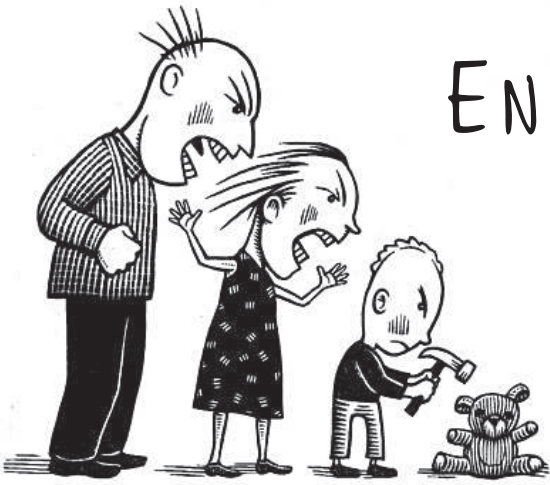


ENDING CORPORAL PUNISHMENT:

WHY YOU SHOULD NEVER SPANK A CHILD

by Amy Wright Glenn



Not long ago, laws protected the “rights of men” to use physical force to correct or punish their wives. A husband’s ability to assert his authority through corporal punishment was accepted as a social norm. Due to the dedicated efforts of activists working to improve the status of women, legal prohibitions forbidding any form of “chastisement” are now commonplace in most countries around the world. This is a good thing. While men’s violence against women continues to be a serious public health concern, it is no longer justifiable in courts of law. It is time to extend this basic dignity to the world’s children.

This won’t be easy. A significant shift in public opinion is necessary if America is to join the 31 countries that currently ban all forms of corporal punishment against their most vulnerable citizens.

In the past, it was considered an act of government interference or encroachment to limit a husband’s use of force against his wife within the privacy of their home. Many Americans adopt this same attitude when it comes to corporal punishment against children. A parent’s “right to discipline,” specifically with the use of physical force, is a deeply held belief in our society. According to an ABC News poll conducted last fall, 50 percent of American parents admit to using corporal punishment at some point. Other surveys indicate that number is closer to 80 percent. The rationalizations provided that justify this behavior are based on the same authoritarian models of thinking that defended corporal punishment against women for centuries.

For example, in all American states with the exception of Delaware, laws distinguish between legal or “reasonable” forms of corporal punishment and illegal forms deemed abusive. How many times in a row can an adult hit a child before it is labeled

abuse? What if a spanking leaves visible bruises? Can a child legally be hit with an object? Does a child have the right not to be slapped in the face?

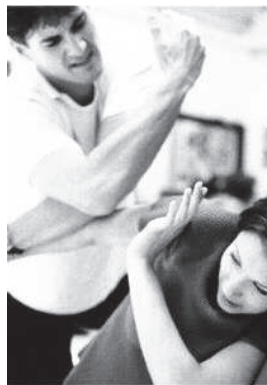
Such deliberations are reminiscent of 19th century legal practices that sought to limit, but not completely outlaw, intimate partner violence. For example, in 1824 the Supreme Court in Mississippi sought to restrict a husband’s use of force allowing only for “moderate chastisement in cases of emergency.” One wonders what events qualified as “emergencies” and how many

of corporal punishment are significant. Whether or not we argue that the use of force in the name of discipline violates a child’s inherent right to physical integrity, the short and long-term effects of corporal punishment alone warrant its abolition.

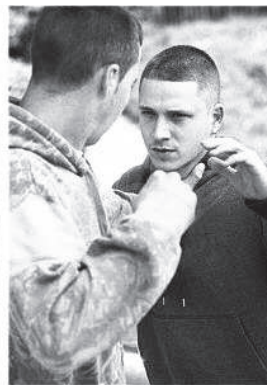
THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

Some rights are inviolable. This means they can’t be taken away no matter how an individual behaves. The UN Declaration of Human Rights, composed following

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE



domestic violence



assault



discipline?

... IT'S NEVER OK

slaps across the face were considered “moderate.” Today, all forms of force used to control or punish women are prohibited. According to the Global Initiative to End all Corporal Punishment of Children, “it is paradoxical and an affront to humanity that the smallest and most vulnerable of people should have less protection from assault than adults.”

