

The topic of spanking children



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One day last summer, I hung out with my friends Elizabeth and Kisha.

Elizabeth is a young mother with a 3-year-old son named Raine. Elizabeth did not know how to control her son; on that day, the three of us went to a strip mall to shop for clothes, and Raine was with us. While we were shopping, Raine wandered off many times from his mother, and she rarely told him anything. Then, he threw huge tantrums whenever he saw something he could not have. I bit my tongue so much that day because despite how I felt about his behavior, it was not my place to tell anyone else how to raise his or her children. He was very bratty; he made a scene in a convenience store we all walked into, becoming disobedient and defiant with Elizabeth and screaming at her. Still, I said nothing out of good taste.

Finally, the topic of whether or not I would make a good father came up because I saw a couple with children who were behaving well; I enjoy children when they are well-behaved. I was making no attempt to attack Elizabeth's parenting even though her son was horrible. I was merely conjecturing my own capabilities at parenthood.

I could no longer bite my tongue. The girl with the out-of-control child, of all people, had the audacity to imply that I may not be a good parent. Before I realized it, I told her, " Well at least my children will know how to conduct themselves in public and will not talk to me any kind of way. He is clearing acting up and disrespecting you, but you refuse to spank him." Because of this, Elizabeth and I do not talk much anymore.

I suggested that she spank Raine. She obviously did not believe in spanking bad children. I thought it was very foolish of her to have this mindset

because she never employed any other disciplinary technique that was successful in altering his behavior. She, along with others, believes that spanking is wrong. I do not think that it is absolutely right, but I do believe that the positive outweighs the negative; parents should be allowed to spank their children when it is necessary. There is an appropriate way for parents to do this without abusing their children. Though, it is not absolute, spanking can still be very effective. Children are not perfect beings who do not make mistakes. Children need to be taught respect and appropriate behavior. They need to know that there are consequences for not following the rules.

What exactly is spanking? Kazdin and Benjet define spanking as the act of hitting a child with an open palm on the buttocks or the extremities (hands and legs) with the intent to discipline without leaving any bruises or injuries (Kazdin & Benjet, 100). Larry Winget, a father and also the author of *Your Kids are Your Own Fault: A Guide for Raising Responsible, Productive, Young Adults*, agrees with this definition and believes that spanking should be used to alter undesirable behavior in children, not to hurt them (Winget, 88). What is discipline? Any attempt to change or control a child's behavior is discipline (Brown, 69). Discipline can be divided into two sub-categories: autonomy-granting techniques and restrictive techniques. Autonomy-granting techniques allow a child to correct his or her behavior on his or her own accord. These techniques are generally non-punitive and include lecturing and oral disapproval. U. Bronfenbrenner affirms that middle class parents tend to use these techniques which include reasoning, isolation, and guilt (Brown, 68). Research shows that families with higher socioeconomic statuses (SES's) tend to have punishments that are very lenient in correcting

misbehavior. Restrictive techniques force a child to alter his or her behavior by incentive: punishment (Brown, 68-9). And obviously, spanking is a form of punishment, and therefore is included with time-outs, grounding, privilege revocation, and all other restrictive techniques.

Whether or not parents should be able to spank their children, and to what extent, is a very controversial debate. Like any debate, there are contenders of the idea. These contenders make some valid, however flawed, statements against spanking. One is that spanking instills fear into children, and children who will comply with the rules via spanking will not do so out of respect; they will succumb out of fear (Davis, 141). Another argument is that spanking is abusive and condones violence “ as an acceptable way to solve a problem” (Davis, 143). These claims are true only when the spanking turns into abuse. Davis included a question from a parent answered by M. Senn, an opponent of spanking. He asked:

Q: Should I hit my child back when he hits me?

A: No, you should not. If you strike him back, you are teaching him that the only way to respond in anger is by physical blows, and it may turn into a fist fight (Davis, 141).

There is so much wrong with this all together. For one, if a child is audacious enough to hit his own parents in a non-life-threatening scenario, the ones who conceived him, then he deserves to be punished. He or she should also realize that if he or she has enough moxie to hit anyone, parent or not, then he or she should be brave enough to get beat down if it escalates to something more serious. In others words, do not throw a punch if you cannot

