve optimal behavioral control.<sup>3</sup>

### Correction

Correction is necessary when, in spite of proper instruction and affirmation, the child fails to follow comply. 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 affirmation produce an optimal developmental outcome in the child.<sup>3</sup>

## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

*Corporal punishment* is a general term for "physical punishment."<sup>4</sup> Included under this very broad definition is the practice of ordinary spanking, as well as severe physical acts such as beating, kicking, punching, choking, and face slapping. *Physical child abuse* is defined as "non-accidental injury inflicted by a parent or caregiver."<sup>5</sup> The National Clearing House on Child Abuse and Neglect defines *physical abuse* as "the infliction of physical injury as a result of punching, beating, kicking, biting, burning, shaking, or otherwise harming a child."<sup>6</sup> *Disciplinary spanking* has been defined as a mild type of corporal punishment that is "physically non-injurious, intended to modify behavior, and administered with the open hand to the extremities or buttocks."<sup>7</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; see Figure 2.

FIGURE 2

**CORPORAL PUNISHMENT**

	<u>Disciplinary Spanking</u>	<u>Physical Abuse</u>
<i>The Act</i>	Spanking: one to three 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>8</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 distinguished from inappropriate and severe types of corporal punishment. Failure to do so results in confusion, inappropriate generalizations, and inaccurate conclusions.

**THE ROLE OF PUNISHMENT**

Punishment in general has been a controversial topic for decades. The current debate about the use of punishment has been dubbed the “politicization of punishment,” noting a shift of emphasis away from the *effectiveness* of punishment towards the societal *ethics* of using punishment.<sup>9</sup> A textbook on the history of psychology labels the presumed ineffectiveness of punishment “one of the most incredible dogmas of the twentieth century (p. 50)”.<sup>10</sup>

The most ardent opponents of spanking either explicitly or implicitly oppose all forms of disciplinary punishment.<sup>11, 12, 13</sup> This opposition to punishment in general and spanking in particular is based on a prior anti-punishment commitment that considers superficial, correlational research evidence to be sufficient to oppose all punishment, but fails to provide effective discipline alternatives for parents.<sup>14</sup> The central point of exclusively “positive” discipline approach is that negative consequences, such as spanking, time-out, or privilege removal should never be used, and instead should be replaced by explanation and reasoning, regardless the child’s age or behavior. Remarkably, there is no sound scientific evidence to support this opposition to negative disciplinary consequences.<sup>15</sup>

While parents should be as affirming as possible with their children, it is unrealistic and unscientific to expect parents to avoid all negative disciplinary consequences all the time, especially with oppositional defiant children. Punishment is necessary when a child is cognitively and willingly capable of defying a parent’s directive. The selection of punishment techniques should be determined by the child’s level of development, and must include a full range from physical restraint and time-out for the toddler, to spanking and privilege removal for the preschooler, to grounding for the adolescent.

**RESEARCH ON DISCIPLINARY SPANKING**

Two major perspectives in the debate and literature have emerged in recent decades.<sup>16</sup> The first is an unconditional anti-spanking position which opposes all forms of physical punishment. Supporting this position, Elizabeth Gershoff concluded in her meta-analyses 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>17,18</sup> The second position claims supporting evidence for the selective use of spanking, which has been called the conditional-spanking perspective.<sup>19</sup> Supporting this position, Robert Larzelere and Brett Kuhn, in their 2005 meta-analysis of the corporal punishment literature, identified conditions under which spanking has been shown to be more beneficial to children than most alternative disciplinary methods. They concluded that spanking can sometimes be used to reduce children's noncompliance or aggression better than other methods.<sup>20</sup>

### **Examining the Research**

Scrutiny of the methods used in many of the recent spanking studies reveals significant flaws, many of which can significantly impact the study's findings. In fact, most research against spanking uses methods so flawed that such studies would be rejected if used to oppose a medical therapy, such as chemotherapy for treating cancer. These fatal flaws include the following:

- The *definition* fallacy: In assessing the effectiveness of an intervention, whether a medical intervention against a disease or a disciplinary action to correct behavior, the intervention must be clearly defined and implemented correctly. Definitions are largely ignored in most studies showing negative outcomes from the use of physical punishment.
- The *correlational* fallacy: Correlations, or associations between two variables, do not prove causation. Correlations are especially misleading when evaluating actions chosen to correct disciplinary or medical problems, called *corrective actions*.
- The *extrapolation* fallacy: Extrapolations can lead to inaccurate conclusions. Even if infrequent spanking is correlated with better outcomes than overly frequent spanking, this does not mean that eliminating all spanking is best.
- The *grouping* fallacy: Indiscriminate grouping or lumping of all forms of physical punishment can account for inaccurate conclusions. For example, in Gershoff's meta-analysis of 75 studies, only four were limited to open-handed swats to the buttocks for child defiance. The other 71 studies lumped together all "spanking" regardless of how it was implemented and why it was used.