Furthermore, decades of peer-reviewed scientific research reveal the negative effects

of corporal punishment are significant. Whether or not we argue that the use of force in the name of discipline violates a child’s inherent right to physical integrity, the short and long-term effects of corporal punishment alone warrant its abolition. the horrors of World War II, consists of thirty articles outlining rights that are to be regarded as universal. Among these are: the right to life, the right to be free from slavery or torture, and the right to freedom of thought and religion. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, currently ratified by 193 countries with the exception of South Sudan, Somalia, and the United States, specifically states that children have the right to be free from “all forms

of physical and mental violence, injury, or abuse.” For this reason, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child actively works to end the use of corporal punishment and defines it as “any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light.”

Honoring the rights of children is a human rights movement whose time has come. It couldn’t be more needed. “Harsh treatment of children is epidemic in all communities,” states Desmond Runyan professor of social medicine at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine. According to a 2002 study published by “Child Abuse Review,” 80 percent of American preschool children are spanked by one or both parents. Of children aged 8-9, one-half are hit with an object. In March of this year, researchers at the University of Michigan conducted a longitudinal study of more than 2700 new parents. They found that 30 percent of babies, children under one, were spanked by one or both parents at least once in the last month. According to the professors who headed the study, “spanking babies is particularly misguided.”

In “The Discipline Book: Everything You Need to Know to Have a Better-Behaved Child – From Birth to Age Ten,” William Sears M.D. and Martha Sears R.N. reflect upon the language commonly used to describe corporal punishment. They note that when a child strikes another child, we call it hitting. When an adult strikes another adult, we also call it hitting. Yet, when it comes to an adult striking a child, so often the description is “softened” to “spanking.” Why? According to the Sears, spanking is a euphemism for hitting. We use this term to take the edge out of the guilt that arises from hitting those we are called to nurture with compassion. Not all parents need to use this euphemism. While they constitute a minority, there have always been children who grow up in homes free of corporal punishment.

A 2004 US News and World Report Special Issue on heroes tells the remarkable story of Marion Prichard, a Dutch woman who hid dozens of Jewish children during the Nazi occupation of Holland. How did she find the strength to act so boldly at the risk her own life? Pritchard attributes her courage to the example of her father. “To my father, justice was everything. Not law and order, but justice.” She continues, “I was never spanked, never hit. I got all my questions answered. When you are brought

up that way, with complete love, respect, and understanding, that is how you try to treat people.



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THE RESEARCH

In 2012, the Canadian Medical Journal Association (CMJA) published an analysis of over 80 studies documenting the effects of corporal punishment on children. Not one, not a single one, found any positive long-term effect and the list detailing the short and long-term consequences would concern anyone invested in public health.

Corporal punishment is directly related to an increase in mental health disorders. In their July 2012 statement entitled, “Spanking Linked to Mental Illness,” the American Academy of Pediatrics states that it is “strongly opposed” to the use of

physical punishment to discipline children. Even in the absence of “severe child maltreatment” -- such as sexual abuse, neglect, or exposure to intimate partner violence -- physical punishments such as “pushing, grabbing, shoving, slapping, or hitting” lead to a statistically observable increase in mental disorders.

Children who are hit as toddlers have lower IQ ratings than their non-spanked peers. According to Murray Straus, professor at the University of New Hampshire, children growing up in homes where they were slapped or spanked averaged a five-point drop in IQ. The “strongest link” between corporal punishment and IQ occurs when parents continue to hit their children into their teen years. Yet, “even small amounts of spanking” make a difference Straus warns.

Furthermore, hitting a child puts her or him at a statistically greater risk of developing depression, substance abuse addictions, and aggressiveness. It teaches children that interpersonal problems can be legitimately solved with the use of force. Children who experience corporal punishment are statistically more likely to engage in future intimate partner violence and perpetuate the cycle by hitting their own children.

The CMJA analysis found only one short-term positive effect of corporal punishment: “immediate compliance.” However, such compliance is short lived. Recent research conducted by psychologist George Holden at Southern Methodist University in Dallas reveals that in the majority of occasions, the offending behavior resumes within ten minutes of spanking.

Last month, Holden and his colleagues released their findings from recordings made in 2011 that captured “real time” interactions between parents and children. In “Eavesdropping on the Family: A Pilot Investigation of Corporal Punishment in the Home,” published by the American Psychological Association, Holden offers a disturbing look into the workings of the average American household.

In consenting to be recorded, parents were told they were participating in a study examining parent-child interactions. The use of corporal punishment specifically was not mentioned. The majority of participants in Holden’s study were white, married mothers who had completed more college education than the majority population. This is important because previous studies reveal that mothers with lower

rates of education more commonly rely upon corporal punishment. The children averaged four years of age.