take one. A child is headed in the wrong direction if he or she thinks that he or she can be violent without suffering any consequences. And, one can certainly not hit a random person out on the streets and expect not to be retaliated against. We live in a society where skirmishes turn into bloodbaths because people think that they can “handle” them with their fists. Ideally, fighting is not the answer, but parents should certainly not condone abuse by their own children. That is crazy. And if parents have to spank their children to convey that message to them, then I support it one hundred percent. Tibbetts affirms that “spanking is but a single act – among many – that supports civilized behavior against the natural barbarism of the American brat” (Davis, 144). Leaving children undisciplined is like leaving people to anarchy; it just will not work. There are many adults who lack the judgment and reasoning capabilities needed to function in society. And, children are still developing mentally and physically in order to be able to cope as adults. Why would one assume that children, non-adults, will be fine if left to their own devices? Opponents of spanking believe that it encourages the development of bad character in kids; children who do not want spankings become very deviant by lying to avoid them (Davis, 140). However, one parent with an 8-year-old named George chose not to spank him and found that it permitted George to be dishonest and defiant. The father saw an improvement in George’s behavior after he decided to spank him and noted that he only had to spank his son a few times by the time George turned thirteen (Davis, 137). Opponents argue that the people who support spanking are religious fundamentalists who base their reasons to justify it on the Bible, a book that some, depending on their own particular beliefs, view as unsubstantial (Davis, 139). Proverbs 13: 24 reads that “he

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who spares the rod” does not love his child, and that he who loves his child will discipline him or her promptly. Despite how one may feel about Christianity and the Bible, the practicality and cogency of this statement cannot be disputed. Only a negligent parent and fool will let his or her children run amok and not discipline them. And, one final belief that opponents share is that spanking is addictive because of its easiness to execute and gives parents the satisfaction of getting out anger (Davis, 142). Spanking should not be about seeking a thrill, getting revenge, or relieving stress on behalf of the parent. It should be simply to discipline the child and nothing more. Anything else and spanking is at risk of becoming abuse.

Kazdin and Benjet agree that “spanking isn’t necessarily positive nor negative, but can be depending on other conditions”. Spanking is negative only when it becomes abuse. Physical abuse is punishment that is severe, excessive, and physically harmful and dangerous to the child. Physical abuse can involve the use of objects. It is also noted to be directed at parts of the body that are not included in the proper definition of spanking: the buttocks or extremities (Kazdin & Benjet, 100). Slapping a child in the face is considered physical abuse. Punching a child is definitely a form of abuse. Allow us to examine the movie *Mommie Dearest*. The film told the story of Christina Crawford, the adopted daughter of the late actress Joan Crawford. In the film, Christina and her brother were subjected to the harsh abuse and strictness of their mother. There was a scene in the movie when Joan was upset with Christina for hanging her own clothes with a wire hanger. Because of this, Joan beat Christina with the same wire hanger to teach her a lesson: do not hang your clothes with wire hangers. How preposterous does that

sound? If that is not a clear image of physical abuse, then I do not know what is. There was no reasoning behind it. To say that the punishment was excessive would be an understatement; it was uncalled for, period. Joan Crawford must have had mental issues because responsible, mentally fit parents do not act this way.

Another film depicting child abuse is *Precious*. The film depicted the life of a 16-year-old, African-American girl named Claireece “Precious” Jones who was obese, illiterate, and suffered severe forms of mental, physical, and sexual abuse from her parents. In one scene, Precious’s mother Mary attempted to hit her in the head with a cooking pot. This was because she thought Precious told an adult from her school to come to the house to discuss the benefits of education and alternative schooling with Mary in regards to Precious. Discussing education is a justifiable reason to try to give one’s own child a concussion. The reality was that the adult came to Precious and Mary’s home of her own accord; Precious even warned the adult to not come because she knew Mary would react this way. In another scene, Mary forced Precious to eat a huge plate of pig’s feet Precious made for Mary because it was not of her liking. She glared at Precious coldly, making sure that Precious ate every bit of it before she would make Precious cook dinner again, right this time. This was why Precious was morbidly obese. In yet another scene, Mary attacked Precious and her newborn when they finally came home after leaving the hospital. Mary did this because she was angry with Precious for coming clean to a social worker about the abuse she suffered. Mary was also jealous of Precious because Mary’s boyfriend (who was also Precious’s father) preferred to sleep with Precious and not her; both

of Precious's children, the newborn included, were products of rape from her father. In this scene, Mary waited for Precious to come home with the baby and asked Precious if she could hold him. Then, she told Precious to get her something to drink. While Precious's back was turned, Mary tossed the baby to the ground and then threw a flower pot at the back of Precious's head, causing it to shatter. She hurled more objects at Precious and cursed at her. She then charged at Precious, and a violent scuffle ensued. Luckily, Precious and her baby were able to leave the apartment with minor injuries. Precious ran down the staircase with the baby and fell down; they both were miraculously fine. Fortunately, she moved herself and her child out of the way before a television came falling down the stair well from the floor of her mother's apartment; Mary, out of hate, tried to kill her own daughter and grandson. Although the Precious movie depicted an overly extreme case of physical abuse among other abuses, it defined it nonetheless. With that being said, proper spanking done from a responsible parent should never be mistaken for abuse.