### **Better Analysis, Different Conclusions**

When spanking is analyzed using valid and objective methodologies, the proclaimed negative effects of its usage seem to disappear. Three published meta-analyses have gone beyond using problematic correlational evidence to emphasize stronger causal evidence of the effects of spanking. The first two are the only meta-analyses that were limited to longitudinal studies and emphasized those that controlled statistically for pre-existing differences on the outcome variable. The first of these was a 2013 literature review by Ferguson, which concluded that any adverse effects of spanking were "trivial" after controlling for pre-existing differences.<sup>21</sup>

The second and most recent meta-analysis by Larzelere, Gunnoe, and Ferguson was limited to longitudinal studies of spanking that controlled for pre-existing differences.<sup>22</sup> It replicated Ferguson's trivial effects after controlling for pre-existing child differences, but further demonstrated that these effects of spanking could look either beneficial or harmful depending on which of two valid statistical methods were used to adjust for pre-existing differences.

The third meta-analysis by Larzelere and Kuhn<sup>23</sup> took a distinct approach in distinguishing the

physical punishment in four categories:

1. *conditional* spanking (used under limited conditions, such as to enforce timeout)
2. *customary* physical punishment (typical manner of use by ordinary parents)
3. *overly severe* physical punishment
4. *predominant use of* physical punishment

The review's findings are summarized as follows:

- Conditional spanking was associated with less defiance or less aggression than were 10 of 13 alternative disciplinary responses, with no differences in outcomes compared to the other three alternatives. Conditional spanking is used to enforce milder disciplinary responses when young children defiantly refuse to cooperate with them.
- Neither conditional spanking nor customary physical punishment were ever associated with worse outcomes than any other alternative response.
- Customary physical punishment was associated with less substance abuse than was non-contact punishment in one large retrospective study. Otherwise, customary physical punishment was equally as effective as any alternative disciplinary response.
- All types of physical punishment were associated with lower rates of antisocial behavior or aggression than were alternative disciplinary responses.
- Physical punishment predicted more adverse child outcomes than alternative responses only when it was used too severely or as the predominant method of discipline.

Altogether, these three meta-analyses that went beyond simple correlations found that the average effect of customary spanking was trivial in either a harmful or beneficial direction. Further, the outcomes of physical punishment were worse than other disciplinary responses only when the punishment was used too severely or as the predominant discipline method. In contrast, spanking reduced subsequent defiance or aggression more than most disciplinary tactics when used nonabusively to enforce milder disciplinary tactics in defiant 2- to 6-year-olds.

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

Although disciplinary spanking may be seen as unwarranted by some from a philosophical perspective, primary care physicians who field parenting questions every day have viewed spanking as acceptable in at least some situations.<sup>23,24,25</sup> In spite of its popular use, however, caring parents do not enjoy or even desire to spank their children. So, the question arises, "Is spanking necessary?"

When clear instructions have been given and measures of affirmation are insufficient in managing a child's behavior, measures of correction are necessary. When simpler measures of correction (such as redirection, disapproval, and ignoring of mild misbehavior) fail to persuade a child to comply, other corrective measures are needed. Methods of punishment for the cognitively immature toddler are limited to consequences (natural and logical), time-out, and disciplinary spanking. For the most defiant child, milder forms of punishment will often fail and spanking may be necessary to deter uncontrolled behavior. If used strategically to back-up milder measures, spanking can strengthen those milder measures, thereby diminishing the need for spanking as the child matures.

Without disciplinary spanking, parents can quickly exhaust their corrective options and, with a

defiant preschooler, can be left with feelings and expressions of exasperation (yelling) in a coercive cycle to persuade the child to behave. The resulting escalation in parental frustration can increase the risk for abuse and neglect. To illustrate, after spanking bans were issued in Austria (in 1989) and Germany (2000), parental use of spanking was studied in 2007. Fewer than 33% of the parents were aware that all spanking had been banned.<sup>26</sup> This set up a natural experiment comparing those who knew mild spanking had been banned with those who considered it still legal. As expected, those who thought it was legal were more likely to use spanking. Remarkably, these same parents were *less* likely to use severe corporal punishment,<sup>26</sup> suggesting that parental frustration with misbehavior was less likely to escalate further toward abuse when spanking was an available disciplinary option.

