

SLATE

FAMILY

Spare the Rod

Why you shouldn't hit your kids.

By Alan E. Kazdin

Posted Wednesday, Sept. 24, 2008, at 7:09 AM ET

The typical parent, when whacking a misbehaving child, doesn't pause to wonder: "What does science have to say about the efficacy of corporal punishment?" If they are thinking anything at all, it's: "Here comes justice!" And while the typical parent may not know or care, the science on corporal punishment of kids is pretty clear. Despite the rise of the timeout and other nonphysical forms of punishment, most American parents hit, pinch, shake, or otherwise lay violent hands on their youngsters: 63 percent of parents physically discipline their 1- to 2-year-olds, and 85 percent of adolescents have been physically punished by their parents. Parents cite children's aggression and failure to comply with a request as the most common reasons for hitting them.

The science also shows that corporal punishment is like smoking: It's a rare human being who can refrain from stepping up from a mild, relatively harmless dose to an excessive and harmful one. Three cigarettes a month won't hurt you much, and a little smack on the behind once a month won't harm your child. But who smokes three cigarettes a month? To call corporal punishment addictive would be imprecise, but there's a strong natural tendency to escalate the frequency and severity of punishment. More than one-third of all parents who start out with relatively mild punishments end up crossing the line drawn by the state to define child abuse: hitting with an object, harsh and cruel hitting, and so on. Children, endowed with wonderful flexibility and ability to learn, typically adapt to punishment faster than parents can escalate it, which helps encourage a little hitting to lead to a lot of hitting. And, like frequent smoking, frequent corporal punishment has serious, well-proven bad effects.

The negative effects on children include increased aggression and noncompliance—the very misbehaviors that most often inspire parents to hit in the first place—as well as poor academic achievement, poor quality of parent-child relationships, and increased risk of a mental-health problem (depression or anxiety, for instance). High levels of corporal punishment are also associated with problems that crop up later in life, including diminished ability to control one's impulses and poor physical-health outcomes (cancer, heart disease, chronic respiratory disease). Plus, there's the effect of increasing *parents'* aggression, and don't forget the consistent finding that physical punishment is a weak strategy for permanently changing behavior.

But parents keep on hitting. Why? The key is corporal punishment's temporary effectiveness in stopping a behavior. It does work—for a moment, anyway. The direct experience of that momentary pause in misbehavior has a powerful effect, conditioning the parent to hit again next time to achieve that jolt of fleeting success and blinding the parent to the long-term failure of hitting to improve behavior. The

research consistently shows that the unwanted behavior will return at the same rate as before. But parents believe that corporal punishment works, and they are further encouraged in that belief by feeling that they have a right and even a duty to punish as harshly as necessary.

Part of the problem is that most of us pay, at best, selective attention to science—and scientists, for their part, have not done a good job of publicizing what they know about corporal punishment. Studies of parents have demonstrated that if they are predisposed not to see a problem in the way they rear their children, then they tend to dismiss any scientific finding suggesting that this presumed nonproblem is, in fact, a problem. In other words, if parents believe that hitting is an effective way to control children's behavior, and especially if that conviction is backed up by a strong moral, religious, or other cultural rationale for corporal punishment, they will confidently throw out any scientific findings that don't comport with their sense of their own experience.

The catch is that we frequently misperceive our own experience. Studies of parents' perceptions of child rearing, in particular, show that memory is an extremely unreliable guide in judging the efficacy of punishment. Those who believe in corporal punishment tend to remember that hitting a child worked: She talked back to me, I slapped her face, she shut her mouth. But they tend to forget that, after the brief pause brought on by having her face slapped, the child talked back again, and the talking back grew nastier and more frequent over time as the slaps grew harder.

So what's the case for *not* hitting? It can be argued from the science: Physical discipline doesn't work over the long run, it has bad side effects, and mild punishment often becomes more severe over time. Opponents of corporal punishment also advance moral and legal arguments. If you hit another adult you can be arrested and sued, after all, so shouldn't our smallest, weakest citizens have a right to equal or even more-than-equal protection under the law? In this country, if you do the same thing to your dog that you do to your child, you're more likely to get in trouble for mistreating the dog.