Spanking, when done properly, is actually a great tool for discipline. Studies show that 74% of American parents of children age seventeen and younger use spanking as a disciplinary technique while 94% of parents with children age three to four spank (Kazdin & Benjet, 100). Spanking cannot be as bad as some people make it seem if virtually all parents do it. E. T. Gershoff concluded with an analysis of 88 studies that spanking had negative effects only when it was abusive (Kazdin & Benjet, 100-01). Sweden passed a law in 1979 banning spanking to prevent child abuse. However, child abuse cases increased six-fold from 1981 to 1994 (Larzelere, 5). Spanking is not that

issue that people should worry about; abuse is the issue. One father concurs that spanking prepares children for the real world; in the real world, people are punished for breaking the rules. He states, “ To have rules for behavior without the threat of physical punishment is like having laws without jails” (Davis, 138). To the people who argue that spanking promotes fear in children, is fear really a bad thing? Is it not that same fear that prevents many children from getting in trouble in the first place? Is it not fear that scares adults from committing crimes that will otherwise put them in jail or prison? Is it not fear that promotes safety and good judgment in people anyway? People argue about deviant behavior to avoid punishment. If people, children included, are doing the right thing to begin with, then they should not have to worry about being punished. It is as simple as that. Let us consider the story of the little boy who burned himself after playing with the stove after his mother told him not to. She understood that the fire looked cool but advised him not to touch it because it will burn him. Out of his own defiance and curiosity, he touched the fire anyway and so forth. Analogously, spanking is the fire. He did not listen to his mother and had to suffer the consequences: being burnt. And hopefully, he learned first-hand that fire burns and that he should not touch it if he does not want to get burnt again. Analogously, children should behave accordingly if they do not want any spankings. And, that is the practicality that makes spanking effective; it presents the child with an unfavorable outcome if he or she decides to be disobedient. Larry Winget agrees that children who are effectively and appropriately punished have more love and respect for their parents because their parents are showing that they care enough to correct potentially self-destructive behaviors in their children (Winget, 86); Janis Cambell believes

that people tend to raise their children the way that their parents raised them (Cambell, 199). If this is true, then it is safe to say that Larry Winget respects and loves his parents, and they spanked him whenever it was necessary; he does the same to his children, and they love and respect him. Properly spanking a child when it is necessary can aid in ensuring that the child in question is not going down the wrong path and getting into trouble.

Dianne is contemplating spanking her child. How does she go about it properly? Dr. Diana Braumrind states that Parents should first use verbal disciplinary reasoning to correct misbehavior. If that fails, then use non-physical punishments such as time-outs. If the problem persists, then use non-abusive spanking to correct the behavior (Larzelere, 4). Larry Winget's approach to discipline involves "mak[ing] the punishment about the behavior and not about the person." With his experience as a father, he believes that parents should stress that they are spanking their children to alter their behavior, not because the children are bad people. He urges parents not to attack their children's personalities (93). Doing so could potentially harm their mental developments. Winget continues by stating that parents need to "make the punishment fit the crime" (92). Do not spank a child if he or she forgets not to smack at the dinner table. Do not spank him when the both of you are at the grocery store and he asks for Skittles despite you telling him that you were not buying any candy prior to walking in. If you say no and he throws a massive tantrum and knocks items off the shelves, then spank him. Only spank a child when it is absolutely necessary. Winget affirms that "anger is an appropriate response to [an] offense," and that a parent should "wait to administer punishment" because

he or she may lose his or her temper and do something he or she may regret: seriously injuring the child (91, 92). Most of all, Winget stresses that a good parent will talk with his or her child so the child can have a better understanding of why he or she is being punished. Talking allows the parent to exercise judgment when listening to the child and figure out why the child did what he or she did so that the parent can determine how to punish the child. This can also help the parent to decide whether or not a spanking is even necessary (92-93). Good parents who spank their children are not the vicious, evil monsters that people believe them to be. The procedures mentioned by Braumrind and Winget show sympathy to the child.

Although spanking can be a great means of discipline, it is not the most perfect method. No discipline is. However, it can be very effective. The first flaw with spanking is that it may not work on every child. Winget agrees that “different kids require different punishments,” and that “spanking is an effective tool with some kids.” Winget’s son Tyler responded better to discussions and lectures while his other son Patrick responded better to being spanked (87; 88). The second imperfection with spanking is that its efficacy is subjected to severity and frequency (Kazdin & Benjet, 100). Spanking loses its effectiveness when it is overused and is the only method of discipline, and it is very easy for parents to exhaust this method (Winget, 88). I can recall children from my childhood who were spanked almost everyday by their mothers and were still problematic. I remember these mothers spanking their kids and nothing else; they never asked them “why did you do it?” Rather, they found the nearest belt, or switch (long twig from a tree), or loafer and began whipping with the deepest frustration. In a study,

Kazdin and Benjet found that occasional, mild spanking accompanied with other disciplinary techniques showed to be the most positive, effective form of punishment (101). One study states that parents from lower SES's tend to spank their children more while middle-class parents favored reasoning, isolation, guilt, and the threat of "loss of love over spanking (Brown, 68). Researchers concluded that the parents of the lower SES's had higher levels of stress; stress is linked to physical abuse (Giles-Sims, Straus & Sugarman, 171). However, M. L. Kahn did a study stating that working-class (lower SES) parents tended to spank when their children's behavior was most extreme, but held back whenever they sensed that spanking was not the appropriate course of action (Brown, 68); These parents displayed good judgment while chastising their children. Though spanking is not the utmost, absolute way of effective discipline, it can still be an effective tool when coupled with other methods and used with proper judgment.

