

Why Corporal Punishment Doesn't Work, According to Science

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I was stunned last week when I read an [NPR article](#) reporting that about half of American states—mostly in the South—still allow corporal punishment in schools, including the state where I am raising my children.

When I brought up this topic to my husband, he immediately questioned where I was getting this information. Given all the [false media](#) these days, he was skeptical. We conducted our own research –after being raised up north, this was completely new territory for us. I wanted to understand why so many people still hit their children and if this approach had any merit.

What exactly is corporal punishment?

Corporal punishment is not a term we hear every day. It's not exactly a topic that comes up during playdates and moms' night out. According to [The National Association of School Psychologists](#), corporal punishment is, "the intentional infliction of pain or discomfort and/or the use of physical force upon a student with the intention of causing the student to experience bodily pain so as to correct or punish the student's behavior." Common forms in schools and homes include spanking, hitting, and even paddling.

Throughout history, parents and teachers have hit children to try and teach them a lesson. Until the end of the last century, physical punishment of children was generally accepted worldwide. But then more information became available about the harm it causes to children both in the short and long term, which led to about 50 countries banning corporal punishment in all settings including the

home.

However, it still goes on in the United States, and in fact, many parents think that's perfectly fine. In 2012, a national survey found that more than half of women and three-quarters of men in the United States believe a child sometimes needs to be spanked.

Does it work?

Putting history, culture, tradition – and even law – aside, let's just focus on what the scientific evidence tells us about the effectiveness of hitting our kids as a disciplinary tool.

Supporters often rely on personal anecdotes to argue that school corporal punishment, for example, improves students' behavior and achievement. Parents who hit their kids typically claim that they were struck during their childhood but turned out okay. However, there have been no studies reporting any benefits from hitting children.

On the other hand, a recent report issued in June 2016 assessed more than 250 studies exploring the relationship between physically punishing our kids and a wide range of outcomes. The results of the numerous studies reveal the following negative effects of corporal punishment:

Increased aggression.

Children who are hit are more likely to be aggressive toward their peers, approve of violence in relationships, bully others, and be aggressive toward their parents. Researchers from Tulane University found that children who are spanked often, starting at age three, are more likely to show aggressive behavior by the time they're five than children who are not spanked.

Aggression is a reflexive response to experiencing pain. When children grow up with the understanding that violence is an appropriate way to get what you want, they'll mimic this behavior. In several surveys, children explain how they feel aggressive after being physically punished.

Exacerbated bad behavior.

According to Sandra Graham-Bermann of the Child Violence and Trauma Laboratory at the University of Michigan, spanking may seem to stop bad behavior at the time, but in the long term it only makes the child behave worse.

In fact, corporal punishment has been linked to negative behaviors like bullying, lying, cheating, running away, truancy, school behavioral problems, and involvement in crime.

Mental health challenges.

Hitting not only causes physical pain, but lingering emotional pain as well. It's been associated with behavioral disorders, anxiety disorders, depression, suicide attempts, alcohol and drug dependency, low self-esteem, hostility, and emotional instability.

Researchers observed that children's brains are actually altered when they are frequently spanked (at least once a month for more than three years). These children had less gray matter in certain areas of the prefrontal cortex, which has been linked to depression, addiction, and other mental health disorders.

Reduced cognitive ability.

The change in gray matter also affects a child's IQ, decision making, and thought processing capabilities. Some studies also showed that adults who experienced corporal punishment as children were less likely to graduate from college and have successful careers.

Ongoing cycle of abuse.

A 2011 [study](#) published in Child Abuse and Neglect confirms that children who are hit are more likely to use the action to solve problems in the future, and use this same approach with their own children. Corporal punishment perpetuates itself and it's very difficult to break that cycle.

Damaged parent-child relationship.

[Analysis](#) of several studies found that corporal punishment can ruin the relationship between parents and children because it makes children feel rejected by their parents and teaches them to fear and avoid their parents.

What are some safer, more effective discipline options?

Experts from key organizations around the world offer the following healthier, more productive options for disciplining our children:

Develop verbal communication.

The most important step is to develop an open, honest line of communication with your children from a very young age so that they'll become [emotionally intelligent](#).

This is a skill that helps them recognize, direct, and positively express their emotions, allowing them to overcome challenges and build stronger relationships throughout their lives.

Present consequences.

Show your children what'll happen if they do not behave. Be specific about the consequences that will result because of their behavior. For example, when children throw their toys, explain how the toys can break and how sad that will make them feel.

Take away privileges.

Tell your children that if they do not cooperate, they will have to give something up, like a favorite toy. [The American Academy of Pediatrics](#) provides the following guidelines when you use this approach:

Never take away something your child truly needs, such as a meal.

Choose something that your child values that is related to the misbehavior.

For children under seven, withholding privileges works best if done immediately.

Follow through on your promise.

Give a time-out.

The goal of a time-out is to separate children from unacceptable behavior to allow them to pause and cool off. It tends to work well when a specific rule has been broken. It's most effective for children ages two to five, but can be used throughout childhood. [The American Academy of Pediatrics](#) suggests these tips for making time-out most effective:

Set rules in advance; decide which behaviors will lead to a time-out and explain this to your child.

Choose a consistent time-out spot that is a boring place with no distractions.

Explain the reason for the time-out. Be very specific about what they did to need a time-out. Let them know how their behavior made you feel.

Set a time limit based on age. A rule of thumb is 1 minute of time-out for every year of your child's age.

Resume activity when the time is up and do not dwell on what they did wrong.

Try mindfulness.

This new form of discipline is now a huge success at several schools. Try creating a calm corner in your home where your children can spend time reflecting on their behavior.

Whether or not you hit your kid is ultimately your own business, especially in a country that does not necessarily consider it illegal to physically harm an innocent child. But before you raise your hand, consider the many proven negative impacts that it can have on your child – now, and for the rest of their lives. Keep in mind that the parenting decisions we make today influence the generations of tomorrow.

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