In the recordings, the hitting of children is commonplace. All of the parents knew they were wearing a microphone and yet, they didn't censor themselves when it came to the use of physical force in the home. "So many parents believe in the technique

on the self-reporting of parents, indicated that the average parent hit or spanked his or her child around 18 times a year. In these recordings, it's clear that hitting or spanking is happening about 18 times a week.

According to renowned child psychologist and attachment parenting theorist Dr. Laura Markham, parents often resort to the use of force when "flight or fight" energy is triggered. When this primal and reptilian function in our brain is activated, even a small child can appear as "an enemy." Obviously,

choosing to use the advantage of physical strength in moments of such clouded vision is unwise.

In "Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids: How to Stop Yelling and Start Connecting," Markham offers her readers helpful ways to discharge the fight or flight energy. In order to end corporal punishment, we must find skillful means of transforming the energies of frustration, rage, and overwhelm.

The Sears note that if parents refrain from using corporal punishment when they are angry, "99 percent of spanking wouldn't occur." Once a parent calms down, more thoughtful and appropriate means of guidance or correction become apparent. Holden's studies clearly reveal that parents too often act impulsively triggering a cascade of harmful consequences. Los Angeles based blogger Tracy Moore aptly notes that spanking is a "deeply misguided failure of patience, compassion, temper, and good ideas, and it is practiced and protected only by cowards."

ENDING CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

Like most Americans, I grew up in a home where the use of force to correct misbehavior, or discharge frustration, was commonplace. My parents were acting well within the dominant social norms of the day when it came to using the advantage of their physical power in order to "teach a lesson." Generally, they relied on more peaceful means of disciplining but when the energies of sheer overwhelm and chaos threatened the tenuous harmony of our household of nine, corporal punishment offered my parents a means of bringing a momentary semblance of order to the fray.

Such order comes at a price. Fear

rather than respect enters into the hearts of children when the larger-than-life people they depend on for their basic needs purposefully harm them. While a parent certainly has the power advantage, might does not make right. It took time to realize that the practice of hitting children is passed on through generations. Stories about the violence my father lived through as a boy helped me put important pieces together. It wasn't until I became a mother that I consciously took the time to research the subject. The more I learned, the more I vowed never to raise my hand against my son even if this act is done in the name of discipline.

IS THIS SO STRANGE?

Imagine hearing a man declare that no matter how frustrated or angry he may become in relationship with his significant other, he vows never to lift his hand in anger. Today, such an approach to marriage or partnership is affirmed. We look back at the laws in the past that justify the use of force against women as hurtful, archaic, sexist, and wrong. Future generations will look back at our own laws regarding children in the same light. They will be shocked to imagine that corporal punishment against children was ever legal.

The Sears tell the story of a mother named Joan whose toddler becomes "withdrawn" after "several months of spank-controlled discipline." For example, he avoids her eye contact and prefers to play alone in his room. "My child now fears me and I've lost something precious," Joan laments.

Banning corporal punishment against children reflects a firm commitment to human rights for all, including the smallest and most vulnerable. In addition, we safeguard children from the seriously adverse effects of physical punishment and model to them the value of patience, kindness and creative problem solving. For the sake of each child's individual future and the well-being of our collective human family, let us not lose something precious. ♦

Bio: Amy, the voice for "Motherhood Spirituality, and Religion" on Philly.com is also a columnist for Holistic Parenting Magazine. Her first book is the highly acclaimed Birth, Breath, and Death: Meditations on Motherhood, Chaplaincy, and Life as a Doula. See www.birthbreathanddeath.com • Note: This article was first published online at Philly.com and is reprinted with permission.

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and are not defensive about their use of it," Holden states. "They erroneously believe it's a useful technique to raise well-behaved kids."

The recordings clearly reveal the parents hit children out of anger and frustration, not in a calm and collected state of mind. Rather than using physical force only as a last resort, or in response to breaking a major infraction, the recordings reveal that parents slap or spank their small children -- one as young as 7-months-old -- within 30-seconds of a warning and for "extraordinarily mundane offenses" such as "sucking their fingers." Rather than following various guidelines offered by pro-spanking advocates, such as hitting a child no more than twice in a row, the recordings reveal that parents hit their children repeatedly. In one incidence, a child was hit 11 times in a row leading to a cascade of protesting shrieks and coughing.

Most disturbingly, Holden confirms that the use of corporal punishment is much more common than parents admit. Previous research on the subject, based