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Reasons Not to Hit Children

HITTING MODELS HITTING

There is a classic story about the mother who believed in spanking as a necessary part of discipline until one day she observed her three-year-old daughter hitting her one-year-old son. When confronted, her daughter said, *"I'm just playing mommy."* This mother never spanked another child.

Children love to imitate, especially people whom they love and respect. They perceive that it's okay for them to do whatever you do. Parents, remember, you are bringing up someone else's mother or father, and wife, or husband. The same discipline techniques you employ with your children are the ones they are most likely to carry on in their own parenting. The *family is a training camp* for teaching children how to handle conflicts. Studies show that children from spanking families are more likely to use aggression to handle conflicts when they become adults.

Spanking demonstrates that it's alright for people to hit people, and especially for big people to hit little people, and stronger people to hit weaker people. Children learn that when you have a problem you solve it with a good swat. A child whose behaviour is controlled by spanking is *likely to carry on this mode of interaction into other relationships* with siblings and peers, and eventually a spouse and offspring.

HITTING LEAVES LASTING IMPRESSIONS

But, you say, "I don't spank my child that often or that hard. Most of the time I show them lots of love and gentleness. An occasional swat on the bottom won't bother them." This rationalisation holds true for some children, but other children remember spanking messages more than nurturing ones. You may have a hug-hit ratio of 100:1 in your home, but you run the risk of your child remembering and being influenced more by the one hit than the 100 hugs, especially if that hit was delivered in anger or unjustly, which happens all too often.

Physical punishment shows that it's alright to vent your anger or right a wrong by hitting other people. This is why the parent's attitude during the spanking leaves as great an impression as the swat itself. How to control one's angry impulses (swat control) is one of the things you are trying to teach your children. Spanking sabotages this teaching. Spanking guidelines usually give the warning to never spank in anger. If this guideline were to be faithfully observed 99 percent of spanking wouldn't occur, because once the parent has calmed down he or she can come up with a more appropriate method of correction.

Physical hitting is not the only way to cross the line into abuse. Everything we say about physical punishment pertains to **emotional/verbal punishment** as well. Tongue-lashing and name-calling tirades can actually harm a child more psychologically. Emotional abuse can be very subtle and even self-righteous. Threats to coerce a child to cooperate can touch on his worst fear—abandonment.

("I'm leaving if you don't behave.") Often threats of abandonment are implied, giving the child the message that you can't stand being with them or a smack of emotional abandonment (by letting them know you are withdrawing your love, refusing to speak to them, or saying you don't like them if they continue to displease you). Scars on the mind may last longer than scars on the body.

HITTING DEVALUES THE CHILD

The child's self-image begins with how they perceive others – especially their parents – perceive them. Even in the most loving homes, spanking gives a confusing message, especially to a child too young to understand the reason for the whack. Parents spend a lot of time building up their baby or child's sense of being valued, helping the child feel "good." Then the child breaks a glass, you spank, and they feel, "I must be bad."

Even a guilt-relieving hug from a parent after a spank doesn't remove the sting. The child is likely to feel the hit, inside and out, long after the hug. Most children put in this situation will hug to ask for mercy. "If I hug him, daddy will stop hitting me." When spanking is repeated over and over, one message is driven home to the child, "You are weak and defenceless."

Joan, a loving mother, sincerely believed that spanking was a parental right and obligation needed to turn out an obedient child. She felt spanking was "for the child's own good." After several months of spank-controlled discipline, her toddler became withdrawn. She would notice him playing alone in the corner, not interested in playmates, and avoiding eye contact with her. He had lost his previous sparkle. Outwardly he was a "good boy." Inwardly, Spencer thought he was a bad boy. He didn't feel right and he didn't act right. Spanking made him feel smaller and weaker, overpowered by people bigger than him.

How tempting it is to slap those daring little hands! Many parents do it without thinking but consider the consequences. Maria Montessori, one of the earliest opponents of slapping children's hands, believed that children's hands are tools for exploring, an extension of the child's natural curiosity. Slapping them sends a powerful negative message. Sensitive parents we have interviewed all agree that the hands should be off-limits for physical punishment.

Research supports this idea. Psychologists studied a group of sixteen 14-month-olds playing with their mothers. When one group of toddlers tried to grab a forbidden object, they received a slap on the hand; the other group of toddlers did not receive physical punishment. In follow-up studies of these children seven months later, the punished babies were found to be less skilled at exploring their environment. Better to separate the child from the object or supervise his exploration and leave little hands unharmed.