The combination of scientific and moral/legal arguments has been effective in debates about discipline in public schools. Twenty-eight states and the District of Columbia have banned corporal punishment in the schools. But so far, we have shown ourselves unwilling to extend that debate beyond the schools and into the ideologically sacred circle of the family. Where the argument against corporal punishment in the schools has prevailed, in fact, it has often cited parents' individual right to punish their own children as they, and not educators acting for the state, see fit. The situation is different in other countries. You may not be surprised to hear that 91 countries have banned corporal punishment in the schools, but you may be surprised to hear that 23 countries have banned corporal punishment everywhere within their borders, including in the home.

I know what you're thinking: *Are there really 23 Scandinavian countries?* Sweden was, indeed, the first to pass a comprehensive ban, but the [list](#) also includes Hungary, Bulgaria, Spain, Israel, Portugal, Greece, Uruguay, Chile, Venezuela, and New Zealand. According to advocates of the ban, another 20 or so countries are committed to full prohibition and/or are debating prohibitionist bills in parliament. The Council of Europe was the first intergovernmental body to launch a campaign for universal prohibition across its 47 member countries.

Practically nobody in America knows or cares that the United Nations has set a target date of 2009 for a universal prohibition of violence against children that would include a ban on corporal punishment in the home. Americans no doubt have many reasons—some of them quite good—to ignore or laugh off instructions from the United Nations on how to raise their kids. And it's naive to think that comprehensive bans are comprehensively effective. Kids still get hit in every country on earth. But especially because such bans are usually promoted with large public campaigns of education and opinion-shaping (similar to successful efforts in this country to change attitudes toward littering and smoking), they do have measurable good effects. So far, the results suggest that after the ban is passed, parents hit less and are less favorably inclined toward physical discipline, and the country is not overwhelmed by a wave of brattiness and delinquency. The opposite, in fact. If anything, the results tell us that there's *less* deviant child behavior.

There could conceivably be good reasons for Americans to decide, after careful consideration, that our commitment to the privacy and individual rights of parents is too strong to allow for an enforceable comprehensive ban on corporal punishment. But we don't seem to be ready to join much of the rest of the world in even having a serious discussion about such a ban. In the overheated climate of nondebate encouraged by those who would have us believe that we are embroiled in an ongoing high-stakes culture war, [we mostly just declaim our fixed opinions at one another](#).

One result of this standoff is that the United States, despite being one of the primary authors of the U.N.'s Convention on the Rights of Children, which specifies that governments must take appropriate measures to protect children from "all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation," is one of only two nations that have not ratified it. The other is Somalia; 192 nations have ratified it. According to my colleague Liz Gershoff of the University of Michigan, a leading expert on corporal punishment of children, the main arguments that have so far prevented us from ratifying it include the ones you would expect—it would undermine American parents' authority as well as U.S. sovereignty—plus a couple of others that you might not have expected: It would not allow 17-year-olds to enlist in the armed forces, and (although the Supreme Court's decision in *Roper v. Simmons* has made this one moot, at least for now) it would not allow executions of people who committed capital crimes when they were under 18.

We have so far limited our national debate on corporal punishment by focusing it on the schools and conducting it at the local and state level. We have shied away from even theoretically questioning the primacy of rights that parents exercise in the home, where most of the hitting takes place. Whatever one's position on corporal punishment, we ought to be able to at least discuss it with each other like grownups.

[Alan E. Kazdin](#) is John M. Musser professor of psychology and child psychiatry at Yale University and director of Yale's Parenting Center and Child Conduct Clinic. He is also president of the American Psychological Association and author, most recently, of [The Kazdin Method for Parenting the Defiant Child](#).

Article URL: <http://www.slate.com/id/2200450/>

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