Despite all the benefits of spanking and the preponderance of parents who support it, society still frowns upon it. There are many people, doctors and others with merits, who consider proper, mild, non-abusive spanking still abuse. It has become a secretive thing for parents because of the taboo surrounding it despite it being legal; critics have been known to rebuff its legality by comparing it to cigarettes, saying that both are "legal, harmful, and habitual" (Davis, 142). This argument does not serve good parents who only seek to eliminate bad behavior any justice. Non-abusive spanking is not harmful, and the parents who are successful at correcting misbehavior do not have to spank frequently in order for it to become a habitual thing (Davis 137). With spanking becoming more, and more secretive, parents have been

very conscious of how they discipline their children in public places. Parents who suffer the unfortunate circumstance of their children misbehaving in places like the grocery store face a catch-22: being considered as unfit if they ignore it, or being viewed as abusive if they attempt to correct the misbehavior (Brown, 70). These parents worry about the nosy, meddlesome, old women who believe in all children being cherubs incapable of mischief. They worry about being scrutinized and ultimately reported to authorities for simply trying to raise children to the best of their abilities. Whenever a child is knowingly misbehaving the way children do from time to time, these old women tend to pardon it by saying, “ Oh, he is just being a kid. Don’t punish him.” But, whenever a child is extremely offensive, they have the temerity to question and challenge the parenting skills of the adult. Parents are embarrassed when their children act up in public and view it as an emergency situation because of three beliefs concerning parenthood in American society: that children turn out well with “ good” parents, that contemporary parents are not as good as their predecessors, and that there is no such thing as “ bad” kids – only “ bad” parents (Brown, 70). Parents feel judged by these beliefs. With parents’ judgments conflicting with the mores, it is no wonder why there is so much controversy surrounding the right of parents to spank.

While researching, I stumbled across some interesting facts. Studies show that fathers tend to spank their children more than mothers despite mothers being the main disciplinarians who also spend the most time with the children; mothers tend to yell at their children more (Cambell; 199, 202). I remember being spanked by my father more so than by my mom in my

childhood. And I also remember her lecturing me more so than my father. Another fact is that younger parents are more likely to spank their children more than older parents (Giles-Sims, Straus & Sugarman, 171). That caught my attention because I thought it would be the older group that favored spanking; the old people I grew up around were staunch advocates of spanking problematic children. Boys tend to be spanked more than girls (Giles-Sims, Straus & Sugarman, 171). I can see this as being true because the boys I grew up with tended to misbehave more so than the girls. Parents who spank their children more than once often forget how many times they have had to do so (Giles-Sims, Straus & Sugarman, 171). Losing count is only expected for things that have been done with a sufficient amount of frequency. The final fact that I learned was that Caucasian parents are more likely to spank their children, despite other ethnic groups' general acceptance of it, particularly African-Americans (Giles-Sims, Straus & Sugarman, 171). That, too, was interesting because I always thought Caucasians generally disagreed with spanking. There has been quite a handful of research done on spanking.

The issue of spanking is one containing opposing viewpoints. One side of the argument is in dissent about the issue, claiming that it is abuse while the other side supports it as an effective tool. Fact of the matter is, spanking definitely works and is very popular among American parents despite societal tendencies to discourage it. Ideally, if all children did not misbehave, then parents would not need to spank them. A mother in her right mind does not even want to think about spanking her child, let alone having to do it. It becomes a conflict for her because she will see her child misbehaving and

know that she will have to spank him. I remember my own mother telling me that spanking will hurt her more than it will hurt me because I would eventually understand my wrong along with the consequences that entail. I would get over it; she, on the other hand, would bear the burden of her conscience because she would be placed in a position to where she would have to spank the child she loves so that he would learn to do better, not because she is angry. Non-abusive spanking should never become synonymous with abuse because abuse is detrimental; proper spanking is the opposite. Non-abusive spanking is not always the best solution, nor is it the only option to every crime committed by the child, but is very effective when done correctly; there is a proper way parents must go about executing it. And finally, there has been extensive research done on the topic. Parents should be allowed to spank their children so that they will become responsible adults with a great understanding of appropriate behavior to have in American society, or any society for that matter.