HITTING DEVALUES THE PARENT

Parents who spank-control or otherwise abusively punish their children often feel devalued themselves because deep down they don't feel right about their way of discipline. Often, they spank (or yell) in desperation because they don't know what else to do, but afterward feel more powerless when they find it doesn't work. As one mother who dropped spanking from her correction list put it, "I won the battle but lost the war. My child now fears me, and I feel I've lost something precious."

Spanking also devalues the role of a parent. Being an authority figure means you are trusted and respected, but not feared. Lasting authority cannot be based on fear. Parents or other caregivers who repeatedly use spanking to control children enter into a lose-lose situation. Not only does the child lose respect for the parent, but the parents also lose out because they develop a spanking mindset

and have fewer alternatives to spanking. The parent has fewer preplanned, experience-tested strategies to divert potential behaviour, so the child misbehaves more, which calls for more spanking. This child is not being taught to develop inner control.

Hitting devalues the parent-child relationship. Corporal punishment puts a distance between the spanker and the spankee. This distance is especially troubling in-home situations where the parent-child relationship may already be strained, such as single-parent homes or blended families. While some children are forgivingly resilient and bounce back without a negative impression on mind or body, for others it's hard to love the hand that hits them.

HITTING MAY LEAD TO ABUSE

Punishment escalates. Once you begin punishing a child "a little bit," where do you stop? A toddler reaches for a forbidden glass. You tap the hand as a reminder not to touch. They reach again, you swat the hand. After withdrawing their hand briefly, they once again grab their grandmother's valuable vase. You hit the hand harder. You've begun a game no one can win. The issue then becomes who's stronger—your child's will or your hand—not the problem of touching the vase. What do you do now? Hit harder and harder until the child's hand is so sore they can't possibly continue to "disobey?"

The danger of beginning corporal punishment in the first place is that you may feel you have to bring out bigger guns: your hand becomes a fist, the switch becomes a belt, the folded newspaper becomes a wooden spoon, and now what began as seemingly innocent escalates into child abuse. Punishment sets the stage for child abuse. Parents who are programmed to punish set themselves up for punishing harder, mainly because they have not learned alternatives and click immediately into the punishment mode when their child misbehaves.

HITTING DOES NOT IMPROVE BEHAVIOUR

Many times, we have heard parents say, "The more we spank the more he/she misbehaves." Spanking makes a child's behaviour worse, not better. Here's why. Remember the basis for promoting desirable behaviour: The child who feels right acts right. Spanking undermines this principle. A child who is hit feels wrong inside and this shows up in their behaviour. The more they misbehave, the more they get spanked and the worse they feel. The cycle continues. We want the child to know that they did wrong, and to feel remorse, but to still believe that they are a person who has value.

The Cycle of Misbehaviour

One of the goals of disciplinary action is to *stop the misbehaviour immediately*, and spanking may do that. It is more important to create a conviction within the child that they don't want to repeat the misbehaviour (i.e. internal rather than external control). One of the reasons for the ineffectiveness of spanking in creating internal controls is that during and immediately after the spanking, the child is so preoccupied with the perceived injustice of the physical punishment (or maybe the degree of it he's getting) that they "forget" the reason for which they were spanked.

Sitting down with them and talking after the spanking to be sure they're aware of what they did can be done just as well (if not better) without the spanking part. Alternatives to spanking can be much more thought-and-conscience-provoking for a child, but they may take more time and energy from the parent. This brings up the main reason why some parents lean toward spanking—it's easier.

HITTING PROMOTES ANGER – IN CHILDREN AND IN PARENTS

Children often perceive punishment as unfair. They are more likely to rebel against corporal punishment than against other disciplinary techniques. Children do not think rationally like adults, but they do have an innate sense of fairness—though their standards are not the same as adults. This can prevent punishment from working as you hoped it would and can contribute to an angry child. Oftentimes, the sense of unfairness escalates to a feeling of humiliation. When punishment humiliates children they either rebel or withdraw. While spanking may appear to make the child afraid to repeat the misbehaviour, it is more likely to make the child fear the spanker.

In our experience, and that of many who have thoroughly researched corporal punishment, children whose behaviours are spank-controlled throughout infancy and childhood may appear outwardly compliant, but inside they are seething with anger. They feel that their personhood has been violated, and they detach themselves from a world they perceive has been unfair to them. They find it difficult to trust, becoming insensitive to a world that has been insensitive to them.