### **Guidelines for Disciplinary Spanking**

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

1. Spanking should be used selectively for clear, deliberate misbehavior, particularly that which arises from a child's persistent defiance of a parent's instruction. It should be used only when the child receives at least as much encouragement and praise for good behavior as correction for problem behavior.
2. Milder forms of discipline, such as verbal correction, extinction, explanations, mutually acceptable compromises, logical and natural consequences, and time-out should be used initially, followed by spanking when noncompliance persists. Spanking has been shown to be an effective method of enforcing milder tactics, such as time-out with the child who refuses to comply.
3. Only a parent, or in exceptional situations someone else who has an intimate relationship of authority with the child, should administer disciplinary spanking.
4. Spanking should not be administered on impulse or when a parent is out of control. A spanking should always be motivated by love, for the purpose of teaching and correcting, and not for revenge or retaliation.
5. Spanking is inappropriate before 18 months of age and is usually not necessary until after 24 months. It should be less necessary after 6 years and rarely, if ever, used after 10 years of age.
6. After 10 months of age, one slap to the hand of a stubborn crawler or toddler may be necessary to stop serious misbehavior when distraction and removal have failed. This is particularly the case when the forbidden object is immovable and dangerous, such as a hot oven door or an electrical outlet.
7. Spanking should always be a *planned* action (not an impulsive 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 to three spanks are administered to the buttocks. This is followed soon thereafter by embracing the child and calmly reviewing the offense and the desired behavior in an effort to reestablish a warm relationship.
8. Spanking should leave only transient redness of the skin and should not cause physical injury.

9. If properly administered spankings are ineffective, other disciplinary responses should be tried again rather than increasing the intensity of spankings. Professional help should be obtained when a satisfactory behavioral response cannot be achieved through the process of discipline.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. The disciplinary spanking debate has become very emotional and polarized, which has led to inaccurate statements of absolute conclusions without an adequate scientific basis. Proper definitions and terminology must be used in objectively evaluating the issue.
2. The discipline of a child is a multifaceted process and the assessment of any one of its components must be considered within the milieu of the other components to arrive at accurate conclusions.
3. The effects of disciplinary spanking, or any nonabusive discipline measure, depend on how it is implemented and by the overall pattern of parental nurturance and control.
4. Acts of harsh corporal punishment resulting in poor child outcomes are often associated with parental anger and depression, marital dysfunction and ineffective parenting skills.
5. There is no established causal link between a parent's use of ordinary nonabusive spanking and the occurrence of physical child abuse, or the development of childhood aggression.
6. There is evidence of short-term effectiveness and positive long-term outcomes when parents use disciplinary spanking for persistent defiance within a nurturing environment.
7. In implementing the disciplinary process, a parent must accomplish an appropriate degree of behavioral control of the child for optimal development. This will require instruction, affirmation, and correction. In the rearing of the young child (particularly under 6 years), a parent's corrective measures are limited. At this age, disciplinary spanking, when properly employed by a parent, can be effective, appropriate, and at times necessary, especially when used to enforce milder disciplinary methods.
8. Parents should be allowed considerable latitude with the disciplinary responses they choose to implement, as long as the responses are not abusive or harmful to the child. To deny a parent the use of disciplinary spanking may result in loss of behavioral control over the young defiant child, thus creating an environment for detrimental parental practices such as yelling, nagging, belittling, and even explosive outbursts of rage.
9. Pediatricians may counsel parents on how and how not to use disciplinary spanking with their children. This advice should emphasize the value of encouragement in establishing an optimal parent-child relationship.
10. An unconditional legal ban against all physical punishment of children by their parents would do more harm than good, based upon current evidence.<sup>27,26</sup>
11. Any future research investigating the effects of disciplinary spanking should focus on appropriate implementation and conditions for its use (e.g., child's age, disciplinary situation), and control for child temperament, parental factors, and environmental factors.

Primary Authors: Den A. Trumbull, MD, and Robert E. Larzelere, Ph.D.

See full version of this paper for all the details.

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