Parents who examine their feelings after spanking often realise that all they have accomplished is to relieve themselves of anger. This impulsive release of anger often becomes addictive—perpetuating a cycle of ineffective discipline. We have found that the best way to prevent ourselves from acting on the impulse to spank is to instil in ourselves two convictions:

1. That we will not spank our children.
2. That we will discipline them. Since we have decided that spanking is not an option, we must seek out better alternatives.

HITTING BRINGS BACK BAD MEMORIES

A child's memories of being spanked can scar otherwise joyful scenes of growing up. People are more likely to recall traumatic events than pleasant ones. I grew up in a very nurturing home, but I was occasionally and "deservedly" spanked. I vividly remember the willow branch scenes. After my wrongdoing, my grandfather would send me to my room. He would tell me I was going to receive a spanking. I remember looking out the window, seeing him walk across the lawn and take a willow branch from the tree. He would come back to my room and spank me across the back of my thighs with the branch.

The willow branch seemed to be an effective spanking tool. It stung and made an impression upon me— physically and mentally. Although I remember growing up in a loving home, I don't remember specific happy scenes with nearly as much detail as I remember the spanking scenes. I have always thought that one of our goals as parents is to fill our children's memory bank with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of pleasant scenes. It's amazing how the unpleasant memories of spankings can block out those positive memories.

ABUSIVE HITTING HAS BAD LONG-TERM EFFECTS

Research has shown that spanking may leave scars deeper and more lasting than a fleeting redness of the bottom. Here is a summary of the research on the long-term effects of corporal punishment:

In a prospective study spanning 19 years, researchers found that children who were raised in homes with a lot of corporal punishment, turned out to be more antisocial and egocentric, and that physical violence became the accepted norm for these children when they became teenagers and adults.

College students showed more psychological disturbances if they grew up in a home with less praise, more scolding, more corporal punishment, and more verbal abuse.

A survey of 679 college students showed that those who recall being spanked as children accepted spanking as a way of discipline and intended to spank their own children. Students who were not spanked as children were significantly less accepting of the practice than those who were spanked. The spanked students also reported remembering that their parents were angry during the spanking; they remembered both the spanking and the attitude with which it was administered.

Spanking seems to have the most negative long-term effects when it replaces positive communication with the child. Spanking had less damaging long-term effects if given in a loving home and nurturing environment.

A study of the effects of physical punishment on children's later aggressive behaviour showed that the more frequently a child was given physical punishment, the more likely it was that they would behave aggressively toward other family members and peers. Spanking caused less aggression if it was done in an overall nurturing environment and the child was always given a rational explanation of why the spanking occurred.

A study to determine whether hand slapping had any long-term effects showed that toddlers who were punished with a light slap on the hand showed delayed exploratory development seven months later.

Adults who received a lot of physical punishment as teenagers had a rate of spouse-beating that was four times greater than those whose parents did not hit them.

Husbands who grew up in severely violent homes are six times more likely to beat their wives than men raised in non-violent homes.

More than 1 out of 4 parents who had grown up in a violent home were violent enough to risk seriously injuring their child.

Studies of prison populations show that most violent criminals grew up in a violent home environment.

The life history of notorious, violent criminals, murderers, muggers, rapists, etc., are likely to show a history of excessive physical discipline in childhood.

IN CONCLUSION – SPANKING DOESN'T WORK

The evidence against spanking is overwhelming. Hundreds of studies all come to the same conclusions:

- The more physical punishment a child receives, the more aggressive he or she will become
- The more children are spanked, the more likely they will be abusive toward their own children.
- Spanking plants seeds for later violent behaviour.
- Spanking doesn't work.

Many studies show the futility of spanking as a disciplinary technique, but none show its usefulness. In the past 50 years in paediatric practice, we have observed thousands of families who have tried spanking and found it doesn't work. Our general impression is that parents spank less as their experience increases. Spanking doesn't work for the child, for the parents, or for society. Spanking does not promote good behaviour. It creates a distance between parent and child, and it contributes to a violent society. Parents who rely on punishment as their primary mode of discipline don't grow

in their knowledge of their child. It keeps them from creating better alternatives, which would help them to know their child and build a better relationship.

In the process of raising our own eight children, we have also concluded that spanking doesn't work. We found ourselves spanking less and less as our experience and the number of children increased. In our home, we have programmed ourselves against spanking. We are committed to creating an attitude within our children, and an atmosphere within our home, that renders spanking unnecessary. Since spanking is not an option, we have been forced to come up with better alternatives. This has not only made us better parents but in the long run, we believe it has created more sensitive and well-behaved children.